



BILLIONAIRES AND BABIES

Billionaire's Jet Set Babies

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CATHERINE MANN

The Nanny Bombshell

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MICHELLE CELMER

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**Billionaire's Jet Set Babies & The
Nanny Bombshell: Billionaire's Jet
Set Babies / The Nanny Bombshell**

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Two fan-favorite stories of powerful men...wrapped around their babies' little fingers
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THE BILLIONAIRE AND BABIES COLLECTION

The men in this special 2-in-1 collection rule their worlds with authority and determination. They're comfortable commanding those around them and aren't afraid to be ruthless if necessary. Independent and self-reliant, they are content with their money and lack of commitment.

Then the babies enter their lives and, before they know it, these powerful men are wrapped around their babies' little fingers!

With the babies comes the awareness of what else might be missing. Seems the perfect time for these billionaires to find the women who will love them forever.

Join us for two passionate, provocative stories where billionaires encounter the women—and babies—who will make them complete!

If you love these two classic stories, be sure to look for more Billionaires and Babies books from Harlequin Desire.

Billionaire's Jet Set Babies & The Nanny Bombshell

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Catherine Mann

The Nanny Bombshell

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Michelle Celmer

Billionaire's Jet Set Babies

To Amelia Richard: a treasured reader, reviewer and friend. Thank you for all you've done to help spread the word about my stories. You're awesome!

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Chapter 1

Alexa Randall had accumulated an eclectic boxful of lost and found items since opening her own cleaning company for charter jets. There were the standard smart phones, portfolios, tablets, even a Patek Philippe watch. She'd returned each to its owner.

Then there were the stray panties and men's boxers, even the occasional sex toys from Mile High Club members. All of those items, she'd picked up with latex gloves and tossed in the trash.

But today marked a first find ever in the history of A-1 Aircraft Cleaning Services. Never before had she found a baby left on board—actually, *two* babies.

Her bucket of supplies dropped to the industrial blue carpet with a heavy thud that startled the sleeping pair. Yep, two infants, apparently twins with similar blond curly hair and cherub cheeks. About one year old, perhaps? A boy and a girl, it seemed, gauging from their pink and blue smocked outfits and gender-matched car seats.

Tasked to clean the jet alone, Alexa had no one to share her shock with. She flipped on another table lamp in the main compartment of the sleek private jet, the lighting in the hangar sketchy at best even at three in the afternoon.

Both kids were strapped into car seats resting on the leather sofa along the side of the plane, which was Seth Jansen's personal aircraft. As in *the* Seth Jansen of Jansen Jets. The self-made billionaire who'd raked in a fortune inventing some must-have security device for airports to help combat possible terrorist attacks on planes during takeoffs and landings. She admired the man's entrepreneurial spirit.

Landing his account would be her company's big break. She needed this first cleaning of his aircraft to go off without a hitch.

Tiny fists waved for a second, slowing, lowering, until both babies began to settle back to sleep. Another huffy sigh shuddered through the girl before her breaths evened out. Her little arm landed on a piece of paper safety-pinned to the girl's hem.

Narrowing her eyes, Alexa leaned forward and read:

Seth,

You always say you want more time with the twins, so here's your chance. Sorry for the short notice, but a friend surprised me with a two-week spa retreat. Enjoy your "daddy time" with Olivia and Owen!

XOXO,

Pippa

Pippa?

Alexa straightened again, horrified. Really? Really!

Pippa Jansen, as in the *ex*-Mrs. Jansen, had dumped off her infants on their father's jet. Unreal. Alexa stuffed her fists into the pockets of her navy chinos, standard uniform for A-1 cleaning staff along with a blue polo shirt bearing the company's logo.

And who signed a note to their obviously estranged baby daddy with kisses and hugs? Alexa sank down into a fat chair across from the pint-size passengers. Bigger question of the day, who left babies unattended on an airplane?

A crappy parent, that's who.

The rich and spoiled rotten, who played by their own rules, a sad reality she knew only too well from growing up in that world. People had told her how lucky she was as a kid—lucky to have a dedicated nanny that she spent more time with than she did with either of her parents.

The best thing that had ever happened to her? Her father bankrupted the family's sportswear chain—once worth billions, now worth zip. That left Alexa the recipient of a trust fund from Grandma containing a couple of thousand dollars.

She'd used the money to buy a partnership in a cleaning service about to go under because the aging owner could no longer carry the workload on her own. Bethany—her new partner—had been grateful for Alexa's energy and the second chance for A-1 Aircraft Cleaning Services to stay afloat. Using Alexa's contacts from her family's world of luxury and extravagance she had revitalized the struggling business. Alexa's ex-husband, Travis, had been appalled by her new occupation and offered to help out financially so she wouldn't have to work.

She would rather scrub toilets.

And the toilet on this particular Gulfstream III jet was very important to her. She had to land the Jansen Jet contract and hopefully this one-time stint would impress him enough to cinch the deal. Her business needed this account to survive, especially in today's tough economy. If she failed, she could lose everything and A-1 might well face Chapter 11 bankruptcy. She'd hardly believed her luck when she'd been asked by another cleaning company to subcontract out on one of the Jansen Jets—this jet.

Now that she'd found these two babies, she was screwed. She swept particles of sand from the seat into her hand, eyed the fingerprints on the windows, could almost feel the grit rising from the carpet fiber. But she couldn't just clean up, restock the Evian water and pretend these kids weren't here. She needed to contact airport security, which was going to land Jansen's ex-wife in hot water, possibly him as well. That would piss off Jansen. And the jet still wouldn't be serviced. And then he would never consider her for the contract.

Frustration and a hefty dose of anger stung stronger than a bucket full of ammonia. Scratch cleaning detail for now, scratch cinching this deal that would finally take her company out of the red. She had to locate the twins' father ASAP.

Alexa unclipped the cell phone from her waist and thumbed her directory to find the number for Jansen Jets, which she happened to have since she'd been trying to get through to the guy for a month. She'd never made it further than his secretary, who'd agreed to pass along Alexa's business prospectus.

She eyed the sleeping babies. Maybe some good could come from this mess after all.

Today, she would finally have the chance to talk to the boss, just not how she'd planned and not in a way that would put him in a receptive mood...

The phone stopped ringing as someone picked up.

"Jansen Jets, please hold." As quickly as the thick female Southern drawl answered, the line clicked and Muzak filled the air waves with soulless contemporary tunes.

A squawk from one of the car seats drew her attention. She looked up fast to see Olivia wriggling in her seat, kicking free a Winnie the Pooh blanket. The little girl spit out her Piglet pacifier and whimpered, getting louder until her brother scrunched up his face, blinking awake and none too happy. His Eeyore pacifier dangled from a clip attached to his blue sailor outfit.

Two pairs of periwinkle-blue eyes stared at her, button noses crinkled. Owen's eyes filled with tears. Olivia's bottom lip thrust outward again.

Tucking the Muzak-humming phone under her chin, Alexa hefted the iconic Burberry plaid diaper bag off the floor.

"Hey there, little ones," she said in what she hoped was a conciliatory tone. She'd spent so little time around babies she could only hope she pegged it right. "I know, I know, sweetie, I'm a stranger, but I'm all you've got right now."

And how crummy was that? She stifled another spurt of anger at the faceless Pippa who'd dropped her children off like luggage. When had the spa-hopping mama expected their father to locate them?

"I'm assuming you're Olivia." Alexa tickled the bare foot of the girl wearing a pink smocked dress.

Olivia giggled, and Alexa pulled the pink lace bootie from the baby's mouth. Olivia thrust out her bottom lip—until Alexa unhooked a teething ring from the diaper bag and passed it over to the chubby-cheeked girl.

“And you must be Owen.” She tweaked his blue tennis shoe—still on his foot as opposed to his sister who was ditching her other bootie across the aisle with the arm of a major league pitcher. “Any idea where your daddy is? Or how much longer he'll be?”

She'd been told by security she had about a half hour to service the inside of the jet in order to be out before Mr. Jansen arrived. As much as she would have liked to meet him, it was considered poor form for the cleaning staff to still be on hand. She'd expected her work and a business card left on the silver drink tray to speak for itself.

So much for her well laid plans.

She scooped up a baby blanket from the floor, folded it neatly and placed it on the couch. She smoothed back Owen's sweaty curls. Going quiet, he stared back at her just as the on hold Muzak cued up “Sweet Caroline”—the fourth song so far. Apparently she'd been relegated to call waiting purgatory.

How long until the kids got hungry? She peeked into the diaper bag for supplies. Maybe she would luck out and find more contact info along the way. Sippy cups of juice, powdered formula, jars of food and diapers, diapers, diapers...

The clank of feet on the stairway outside yanked her upright. She dropped the diaper bag and spun around fast, just as a man filled the open hatch. A tall and broad-shouldered man.

He stood with the sun backlighting him, casting his face in mysterious shadows.

Alexa stepped in front of the babies instinctively, protectively. “Good afternoon. What can I do for you?”

Silently he stepped deeper into the craft until overhead lights splashed over his face and she recognized him from her internet searches. Seth Jansen, founder and CEO of Jansen Jets.

Relief made her knees wobbly. She'd been saved from a tough decision by Jansen's early arrival. And, wow, did the guy ever know how to make an entrance.

From press shots she'd seen he was good-looking, with a kind of matured Abercrombie & Fitch beach hunk appeal. But no amount of Google Images could capture the impact of this tremendously attractive self-made billionaire in person.

Six foot three or four, he filled the charter jet with raw muscled *man*. He wasn't some pale pencil pusher. He was more the size of a keen-eyed lumberjack, in a suit. An expensive, tailored suit.

The previously spacious cabin now felt tight. Intimate.

His sandy-colored hair—thick without being shaggy—sporting sun-kissed streaks of lighter blond, the kind that came naturally from being outside rather than sitting in a salon chair. His tan and toned body gave further testimony to that. No raccoon rings around the eyes from tanning bed glasses. The scent of crisp air clung to him, so different from the boardroom aftershaves of her father and her ex. She scrunched her nose at even the memory of cloying cologne and cigars.

Even his eyes spoke of the outdoors. They were the same vibrant green she'd once seen in the waters off the Caribbean coast of St. Maarten, the sort of sparkling green that made you want to dive right into their cool depths. She turned shivery all over just thinking about taking a swim in those pristine waters.

She seriously needed to lighten up on the cleaning supply fumes. How unprofessional to stand here and gawk like a sex-starved divorcée—which she was.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Jansen. I'm Alexa Randall with A-1 Aircraft Cleaning Services.”

He shrugged out of his suit jacket, gray pinstripe and almost certainly an Ermenegildo Zegna, a brand known for its no-nonsense look. Expensive. Not surprising.

His open shirt collar, with his burgundy tie loosened did surprise her, however. Overall, she got the impression of an Olympic swimmer confined in an Italian suit.

“Right.” He checked his watch—the only non-*GQ* item on him. He wore what appeared to be a top-of-the-line diver’s timepiece. “I’m early, I know, but I need to leave right away so if you could speed this up, I would appreciate it.”

Jansen charged by, not even hesitating as he passed the two tykes. *His* tykes.

She cleared her throat. “You have a welcoming crew waiting for you.”

“I’m sure you’re mistaken.” He stowed his briefcase, his words clipped. “I’m flying solo today.”

She held up Pippa’s letter. “It appears, Mr. Jansen, your flight plans have changed.”

* * *

Seth Jansen stopped dead in his tracks. He looked back over his shoulder at Alexa Randall, the owner of a new, small company that had been trying to get his attention for at least a month. Yeah, he knew who the drop-dead gorgeous blonde was. But he didn’t have time to listen to her make a pitch he already knew would be rejected.

While he appreciated persistence as a business professional himself, he did not like gimmicks. “Let’s move along to the point, please.”

He had less than twenty minutes to get his Gulfstream III into the air and on its way from Charleston, South Carolina, to St. Augustine, Florida. He had a business meeting he’d been working his ass off to land for six months—dinner with the head of security for the Medinas, a deposed royal family that lived in exile in the United States.

Big-time account.

Once in a lifetime opportunity.

And the freedom to devote more of his energies to the philanthropic branch of this company. Freedom. It had a different meaning these days than when he’d flown crop dusters to make his rent back, in North Dakota.

“This—” she waved a piece of floral paper in front of him “—is the point.”

As she passed over the slip of paper, she stepped aside and revealed—holy crap—his kids. He looked down at the letter fast.

Two lines into the note, his temple throbbed. What the hell was Pippa thinking, leaving the twins this way? How long had they been in here? And why had she left him a damn note, for Pete’s sake?

He pulled out his cell phone to call his ex. Her voice mail picked up immediately. She was avoiding him, no doubt.

A text from Pippa popped up in his in-box. He opened the message and it simply read, Want 2 make sure you know. Twins r waiting for you at plane. Sorry 4 short notice. XOXO.

“What the h—?” He stopped himself short before he cursed in front of his toddlers who were just beginning to form words. He tucked his phone away and faced Alexa Randall. “I’m sorry my ex added babysitter duties to your job today. Of course I’ll pay you extra. Did you happen to notice which way Pippa headed out?”

Because he had some choice words for her when he found her.

“Your ex-wife wasn’t here when I arrived.” Alexa held up her own cell phone, her thumb swiping away a print. “I tried to contact your office, but your assistant wouldn’t let me get a word out before shifting me over to Muzak. It’s looped twice while I waited. Much longer and I would have had to call security, which would have brought in child services—”

He held up a hand, sick to his gut already. “Thanks. I get the picture. I owe you for cleaning up after my ex-wife’s recklessness as well.”

His blood pressure spiked higher until he saw red. Pippa had left the children unattended in an airplane at his privately owned airport? What had his security people been thinking, letting Pippa just wander around the aircraft that way? These were supposed to be the days of increased precautions and safety measures, and yet they must have assumed because she was his ex-wife that garnered her a free pass around the facility. Not so.

Heads were going to roll hard and fast over this. No one put the safety of his children at risk. No one.

He crumpled the note in his fist and pitched it aside. Forcing his face to smooth so he wouldn't scare the babies, he unstrapped the buckle on his daughter's car seat.

"Hey there, princess." He held Olivia up high and thought about how she'd squealed with delight over the baby swing on the sprawling oak in his backyard. "Did you have fruit for lunch?"

She grinned, and he saw a new front tooth had come in on top. She smelled like peaches and baby shampoo and there weren't enough hours in the day to take in all the changes happening too quickly.

He loved his kids more than anything, had since the second he'd seen their fists waving in an ultrasound. He'd been damn lucky Pippa let him be there when they were born, considering she'd already started divorce proceedings at that point. He hated not being with them every day, hated missing even one milestone. But the timing for this visit couldn't be worse.

Seth tucked Olivia against his chest and reached to ruffle his son's hair. "Hey, buddy. Missed you this week."

Owen stuck out his tongue and offered up his best raspberry.

The petite blonde dressed in trim, pressed chinos popped a pacifier into Owen's mouth then knelt to pick up the crumpled note and pitch it into her cleaning bucket. "I assume today isn't your scheduled visitation."

She would be right on that. Although why the disdain in her voice? Nobody—single parent or not—would appreciate having their kids dumped off in their workplace. Not to mention he was mad as hell at Pippa for just dropping them off unannounced.

What if someone else had boarded this plane?

Thank God, this woman—Alexa—had been the one to find them. He knew who she was, but Pippa hadn't known jack when she'd unloaded his children.

Of all the reckless, irresponsible...

Deep breath. He unbuckled Owen as well and scooped him up, too, with an ease he'd learned from walking the floors with them when they were infants. Just as he'd needed calm then, he forced it through his veins now.

Getting pissed off wouldn't accomplish anything. He had to figure out what to do with his children when he was scheduled to fly out for a meeting with multimillion dollar possibilities.

When he'd first moved to South Carolina, he'd been a dumb ass, led by glitz. That's how he'd ended up married to his ex. He'd grown up with more spartan, farm values that he'd somehow lost in his quest for beaches and billions.

Now, he itched inside his high-priced starched shirt and longed for the solitude of those flights. But he had long ago learned if he wanted to do business with certain people, he had to dress the part and endure the stuffy business meetings. And he very much wanted to do business with the Medina family based out of Florida. He glanced at his watch and flinched. Damn it. He needed to be in the air already, on his way to St. Augustine. At the moment, he didn't have time for a sandwich, much less to find a qualified babysitter.

He would just have to make time. "Could you hold Owen for a second while I make some calls?"

"Sure, no problem." Alexa stopped straightening his jacket on the hanger and extended her arms.

As he passed his son over, Seth's hand grazed her breast. Her very soft, tempting breast. Just that fast touch pumped pure lust through his overworked body. It was more than just "nice, a female" kind of notice. His body was going on alert, saying "I will make it my mission in life to undress you."

She gasped lightly, not in outrage but more like someone who'd been zapped with some static. For him, it was more like a jolt from a light socket.

Olivia rested her head on his shoulder with a sleepy sigh, bringing him back to reality. He was a father with responsibilities.

Still, he was a man. Why hadn't he noticed the power of the pull to this woman when he'd walked onto the plane? Had he grown so accustomed to wealth that he'd stopped noticing "the help"? That notion didn't sit well with him at all.

But it also didn't keep him from looking at Alexa more closely.

Her pale blond hair was pulled back in a simple silver clasp. Navy chino pants and a light blue shirt—the company uniform—matched her eyes. It also fit her loosely, but not so much that it hid her curves.

Before the kids, before Pippa, he would have asked Alexa for her number, made plans to take her out on a riverboat dinner cruise where he would kiss her senseless under a starry sky. But these days he didn't have time for dating. He worked and when he wasn't on the job he saw his kids.

With a stab of regret, his gaze raked back over her T-shirt with the A-1 Aircraft Cleaning logo. He'd seen that same emblem in the cover letter she'd sent with her prospectus.

He also recalled why he hadn't gotten any further than the cover letter and the fledgling business's flyer—where he'd seen her headshot.

Following his eyes, she looked down at her shirt and met his gaze dead-on. "Yes, I have a proposal on your desk." Alexa cocked one eyebrow. "I assume that's why you were looking at my shirt?"

"Of course, why else?" he answered dryly. "You should have received an answer from my secretary."

"I did, and when you're not in a hurry—" she smoothed back her already immaculate hair "—I would appreciate the opportunity to explore your reasons for rejecting my initial bid."

"I'll save us both some time. I'm not interested in the lowest bidder or taking a risk on such a small company."

Her sky-blue eyes narrowed perceptively. "You didn't read my proposal all the way through, did you?"

"I read until my gut told me to stop." He didn't have time to waste on page after page of something he already knew wasn't going to work.

"And you're saying that your gut spoke up quickly."

"Afraid so," he said shortly, hoping to end an awkward situation with his best boardroom bite. A suspicion niggled. "Why is it you're here cleaning today instead of someone from my regular company?"

"They subcontracted A-1 when they overbooked. Obviously I wasn't going to turn down the opportunity to impress you." She stood tall and undaunted in spite of his rejection.

Spunky and hot. Dangerous combo.

He fished his phone from his suit coat again. "I really do need to start making some calls."

"Don't let me keep you." She dipped her hand into the diaper bag and pulled out two rice cakes. She passed one to Owen and the other to Olivia. All the while Owen tugged at her hair, watching the way the white-blond strands glittered in the light. "That should keep them quiet while you talk."

Interesting that Alexa never once winced, even when Owen's fingers tangled and tugged. Not that he could blame his son in the least.

Seth thumbed the numbers on his phone and started with placing a call to his ex-wife—that again went straight to voice mail. Damn it. He then moved on to dialing family members.

Five frustrating conversations later, he'd come up empty on all counts. Either his kids were hellions and no one wanted to watch them, or he was having a serious run of bad luck.

Although their excuses were rock solid. His cousin Paige was on lockdown since her two daughters had strep throat. His cousin Vic had announced his wife was in labor with child number

three—which meant *her* sisters were watching her other two kids, in addition to their own. But damn it, he'd needed to take off five minutes ago.

Brooding, he watched Alexa jostle Owen on her shapely hip. She was obviously a natural with kids. She wasn't easily intimidated, important when dealing with his strong-willed offspring. She'd protected the kids when she found them alone on the plane. He'd seen proof of her determination and work ethic. An idea formed in his head, and as much as he questioned the wisdom of it, the notion still took root.

In spite of what he'd told her, he had read more of her proposal than the cover letter, enough to know something about her. He was interested in her entrepreneurial spirit—she'd done a solid job revitalizing a company that had virtually been on financial life support. Still, his gut told him he couldn't afford to take a risk on this part of his business, especially not now. Now that he was expanding, he needed to hire a larger, more established cleaning chain, even if it cost him extra.

But he needed a nanny and she'd passed the high-level background check needed to work in an airport. Her life had been investigated more thoroughly than anyone he would get from a babysitting service. Not to mention a babysitting service would send over a total stranger that his kids might hate. At least he'd met this woman, had access to her life story. Most importantly, he saw her natural rapport with the twins. He would be nearby in the hotel at all times—even during meetings—if she had questions about their routine.

She was actually a godsend.

Decision made, he forged ahead. “While I don't think your company's the right one to service Jansen Jets, *I* have a proposal for *you*.”

“I'm not sure I understand?”

“You fly with me and the kids to St. Augustine, be Owen and Olivia's nanny for the next twenty-four hours and I'll let you verbally pitch your agency's proposal to me again, in detail.” The more he spelled it out, the better the idea sounded. “I'll give you a few pointers about why my gut spoke up so quickly in case you want to make adjustments for future proposals to other companies. I'll even pass along your name to possible contacts, damn good contacts. And of course you'll be paid, a week's worth of wages for one day's work.”

Was he taking advantage here? He didn't think so. He was offering her a business “in” she wouldn't have otherwise. If her verbal proposal held together, he would mention her business to some of his connections. And yes, give her those tips to help cinch a deal elsewhere. She would land jobs, just not his.

She eyed him suspiciously. “Twenty-four hours of Mary Poppins duty in exchange for a critique and some new contacts?”

“That should be long enough for me to make alternative arrangements.” There'd been a time when twenty-four hours with a woman would be more than enough time to seduce her as well. His eyes roved over Alexa's curves once more, regretting that he wouldn't be able to brush up on those skills during this trip.

“And you trust me, a stranger, with your children?” Disdain dripped from her voice.

“Do you think this is the right time to call me a crummy father?” Though he had to appreciate her protective instincts when it came to his children.

“You could just ring up a nanny service.”

“Already thought of that. They wouldn't get here in time and my kids might not like the person they send. Olivia and Owen have taken to you.” Unable to resist, he tapped the logo just above her breast. Lightly. Briefly. His finger damn near shot out a flame like a Bic lighter. “And I do know who you are. I read enough of your proposal to learn you've passed your security check for airport work.”

“Well, tomorrow is usually my day off...” She dusted the logo on her shirt, as if his touch lingered. “You'll really listen to my pitch and give me tips, mention my company to others?”

“Scout's honor.” He smiled for the first time all day, seeing victory in sight.

“I want you to know I’m not giving up on persuading you to sign me up for Jansen Jets as well.”

“Fair enough. You’re welcome to try.”

She eyed both the children then looked back to him. He knew when he’d presented an irresistible proposition. Now he just needed to wait for her to see this was a win-win situation.

Although he needed for her to realize that quickly. “I have about two minutes left here,” he pressed. “If your answer’s no, get to it so I can make use of the rest of my time to secure alternative arrangements.” Although God only knew what those might be.

“Okay.” She nodded in agreement although her furrowed brow broadcast a hefty dose of reservation. “You have yourself a deal. I’ll call my partner to let her know so she can cover—”

“Great,” he interrupted. “But do it while you buckle up the kids and yourself. We’re out of here.” He settled Olivia back into her car seat with a quick kiss on her forehead.

Alexa looked up quickly from fastening Owen into his safety seat. “Where’s the pilot?”

He stared into her pale blue eyes and imagined them shifting colors as he made her as hot for him as he was for her. God, it would be damn tough to have this jaw-dropping female working beside him for the next twenty-four hours. But his children were his top priority.

So he simply smiled—and, yes, took a hefty dose of pleasure in seeing her pupils widen with awareness. “The pilot? That would be me.”

Chapter 2

Her stomach dropped and she prayed the Gulfstream III wouldn't do the same in Seth Jansen's hands.

Turning off her cell after deleting four missed calls from her mother and leaving a message for her partner, Bethany, Alexa double-checked the safety belts for both children and buckled her own. Watching Seth slide into the pilot's seat, she reminded herself he owned a charter jet company so of course it made sense he could pilot a plane himself. She'd flown on private aircraft during her entire childhood, trusting plenty of aviators she'd never even met to get her safely from point A to point B. So why was she so nervous with this guy at the helm?

Because he'd thrown her off balance.

Boarding the plane earlier, she'd had such optimism, a solid approach in place and control of her world. In the span of less than ten minutes, Seth Jansen had seized control of not just the plane, but her carefully made plan.

The kind of bargain he'd proposed was so unexpected, outrageous even. But too good an opportunity to pass up. She needed to take a deep breath, relax and focus on learning everything she could about him, to give her an edge in negotiations.

Even knowing he must have his pilot's license, she wouldn't have expected someone as wealthy as him willing to fly himself. She'd thought he would have someone else "chauffeur" while he banged back a few drinks or took a nap. Like her dad would have done during their annual family vacation, a one-week trip that was supposed to make up for all the time they never spent together during the year.

Not that she saw much of either of her parents even then. While on vacation, the nanny had taken her to amusement parks or sightseeing or to the slopes while her father attended to "emergency" business and her mother went to the spa.

Simmering over old memories, Alexa polished the metal seatbelt buckle absently with the hem of her shirt as she watched Seth Jansen complete his preflight routine.

The door to the cockpit had been left open. Seth adjusted the mic on the headset, his mouth moving, although she couldn't hear him as the engines hummed to life. Smooth as silk, the plane left the hangar, past a row of parked smaller aircraft until he taxied to the end of the runway and stopped.

Nerves pattered up from her stomach to the roots of her hair. The jet engines roared louder, louder still, and yet she could swear she heard Seth's deep voice calmly blending with the aerial symphony.

Words drifted back...

"Charleston tower... Gulfstream alpha, two, one, prepared... Roger... Ready for takeoff..."

The luxury craft eased forward again, Seth's hands steady on the yoke and power. Confidence radiated from his every move, so much so she found herself relaxing into the butter-soft leather sofa. Her hands fell to rest on the handle of each car seat, claiming her charges. Her babies, for the next twenty-four hours.

Her heart squeezed with old regrets. Her marriage to Travis had been an unquestionable failure. While part of her was relieved there hadn't been children hurt by their breakup, another part of her grieved for the babies that might have been.

The nose of the plane lifted as the aircraft swooped upward. Olivia and Owen squirmed in their seats. Alexa reached for the diaper bag, panic stirring. Did they want a bottle? A toy? And if they needed a diaper change there wasn't a thing she could do about that for a while. Just when the panic started to squeeze her chest, the noise of the engines and the pacifiers she'd used to help their ears soothed them back into their unfinished nap.

The diaper bag slid from her grip, thudding on the floor. Relaxing, she stared across the aisle out the window as they left Charleston behind. She also left behind an empty apartment and a silent phone since her married friends had dropped away after her divorce.

Church steeples and spires dotted the ocean-locked landscape. So many, the historic town had earned nicknames of the Holy City and the City by the Sea. After their financial meltdown, her parents had relocated to a condo in Boca Raton to start over—away from the gossip.

How ironic that her parents' initial reservations about Travis had been so very far off base. They'd begged him to sign a prenuptial agreement. She'd told them to take their pre-nup and go to hell. Travis had insisted he didn't care and signed the papers anyway. She thought she'd found her dream man, finally someone who would love her for herself.

Not that the contract had mattered in the end since her father had blown through the whole fortune anyway. By the time they'd broken up, her ex hadn't wanted anything to do with her, her messy family dysfunction, or what he called her germaphobic ways.

The way Travis had simply fallen out of love with her had kicked the hell out of her self-esteem there for a while. She couldn't even blame the breakup on another woman. No way in hell was she going to let a man have control of her heart or her life ever again.

All the more reason she had to make a go of her cleaning business and establish her independence. She had no other marketable skills, apart from a host of bills and a life to rebuild in her beloved hometown.

So here she was, on a plane bound for St. Augustine with a stranger and two heart-tuggingly adorable babies. The coastline looked miniscule now outside the window as they reached their cruising altitude.

"Hey, Alexa?"

Seth's voice pulled her attention away from the view. He stood in the archway between the cockpit and the seating area.

Her stomach jolted again. "Shouldn't you be flying the plane?"

"It's on autopilot for the moment. Since the kids are sleeping, I want you to come up front. The flight isn't long, but it will give us the chance to talk through some specifics about your time with the twins."

She saw the flinty edge of calculation in his jewel-toned eyes. He may have offered her a deal back at the airport, but now he intended to interview her further before he turned over his children to her. A flicker of admiration lit through the disdain she had felt for him earlier.

Giving each baby another quick check and finding them snoozing away, binkies half in, half out of their slack mouths, she unbuckled, reassured she could safely leave them for a few minutes. She walked the short distance to Seth and stopped in the archway, waiting for him to move back to the pilot's seat.

Still, he stood immobile and aloof, other than those glinting green eyes that swept over her face. The crisp scent of him rode the recycled air to tempt her nose, swirling deeper inside her with each breath. Her breasts tingled with awareness, her body overcome with the urge to lean into him, press the aching fullness of her chest against the hard wall of manly muscles.

She shivered. He smiled arrogantly as if completely cognizant of just how much he affected her on a physical level. Seth stepped back brusquely, returning to the pilot's spot on the left and waving her into the copilot's seat on the right.

Strapping in, she stared at the gauges around her, the yoke moving automatically in front of her. Seth tapped buttons along the control panel and resumed flying the plane. Still, the steering in front of her mirrored his movements until she felt connected to him in some mystical manner.

She resented the way he sent her hormones into overdrive with just the sound of his husky voice or the intensity of his sharp gaze. She was here to do a job, damn it, not bring a man into her already too complicated life.

Twisting her fingers together in her lap, she forced her thoughts back to their jobs. “What’s so important about this particular meeting that it can’t be rescheduled?”

“I have small mouths to feed. Responsibilities.” He stayed steadily busy as he talked, his eyes roving the gauges, his hands adjusting the yoke. “Surely you understand that, and if not, then I don’t even need to read your proposal.” He winked.

“Thank you for the Business 101 lecture, Mr. Jansen.” She brushed specks of dust from a gauge. “I was really just trying to make conversation, but if you’re more comfortable hanging out here alone, I’ll be glad to return to the back.”

“Sorry... And call me Seth,” he said with what sounded like genuine contrition. “Long day. Too many surprises.”

She glanced back at the sleeping babies, suddenly realizing they had miniature versions of his strong chin. “I can see that. What do you do to relax?”

“Fly.”

He stared out at the expanse of blue sky and puffy clouds, and she couldn’t miss the buzz radiating from him. Jansen Jets wasn’t just a company to him. He’d turned his hobby, his true love, into a financial success. Not many could accomplish such a feat. Maybe she could learn something about business from him after all.

“You were looking forward to this time in the air, weren’t you? What should have been your relaxing hour for the day has become a stressor.”

“I’ve gotta ask...” He looked over at her quickly, brow furrowed. “Is the psychoanalysis included in the cleanup fee?”

She winced as his words hit a little too close to a truth of her own. Travis used to complain about that same trait. Well, she did have plenty of practice in what a shrink would say after all the time she’d spent in analysis as a teenager. The whole point had been to internalize those healthier ways of thinking. She’d needed the help, no question, but she’d also needed her parents. When they hadn’t heard her, she’d started crying out for their attention in other ways, ways that had almost cost her life.

Her thoughts were definitely getting too deep and dark, and therefore too distracting. Something about this man and his children made her visit places in her mind she normally kept closed off. “Like I said, just making small talk. I thought you wanted me to come up here for conversation, to dig a little deeper into the background of your new, temporary nanny. If you don’t want to chat, simply say so.”

“You’re right. I do. And the first thing I’ve learned is that you don’t back down, which is a very good thing. It takes a strong person to stand up to the twins when they’re in a bad mood.” He shuddered melodramatically, his complaint totally undercut by the pride in his voice. Mr. Button-Up Businessman loosened up a little when he spoke of his kids. “What made you trade in your white gloves at tea for white glove cleaning?”

So he knew a little about her privileged upbringing as well. “You did more than just read my cover letter.”

“I recognized your name—or rather your return to your maiden name. Your father was once a client of a competing company. Your husband chartered one of my planes.”

“My ex-husband,” she snapped.

He nodded, his fingers whitening as his grip tightened on the yoke. “So, back to my original question. What made you reach for the vacuum cleaner?”

“Comes with the business.”

“Why choose this particular line of work?”

Because she didn’t have a super cool hobby like he did? She’d suffered a rude awakening after her divorce was finalized a year ago, and she realized she had no money and no marketable skills.

Her one negligible talent? Being a neat-freak with a need to control her environment. Pair that with insights into the lifestyles of the rich and spoiled and she’d fashioned a career. But that answer sounded too half-baked and not particularly professional.

“Because I understand the needs of the customer, beyond just a clean space, I know the unique services that make the job stand out.” True enough, and since he seemed to be listening, she continued, “Keeping records of allergies, favored scents, personal preferences for the drink bar can make the difference between a successful flight and a disaster. Flying in a charter jet isn’t simply an air taxi service. It’s a luxury experience and should be treated as such.”

“You understand the world since you lived in it.”

Lived. Past tense. “I want to be successful on my own merits rather than mooch off the family coffers.”

Or at least she liked to think she would have felt that way if there had been any lucre left in the Randall portfolio.

“Why work in this particular realm, the aircraft world?” He gestured around the jet with a broad hand.

Her eyes snagged on the sprinkling of fair hair along his forearm. Tanned skin contrasted with the white cuffs of his rolled up sleeves and wow did her fingertips ever itch to touch him. To see if his bronzed-god flesh still carried the warmth of the sun.

It had been so long since she’d felt these urges. Her divorce had left her emotionally gutted. She’d tried dating a couple of times, but the chemistry hadn’t been there. Her new business venture consumed her. Or rather, it had until right now, when it mattered most.

“I’m missing your point.” No surprise since she was staring at his arm like an idiot.

“You’re a...what...history major?”

“Art history, and being that close means you read my bio. You do know a lot more about me than you let on at first.”

“Of course I do or I never would have asked you to watch my children. They’re far more precious to me than any plane.” His eyes went hard, leaving no room for doubt. Any mistakes with his son and daughter would not be tolerated. Then he looked back at the sky, mellow Seth returning. “Why not manage a gallery if you need to fill your hours?”

Because she would be lucky if working in a gallery would cover rent on an apartment or a lease on an economy car, much less food and economic stability. Because she wanted to prove she didn’t need a man to be successful. And most importantly, *because* she didn’t ever again want the freaked out feeling of being less than six hundred dollars away from bankruptcy.

Okay, sort of melodramatic since she’d still owned jewelry she could hock. But still scary as hell when she’d sold off her house and car only to find it barely covered the existing loans.

“I do not expect anyone to support me, and given the current economy, jobs in the arts aren’t exactly filling up the want ad sections. Bethany has experience in the business, while I bring new contacts to the table. We’re a good team. Besides, I really do enjoy this work, strange as that may seem. While A-1 has employees who handle cleaning most of the time, I pitch in if someone’s out sick or we get the call for a special job. I enjoy the break from office work.”

“Okay, I believe you. So you used to like art history, and now you enjoy feeding people’s Evian habits and their need for clean armrests.”

The deepening sarcasm in his voice had her spine starching with irritation. “Are you making fun of me for the hell of it or is there a purpose behind this line of questioning?”

“I always have a purpose,” he said as smoothly as he flew the plane. “Will your whim of the week pass, once you realize people take these services for granted and your work is not appreciated? What happens to my aircraft then? I’ll be stuck wading through that stack of proposals all over again.”

He really saw her as a flighty, spoiled individual and that stung. It wasn’t particularly fair, either. “Do you keep flying even when people don’t appreciate a smooth or on-time flight, when they only gripe about the late or bumpy rides?”

“I’m not following your point here. I like to fly. Are you saying you like to clean?”

“I like to restore order,” she answered simply, truthfully.

The shrinks she'd seen as a teen had helped her rechannel the need for perfection her mother had drilled into Alexa from birth. She'd stopped starving herself, eased off searching the art world for flawless beauty and now took comfort from order, from peace.

"Ah—" a smile spread over his face "—you like control. Now that I understand."

"Who doesn't like control?" And how many therapy sessions had she spent on *that* topic?

He looked over at her with an emerald-eyed sexy stare. The air crackled as if a lightning bolt had zipped between them. "Would you like to take over flying the plane?"

"Are you kidding?" She slid her hands under her thighs even though she couldn't deny to herself just how tempting the offer sounded.

Who wouldn't want to take a stab at soaring through the air, just her and the wide-open blue rolling out in front of the plane? It would be like driving a car alone for the first time. Pushing an exotic Arabian racehorse to gallop. Happier memories from another lifetime called to her.

"Just take the yoke."

God, how she wanted to, but there was something in his voice that gave her pause. She couldn't quite figure out his game. She wasn't in the position to risk her livelihood or her newfound independence on some guy's whims.

"Your children are on board." She knew she sounded prim, but then hey, she was a nanny for the day.

"If it appears you're about to send us into a nosedive, I'll take over."

"Maybe another time." She leaped up from the seat, not about to get sucked into a false sense of control that wouldn't last. "I think I hear Olivia."

His low chuckle followed her all the way back to both peacefully sleeping children.

* * *

Alexa could hear his husky laugh echoing in her ears two hours later as they settled into their luxurious hotel room in St. Augustine, Florida.

She had seen the best of the best lodgings and the Casa Monica—one of the oldest hotels in the United States—was gorgeous by any standards, designed to resemble a castle. The city of St. Augustine itself was rich with history and ornate Spanish architecture, the Casa Monica being a jewel. The hotel had been built in the 1800s, named for St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, the city's namesake.

And here she was with Seth and his babies. She could use a little motherly advice from a patron saint's mom right now.

She also needed to find some time to touch base with Bethany at work. Even though she was sure Bethany could manage—it had been her company at one time—she really did need to speak with her partner and give Bethany her contact information.

Seth had checked them into one of the penthouse suites, with a walk-out to a turret with views of the city. The suite had two bedrooms connected by a sitting area. The mammoth bath with a circular tub called to her muscles, which ached from working all day then lugging one of the baby carriers around. Then her thoughts went to images of sharing the tub with a man...not just any man...

She turned back to the room, decorated in blue velvet upholstery and heavy brocade curtains. Seth had claimed the spare bedroom, leaving her the larger master with two cribs inside. She trailed her fingers over the handle to Olivia's car seat on the floor beside the mission style sofa in the sitting room. Olivia's brother rested in his car seat next to hers.

"Your twins sleep well. They're making this job too easy, you know."

"Pippa doesn't believe in bedtimes. They usually nap hard their first day with me." Seth strode into the spare bedroom. "Expect mayhem soon enough when they wake up recharged. Owen's a charmer, so much so it's easy to miss the mischief he's plotting. He's always looking for the best way to stack furniture and climb his way out. You can see where he's already had stitches through his left

eyebrow. As for Olivia, well, keep a close eye on her hands. She loves to collect small things to shove up her nose, in her ears, in her mouth...

Affection swelled from each word as he detailed his children's personalities. The man definitely loosened up when around his kids or when he was talking about them. He seemed to know his offspring well. Not what she would have expected from a distant dad. Intrigued, she moved closer.

Through the open door, she could see him drape his suit coat on the foot of the bed. He loosened his tie further and unbuttoned his collar, then worked the buttons free down his shirt.

Alexa backed toward her own room. "Um, what are you doing?"

Seth slipped his still-knotted tie over his head and untucked the shirt. "Owen kicked his shoes against me when I picked him up after we landed." He pointed to smudges down the left side. "I need to change fast before my meeting."

His all-important meeting. Right. Seth had told her he was having dinner with a bigwig contact downstairs and she could order whatever she wanted from room service. He would be back in two to three hours. If she could get the kids settled in the tub, she could sit on the side and make some work calls while watching them. Check voice mail and email on her iPhone, deal with the standard million missed calls from her mom before moving on to deal with work. Her staff wasn't large, just four other employees, including Bethany. Her partner was slowing down, but could hold down the fort. In the event an emergency arose, Bethany would make sure things didn't reach a boiling point. So she was in the free and clear to spend the night here. With the kids.

And Seth.

She thumbed a smudge from the base of the brass lamp. "Can't have shoe prints all over you at the big meeting. That's for sure."

"Could you look in the hang-up bag and get me another shirt?"

"Right, okay." She spun away before he undressed further. She charged over to the black suitcase resting on top of a mahogany luggage rack.

Alexa tugged the zipper around and...oh my. The scent of him wafted up from his clothes, which should be impossible since they were clean clothes. But no question about it, the suitcase had captured the essence of him and it was intoxicating.

Her fingers moved along the hangers until she found a plain white shirt mixed in with a surprising amount of colorful others. Mr. Buttoned-up Businessman had a wild side. An unwelcome tingle played along her skin and in her imagination. She slapped the case closed.

Shirt in hand, she turned back to Seth who was now wearing only his pants and a T-shirt. His shoulders stretched the fabric to the limit. Her fingers curled into the shirt in her hands, her fingertips registering Sea Island Cotton, high-end, breathable, known for keeping the wearer's body cool throughout the day.

Maybe she could use some Sea Island Cotton herself because she was heating up.

Alexa thrust the shirt toward him. "Will this do?"

"Great, thanks." His knuckles brushed hers as she passed over his clothes as if they were intimately sharing a space.

And more.

Awareness chased up her wrist, her arm, higher still as the intimacy of the moment engulfed her. She was in a gorgeous hotel room, with a hot man and his beautiful children, helping him get dressed. The scene was too wonderful. Too close to what she'd once dreamed of having with her ex.

She jerked back fast. "Any last minute things to tell me about the kids when I order up supper?"

"Owen is allergic to strawberries, but Olivia loves them and if she can get her hands on them, she tries to share them with her brother. So watch that—hotels do the strawberry garnish thing on meals."

"Anything else?" She tried to pull her eyes away from the nimble glide of his fingers up the buttons on his shirt.

“If you have an emergency, you can contact me at this number.” He grabbed a hotel pen and jotted a string of numbers on the back of a business card. “That’s my private cell line I use only for the kids.”

“Got it.” She tucked it in the corner of the gold gilded mirror. She could handle a couple of babies for a few hours.

Right?

“Don’t lose it. And don’t let Owen find it or he will eat it.” He unbuckled his belt.

Her jaw dropped.

He tucked in his shirttails—and caught her staring. Her face heating, she turned away. Again.

Looking out the window seemed like a safe idea even though she’d been to St. Augustine about a dozen times. She could see Flagler College across the way, a place she’d once considered attending. Except her parents refused to pay if she left Charleston. Students at the Flagler castlelike fortress must feel as if they were attending Hogwarts. In fact, the whole city had a removed-from-reality feel, a step out of time. Much like this entire trip.

A Cinderella carriage pulled by a horse creaked slowly by as a Mercedes convertible whipped around and past it.

As Charleston had the French Huguenot influence, buildings here sported a Spanish Renaissance flair, and if Seth didn’t get dressed soon, she would run out of things to look at. He was too much of a threat to her world for her to risk a tempting peek.

Her body hummed with awareness even when she didn’t see him. What a hell of a time for her hormones to stoke to life again.

“You can turn around now.” Seth’s voice stroked along her ragged nerves.

She chewed her lip, spinning back to face him, a man too handsome for his own good—or hers. “I’ve taken care of babies before.”

Not often, but for friends in hopes she could prepare herself for the day it was her turn. A day that had never come around.

“Twins are different.” He tugged the tie back over his head.

If he was so worried, he should cancel his meeting. She wanted to snap at him, but knew her irritability for what it was. Her perfect plan for the day had gone way off course, complicated even more by how damn attracted she was to the man she wanted to woo for a contract, not as a bed partner.

Memories of rustling sheets and sweat-slicked bodies smoked through her mind. She’d had a healthy sex life with her ex, so much so that she hadn’t considered something could be wrong until everything fell apart. She definitely couldn’t trust her body to judge the situation.

“Seth.” She said his first name so easily she almost gasped, but forced herself to continue, “the twins and I will manage. We’ll eat applesauce and fries and chicken nuggets then skyrocket your pay-per-view bill with cartoon movies until our brains are mush. I’ll watch Olivia with small objects, and Owen’s charm won’t distract me from his climbing or strawberry snitching. They’ll be fine. Go to your meeting.”

He actually hesitated before grabbing his jacket from the edge of the bed. “I’ll be downstairs in the bar if you need me.”

Oh, her body needed him all right. Too much for her own good. She was better off using her brains.

* * *

Seth stepped from the elevator into the lobby full of arches that led to the bar and restaurant. He scanned the chairs and sofas of rich dark woods with red-striped fabrics. Looking further, he searched past the heavy beams and thick curtains pulled back at each archway.

Thank God, somehow he’d managed to make it here ahead of his dinner partner. He strode past an iron fountain with Moorish tiles toward the bar where he was supposed to meet Javier Cortez, a cousin to royalty.

Literally. Cortez was related to the Medina family, a European monarchy that had ended in a violent coup. The Medinas and relatives had relocated to the United States, living in anonymity until a media scoop exposed their royal roots last year.

Cortez had served as head of security to one of the princes prior to the newsbreak and now oversaw safety measures for the entire family. Landing the Medinas as clients would be a huge coup.

Seth hitched up onto a stool at the bar, waving to the bartender for a seltzer water. Nothing stronger tonight.

Jansen Jets was still a small company, relatively speaking, but thanks to an in, he'd landed this meeting. One of those "Human Web" six degrees of separation moments—his cousin's wife's sister married into the Landis family, and a Landis brother married the illegitimate Medina princess.

Okay, that was more like ten degrees of separation. Thankfully, enough to bring him to this meeting. From this point on he had to rest on his own merits. Much like he'd told Alexa. *Alexa...*

Damn it all, did every thought have to circle back around to her?

Sure he'd noticed her on a physical level when he'd first stepped on the plane, and he'd managed the attraction well enough until he'd caught her eyes sliding over his body as he'd undone his pants. The ensuing heat wave sure hadn't been a welcome condition right before a meeting.

But he needed her help, so he would damn well wrestle the attraction into submission. His kids were his number one priority. He'd tried calling his ex multiple times since landing in St. Augustine, but only got her voice mail. Life had been a hell of a lot less complicated when he was flying those routes solo in North Dakota.

There didn't seem to be a damn thing more he could do about his mess of a personal life. Hopefully he could at least make headway in the business world.

Starting now.

The elevator dinged, doors swished open and Javier Cortez stepped out. Predictably the bar patrons buzzed. The newness of having royalty around hadn't worn off for people. The forty-year-old royal cousin strode out confidently, his Castilian heritage fitting right into the hotel's decor.

The guy's regal lineage didn't matter to Seth. He just appreciated the guy's hard-nosed efficiency. This deal would be sewn up quickly, one way or another.

"Sorry I'm late." Cortez thrust out his hand. "Javier Cortez."

"Seth Jansen." He stood to shake Javier's hand and then resettled onto a barstool beside the other guy.

The bartender placed an amber drink in front of Javier before he even placed an order. "I appreciate your flying down to meet with me here." He rattled the ice and looked around with assessing eyes. "My wife loves this place."

"I can see why. Lots of historic appeal."

It was also a good locale to conduct business, near the Medinas' private island off the coast of Florida. Although Seth hadn't been invited into that inner sanctum yet. Security measures were tight. No one knew the exact location and few had seen the island fortress. The Medinas owned a couple of private jets, but were looking to increase their transport options to and from the island as their family expanded with marriages and new children.

Cortez tasted his drink and set it on the cocktail napkin. "Since my wife and I are still technically finishing up our honeymoon, I promised her a longer stay, the chance to shop, laze around by the pool, soak up some Florida sun before we head back to Boston."

What the hell was he supposed to say to that? "Congratulations."

"Thanks, thanks. I hear you have your kids and their sitter with you."

Of course he'd heard, even though Seth had only been in town for about an hour. The guy was a security whiz and obviously didn't walk into a meeting unprepared. "I like to work in time with them whenever I can, so I brought the kids and Mary Poppins along."

"Excellent. Then you won't mind if we postpone the rest of this discussion."

Crap. Just what he didn't need.

The stay here extended. Less taken care of tonight, more tomorrow and even the next day. "Of course."

Cortez stood, taking his drink with him as he started back toward the elevator. Seth abandoned his seltzer water.

They stepped into the elevator together, and Cortez swiped his card for the penthouse level. "My wife and I would enjoy having you and your kids meet us for breakfast in the morning, your sitter, too. Around nine? Great," he said without waiting for an answer. "See you there."

Holy hell. Breakfast in a restaurant with a one-year-old was tough enough. But with two of them?

He stepped out onto the top floor, Javier going right as he went left.

The closer he came to the suite's door, the louder the muffled sounds grew. Squealing babies. Damn. Was one of them hurt? He double-timed toward his room, whipped the key card through just as the door opened.

Alexa carried a baby on each hip—two freshly bathed and wet naked babies. Her cheeks were flushed, her smile wide. "I just caught them. Holy cow, they've got some speed for toddlers."

He snagged a towel from the arm of the sofa and held it open. "Pass me one."

She handed Owen over and Seth saw...

Her shirt was soaking wet, clinging to every perfect curve. Who would have thought Mary Poppins could rock the hell out of a wet T-shirt contest?

Chapter 3

Alexa plucked at her wet company shirt, conscious of the way it clung to her breasts. She didn't need the heat in Seth's eyes. She didn't need the answering fire it stirred in her. They both had different goals for what remained of their twenty-four-hour deal. They were best served focusing on the children and work.

Turning away, she hitched Olivia up on her hip and snagged the other towel from where she'd dropped it on the sofa to chase the racing duo around the suite. "You're back early from your dinner meeting."

"You need some clothes." The sound of his confident footsteps sounded softly behind her on plush carpet.

"Dry ones, for sure." She glanced through to the bathroom. Towels were draped on the floor around the circular tub, soaking up all the splashes. "I let the babies use the Jacuzzi like a kiddie pool. A few plastic cups and they were happy to play. Supper should be arriving soon. I thought you were room service when I heard you at the door."

"They'll need cleaning up again after supper." He tugged out two diapers and two T-shirts from the diaper bag.

"Then I'll just order more towels." She plucked the tiny pink T-shirt from his hand and busied herself with dressing Olivia to keep from noticing how at ease he was handling his squirming son.

"Fair enough." He pressed the diaper tapes in place, his large masculine hands surprisingly nimble.

"Did your meeting go well?" She wrestled a tiny waving arm through the sleeve.

"We didn't get through more than half a drink. He had to postpone until the morning." A quick tug later, he had Owen's powder-blue shirt in place. He hoisted his son in the air and buzzed his belly before setting him on his feet. "I'll just call room service and add my order to the rest."

He wasn't going back to work? They would be spending the rest of the evening here. Together with the children, of course. And after the toddlers drifted off? He'd mentioned Pippa kept them up late. With luck the pint-size chaperones would burn the midnight oil.

"Too bad your dinner companion couldn't have told you about the delay before you left Charleston. You would have had time to make other arrangements for the children." And she would have been at home in her lonely apartment eating ice cream while thinking about encountering Seth on his plane. Because without question, he was a memorable man.

"I'm glad to have the time with them. I assume you can arrange to stay longer?"

"I'll call my partner back as soon as the kids are asleep. She and I will make it work."

"Excellent. Now we just need to arrange extra clothes and toiletries for you." He reached for the room phone as Olivia and Owen chased each other in circles around their father. "When I order my supper I'll also have the concierge pick up something for you to change into—"

"Really, no need." She held up a hand, an unsettling tingle tripping up her spine at the thought of wearing things purchased by him. "I'll wear the hotel robe tonight and we can have the hotel wash my clothes. The kids and I will kill time tomorrow browsing around downtown, shopping while you finish your meeting. You do have a double stroller, don't you?"

"Already arranged. But you are going to need a change of clothing sooner than that." The furrows in his brow warned her a second before he said, "My business prospect wants to have breakfast with the kids and there's not a chance in hell I can carry that off on my own. It's my fault you're here without a change of clothes."

A business breakfast? With two toddlers? Whose genius idea was that? But she held her silence and conceded to the need for something appropriate to wear.

She stifled a twinge of nerves at discussing her clothing size. She was past those days of stepping on the scales every morning for her mom to check—what a hell of a way to spend “mother-daughter” time. And thank God, she was past the days of starving herself into a size zero.

Size zero. There'd been an irony in that, as if she could somehow fade away...

Blinking the past back, she said, “Okay then, tell them to buy smalls or eights, and my shoes are size seven.”

His green eyes glimmered wickedly. “And underwear measurements?”

She poked him in the chest with one finger. “Not on your life am I answering that one.” God, his chest was solid. She stepped away. “Make sure to keep a tally of how much everything costs. I insist on reimbursing you.”

“Unnecessarily prideful, but as you wish.” He said it so arrogantly she wanted to thump him on the back of his head.

Not a wise business move, though, touching him again. One little tap had nearly seared her fingertip and her mind. “I pay my own way now.”

“At least let me loan you a T-shirt to sleep in tonight rather than that stifling hotel robe.”

His clothes against her naked flesh?

Whoa.

Shaking off the goose bumps, she followed the toddling twins into the master bedroom. The rumble of his voice followed her as Seth ordered his meal, her clothing and some other toiletries...

Olivia and Owen sprinted to check out the matching portable cribs that had been set up on the far side of the king-size bed, each neatly made. Everything had been provided to accommodate a family. A real family. Except she would crawl under her own covers all alone wearing a hot guy's T-shirt.

Alexa wrapped her arms around her stomach, reminded of the life she'd been denied with the implosion of her marriage. A life she purposefully hadn't thought about in a year since she'd craved a real family more than her next breath. Being thrust into this situation with Seth stirred longings she'd ignored for too long. Damn it, she'd taken this gamble for her company, her employees, her future.

But in doing so, she hadn't realized how deeply playing at this family game could cut into her heart.

* * *

Playing pretend family was kicking his ass.

Seth forked up the last bite of his Chilean sea bass while Alexa started her warm peach bread pudding with lavender cream. They'd opted to feed the babies first and put them to bed so the adults could actually dine in peace out on the turret balcony. Their supper had been set up by the wrought-iron table for two, complete with a lone rose in the middle of the table. Historical sconces on either side of the open doors cast a candlelit glow over the table.

Classical music drifted softly from inside. Okay, so it was actually something called “The Mozart Effect—Music for Babies,” and he used it to help soothe Olivia and Owen to sleep. But it still qualified as mood-setting music for grown-ups.

And holy crap, did Alexa ever qualify as a smoking hot adult.

She'd changed into one of his T-shirts with the fluffy hotel robe over it. She looked as if she'd just rolled out of his bed. An ocean breeze lifted her whispery blond hair as late evening street noises echoed softly from the street below. Tonight had been the closest he'd come to experiencing family life with his children.

He hadn't dated much since his divorce and when he had, he'd been careful to keep that world separate from his kids. Working side by side with Alexa had more than cut the tasks in half tonight. That made him angry all over again that he'd screwed up so badly in his own marriage. He and Pippa had known it was a long shot going in, but they'd both wanted to give it a chance, for the babies. Or

at least that's what he'd thought, until he'd discovered Pippa wasn't even sure if he was the biological father.

His gut twisted.

Damn it all, Olivia and Owen were *his* children. *His* name was on their birth certificate. And he refused to let anyone take them from him. Pippa vowed she wasn't going to challenge the custody agreement, but she'd lied to him before, and in such a major way, he had trouble trusting her.

He studied the woman across from him, wishing he could read her thoughts better, but she held herself in such tight control at all times. Sure, he knew he couldn't judge all females by how things had shaken down between him and Pippa. But it definitely made him wary. Fool him once, shame on her. Fool him twice. Shame on him.

Alexa Randall was here for one reason only. To use him to jump-start her business. She wasn't in St. Augustine to play house. She didn't know, much less love, his kids. She was doing a job. Everybody in this world had an agenda. As long as he kept that knowledge forefront in his mind, they would be fine.

He reached for his seltzer water. "You're good with kids."

"Thanks," she said tightly, stabbing at her pudding.

"Seriously. You'll make a good mother someday."

She shook her head and shoved away her half-eaten dessert. "I prefer to have a husband for that and my only attempt at marriage didn't end well."

The bitterness in her voice hung between them.

He tipped back his crystal glass, eyeing her over the rim. "I'm really sorry to hear that."

Sighing, she dipped her finger in the water and traced the rim of her glass until the crystal sang. "I married a guy who seemed perfect. He didn't even care about my family's money. In fact, he sided with my dad about signing a prenup to prove it." Faster and faster her finger moved, the pitch growing higher. "After always having to second-guess friendships while growing up, that felt so good—thinking he loved me for myself, unconditionally."

"That's how it's supposed to work."

"Supposed to. But then, I'm sure you understand what it's like to have to question everyone's motives."

"Not always. I grew up in a regular farming family in North Dakota. Everyone around me had working class values. I spent my spare time camping, fishing or flying."

"Most of my friends in private school wanted the perks of hanging out with me—shopping trips in New York. For my sixteenth, my mother flew me and my friends to the Bahamas." She tapped the glass once with a short fingernail. "The ones with parents who could afford the same kind of perks were every bit as spoiled as I was. No wonder I didn't have any true friends."

Having to question people's motives as an adult was tough enough. But worrying as a kid? That could mark a person long-term. He thought of his children asleep in the next room and wondered how he would keep their lives even-keeled.

"So your ex seems like a dream guy with the prenup...and...?"

"His only condition was that I not take any money from my family." Her eyes took on a faraway, jaded look that bothered him more than it should have for someone he'd just met. "My money could go into trust for our kids someday, but we would live our lives on what we made. Sounded good, honorable."

"What happened?" He lifted his glass.

"I was allergic to his sperm."

He choked on his water. "Uh, could you run that by me again?"

"You heard me. Allergic to his swimmers. We can both have kids, just not with each other." She folded her arms on the edge of the table, leaning closer. "I was sad when the doctor told me, but I figured, hey, this was our call to adopt. Apparently Travis—my ex—didn't get the same message."

“Let me get this straight.” Seth placed his glass on the table carefully to keep from snapping the stemware in two with his growing anger. “Your ex-husband left you because the two of you couldn’t have biological children together?”

“Bingo,” she said with a tight smile that didn’t come close to reaching her haunted blue eyes.

“He sounds like a shallow jerk.” A jerk Seth had an urge to punch for putting such deep shadows in this woman’s eyes. “I would be happy to kick his ass for you. I may be a desk jockey these days, but I’ve still got enough North Dakota farm boy in me to take him down.”

A smile played at her lips. “No worries. I kick butts on my own these days.”

“Good for you.” He admired her resilience, her spunk. She’d rebuilt her life after two nearly simultaneous blows from life that would have debilitated most people.

“I try not to beat myself up about it.” Sagging back in the wrought-iron patio chair, she clutched the robe closed with her fists. “I didn’t have much practice in making smart choices about the people I invited into my life. So it stands to reason I would screw that one up, too.”

“Well, I’m a damn good judge of character and it’s obvious to me that *he* screwed up.” Seth reached across the table and touched her elbow lightly where the sleeve fell back to reveal the vulnerable crook. “Not you.”

Her eyes opened wider with surprise, with awareness, but she didn’t pull away. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I know there had to be fault on both sides.”

“Still, that’s not always easy to see or say.” His hand fell away.

“What about *your* ex?” She straightened the extra fork she hadn’t needed for her dinner. In fact, she hadn’t eaten much of her fire-grilled sea scallops at all and only half of her bread pudding. Maybe the cuisine here didn’t suit her. “Does she make it a regular practice to run off and leave the kids?”

“Actually, no.” Pippa was usually diligent when it came to their care. In fact, she usually cried buckets anytime she left them.

Alexa tapped the top of his hand with a whisper-soft touch. “Come on now. I unloaded about my sucky marriage story. What’s yours?”

Normally he preferred not to talk about his failures. But the moonlight, good food—for him at least—and even better company made him want to extend the evening. If that meant spilling a few public knowledge facts about his personal life, then so be it.

“There’s no great drama to share—” And yeah, he was lying, but he preferred to keep it low-key. He was used to glossing over the truth in front of his kids, who were too young to understand paternity questions. “We had a fling that resulted in a surprise pregnancy—” Pippa had just failed to mention the other fling she’d had around the same time. “So we got married for the children, gave it an honest try and figured out it wasn’t going to work. We already had divorce papers in motion by the time the babies were due.”

“If you don’t mind my asking—” she paused until he waved her on “—why did you get married at all then?”

He’d asked himself the same question more than once, late at night when he was alone and missing the twins. “Old-fashioned, I guess. I wanted to be around my kids all the time. I wanted it to work.” Wanted the babies to be his. “It just...didn’t.”

“You’re so calm about it,” she said with more of those shadows chasing around in her eyes.

Calm? He was a holy mess inside, but letting that anger, the betrayal, fly wouldn’t accomplish anything. “I have the twins. Pippa and I are trying to be good parents. At least I thought we were.”

Her hand covered his completely, steadily. “By all appearances you’re doing a great job. They’re beautiful, sweet babies.”

The touch of her soft skin sent a bolt of lust straight through his veins, pumping pulsing blood south. He wrestled his thoughts back to the conversation, back to the care of his offspring. “They’re hell on wheels, but I would do anything for them. Anything.”

So there was no need for him to stress over the fact that Alexa turned him on so hard his teeth hurt. He'd been too long without sex, only a couple of encounters in the year since his divorce. That had to be the reason for his instantaneous, out of control reaction to this woman.

Gauging by the pure blue flame in her eyes, she was feeling it, too.

He was realizing they had a lot more than just a hefty dose of attraction in common. They were both reeling from crappy marriages and completely focused on their careers. Neither of them was looking for anything permanent that would involve more messy emotions.

So why not hook up? If he wanted to act on their attraction and she was cool with the fact that being together had no effect on his business decisions, this could be the best damn thing to happen to him in months. *She* could be the best thing to happen to him in months.

Yeah, this could work.

Simple, uncomplicated sex.

They had an empty second bedroom waiting for them. He always carried condoms these days. One surprise pregnancy was enough. They had moonlight, atmosphere. She was even already half-undressed. There was nothing stopping him from seeing if she was amenable.

Decision made, Seth pulled the rose from the vase and stroked it lightly down her nose. Her eyes blinked wide with surprise, but she didn't say a word, didn't so much as move. Hell, yeah.

Emboldened, he traced her lips with the bud before he leaned across the table and kissed her.

Chapter 4

The warm press of Seth's mouth against hers surprised Alexa into stillness—for all of three heartbeats. Then her pulse double-timed. Surprise became desire. The attraction she'd been feeling since first laying eyes on him, since he'd taken off his tie, since she'd felt the steamy glide of his gaze over her damp clothing now ramped into hyper-drive.

He stood without breaking contact, and she rose with him as they stepped around the small table into each other's arms. She gripped his shoulders, her fingers sinking into the warm cotton of the shirt she'd chosen for him earlier. Her defenses were low, without a doubt. The romantic meal, moonlit turret and alluring dinner companion had lulled her. Even the soft classical music stroked over her tensed and frazzled nerves. It had been so long since she'd relaxed, too busy charging ahead with rebuilding her life. Even opening up about her divorce had felt—if not good—at least cathartic.

It had also left her bare and defenseless.

The man might be brusque in the way he spoke sometimes, but, wow, did he ever take his time with a kiss. She slid one hand from his shoulder up to the back of his neck, her fingers toying with the coarse texture of his hair. Her body fit against his, her softness giving way to the hard planes of his chest. The sensitive pads of her fingers savored the rasp of his late day beard as she traced his strong jaw, brushed across his cheekbones and back into his thick hair.

His mouth moved over hers firmly, surely, enticing her to open for him. Her breasts pressed more firmly against him as she breathed faster and faster with arousal. The scent of aftershave mingled with the salty sea air. The taste of lime water and spices from his dinner flavored their kiss, tempting her senses all the more to throw reason away. The bold sweep of his tongue made her hunger for more of this. More of *him*.

How easy it would be to follow him into his bedroom and toss away all the stress and worries of the past years as quickly as discarded clothes. Except, too soon, morning would come and with it would come all those concerns, multiplied because of their lack of self-control.

God, this was so reckless and unwise and impulsive in a way she couldn't afford any longer. Scavenging for a shred of self-control, she pushed at his shoulders since she couldn't seem to bring herself to tear her mouth away from his.

Thank goodness he took the hint.

He pulled back, but not far, only a whisper away. Each breath she took drew in the crisp scent of him. The starlight reflected in his green eyes staring at her with a keen perception of how very much she ached to take this kiss further.

Her chest pumped for air even though she knew full well the dizziness had nothing to do with oxygen and everything to do with Seth's appeal. Slowly he guided her back to her chair—good thing since her legs were wobbly—and he returned to his as well, his eyes still holding her captive. He lifted his crystal glass, sipping the sparkling water while watching her over the rim.

She forced a laugh that came out half strangled. "That was unexpected."

"Really?" He placed his glass on the table again. The pulse visibly throbbing in his neck offered the only sign he was as shaken as she was by what they'd just shared. "I've wanted to kiss you since I first saw you on board my plane. At that moment, I thought that attraction was mutual. Now, I *know* it is."

His cool arrogance smoked across the table.

A chilling thought iced the heat just as quickly as he'd stoked it. "Is that why you asked me to watch your children? Because you wanted a chance to hit on me?" She sat straighter in her chair and wished she wore something more businesslike than a borrowed terry-cloth robe and his shirt. "I thought we had a business arrangement. Mixing business and personal lives is never a good idea."

"Then why did you kiss me back?" He turned the glass on the tablecloth.

“Impulse.”

His eyes narrowed. “So you admit you’re attracted to me.”

Duh. Denying the mutual draw would be pointless. “You know that I am, but it doesn’t mean I’ve been making plans to act on the feeling. I think Brad Pitt’s hot as hell, but I wouldn’t jump him even if given the opportunity.”

“You think I’m Brad Pitt-hot?”

Damn the return of his arrogant grin.

“I was just making a point,” she snapped.

“But you think I’m hot.”

“Not relevant.” She flattened her hands on the table. “I’m not acting on the impulse any further tonight or ever. If that means you renege on your offer to read my proposal and refer me to others in the business, then so be it. I will not sleep my way into a deal.”

She pushed to her feet.

“Whoa, hold on.” Standing, he circled the table to face her, stroking her upper arm soothingly. “I didn’t mean to imply anything of the sort. First, I don’t believe you’re the kind of person to get ahead in the world that way. And second, I have never paid for sex, and I never intend to.”

She froze, his touch sending fresh skitters of awareness up her arm. The darkness and distant night sounds isolated them with too much intimacy.

Alexa eased back a step toward their suite and the soft serenade of Mozart on the breeze. “Have you looked into finding someone else to take care of your children?”

Still, he didn’t move. He didn’t have to. His presence called to her as he simply stood a couple of steps away, his broad shoulders backlit by the moon, starlight playing across his blond hair, giving him a Greek godlike air.

“Why would I need to do that?” he asked. “You’re here for them.”

“Our agreement only lasts for twenty-four hours,” she reminded him, holding onto the door frame to bolster her wavering resolve.

“I thought we established the time frame had expanded because my meeting with Javier Cortez fell through tonight.” He stepped closer, stopping just shy of touching her again. “You even rearranged things at your work to accommodate our business agreement.”

He was right, and she’d allowed him to scramble her thoughts once more. She locked onto his last three words and pushed ahead. “Our *business* agreement.”

“You’re angry.”

“Not...angry exactly. Just frustrated and disappointed in both of us.”

His eyes flared with something indefinable. “Disappointed?”

“Oh—” she suddenly understood his expression “—not disappointed in the kiss. It was... Hell, you were here, too. There’s no denying the chemistry between us.”

Another arrogant grin spread across his face. “I agree one hundred percent.”

“But back to the Brad Pitt principle.” She stiffened her spine and her resolve. “Just because there’s an attraction doesn’t mean it’s wise to act on it. I’m disappointed that we did something so reckless, so unprofessional. My business has to be my primary focus, just as you’ve said your children are your main concern.”

“Having my priorities in order doesn’t cancel out my attraction to you. I can separate business from pleasure.” He held her with his laser hot gaze. “I’m very good at multitasking.”

Anger did build inside her now alongside the frustration. “You’re not hearing me! This thing between us is too much, too soon. We barely know each other and we both have high stakes riding on this trip.” She jabbed him in the chest with one finger. “So, listen closely. No. More. Kissing.”

She launched through the door and into the suite before he could shake her resolve again. But as she raced across the luxurious sitting area into her bedroom, his voice echoed in her ears and through her hungry senses.

“Damn shame.”

She completely agreed. Sleep tonight would be difficult to come by as regrets piled on top of frustrated desire.

* * *

Staring off over the city skyline, Seth leaned back in his chair, staying on the turret balcony long after Alexa left. The heat of their kiss still sizzling through him, he finished his seltzer water, waiting for the light in her room to turn off.

He'd only met her today, and he couldn't recall wanting any woman this much. The strength of the attraction had been strong enough on its own. But now that he'd actually tasted her? He pushed the glass aside, his deeper thirst not even close to quenched.

Now he had to decide what to do about that feeling. She was right in saying that giving in to an affair wasn't wise. They both had important reasons to keep their acquaintance all business.

His life was complicated enough. He needed to keep his life stable for his kids. No parade of women through the door, confusing them.

He eyed his smartphone on the table where it had been resting since his four attempts to contact Pippa. She still wasn't returning his messages, and his temper was starting to simmer. What if there had been something wrong with one of the kids and he needed to contact her? She should at least pick up to find out why he was trying to reach her.

His phone vibrated with an incoming call. He slammed his chair back on all four legs and scooped up his cell fast. The LED screen showed a stored name...his cousin Paige back in Charleston.

Not Pippa.

Damn it.

Even his extended family kept in better contact with him than the mother of his kids. His cousins Paige and Vic had both moved from North Dakota, each starting their families in the Charleston area. With no other family left out west, Seth had followed and started his own business.

He picked up without hesitation. “Paige? Everything okay?”

“We're fine.” His cousin's voice was soft as if lowered to keep from waking her children. Classical guitar music played softly in the background. “The girls are both finally asleep. I've been worried about you all afternoon. How are you and the twins? I feel so bad that I couldn't help you out.”

“No need to call and apologize. We prefer to steer clear of strep throat.”

“Actually I'm calling about Vic and Claire...”

Oh. Hell. In the chaos with the twins, he'd actually forgotten that his cousin Vic's wife had gone into labor today. “How's she doing?”

“She delivered a healthy baby boy just before midnight. Nine pounds thirteen ounces, which explains the C-section. But Mom and baby are doing great. His big sister and big brother can't wait to meet him in the morning.” Two boys and a girl. A family.

Seth scratched the kink in his neck. “Send my congratulations when you see them. I'll swing by for a visit when I get back in town.”

“I'll let them know.” The reception crackled as it sounded like she moved her phone to the other ear. More guitar music filled the airwaves... Bach, perhaps? “Actually, I called for a different reason. Now that Claire's had the baby and Vic has picked up their kids, her sister Starr says she can watch the twins. They know her two kids. They'll have a blast. You could fly Olivia and Owen up early in the morning before your first meeting.”

“That's a generous offer...”

“My girls won't be contagious in another day or two once the antibiotics kick in, so I can relieve her then. No worries.”

Her plan sounded workable. And yet, he hesitated, his gaze drawn back to the suite where Alexa slept. “You're all busy with your own families, and I have a plan in place here.”

“You're family,” Paige insisted sincerely. “We want to help.”

“I appreciate that.” Except he genuinely wanted his kids near him—and he wanted to keep Alexa near him, too.

The thought of cutting his time with Alexa short—it just wasn’t happening. Crazy, really, since he could contact her later, after this deal was cinched. If she was even still speaking to him once she realized he never intended to give her the Jansen Jets contract.

No. His time to get to know Alexa was now. He needed to figure out this unrelenting draw between them and work through it. She was here, and he intended to keep it that way. “Thanks, Paige, but I meant it when I said I’m set. I have help.”

“Hmm...” Her voice rose with interest. “You have a new nanny?”

His family chipped in most of the time, but he didn’t want to take advantage so he hired a couple of part-time nannies on occasion, all of which Paige would already know about. “Not a nanny. More of a sitter, a, uh, friend actually.”

“A female friend?” she pressed, tenacious as ever.

“She’s a female, yes.” *Definitely* female.

“That’s it?” Paige laughed. “That’s all you’re going to tell me, eh?”

“There’s not much to tell.” Yet. His eyes drifted back to the suite as he envisioned Alexa curled up asleep, wearing his shirt.

“Ah,” she said smugly, “so you’re still in the early stages, but not too early, right, or she wouldn’t be there with your children. Because, as best as I can remember, you haven’t dated much and none of those women ever got anywhere near the twins.”

His cousin was too insightful. The way she homed in on the intensity of his draw to Alexa so quickly made him uncomfortable.

He shot up from his seat. “That’s enough hypothesizing about my personal life for one night. I need to go.”

“I’m not giving up. I’ll want details when you return,” Paige insisted, getting louder and louder by the second. “And I want to meet her. I know you guard your privacy, but I’m family and I love you.”

“Love you too, cuz.”

“So you’ll talk to me? Let me know what’s going on in your world rather than hole up the way you did after Pippa—”

“I hear a kid,” he cut her short. “Gotta go. Bye.” He thumbed the off button and flipped the phone in his palm, over and over.

Guilt kicked around in his gut for shutting down Paige and for taking advantage of Alexa’s help. He should send Alexa back to Charleston and then impose on the sister of a cousin-in-law because his ex-wife had dumped his kids off without warning...

Hell, his life was screwed up, and he needed to start taking charge. He’d meant it when he said he could separate the personal from the professional. But he also heard Alexa when she said this was moving too fast for her. She needed more time, time they wouldn’t have if she went back to Charleston while he stayed here. He suspected once she went home, she would erect mile-high walls between them, especially once she learned he’d never planned to sign her cleaning company.

He needed longer with her *now*.

His mind filled with a vision of Alexa chasing his kids around, all wet from the tub. Warm memories pulled him in with a reminder of the family life he should be having right now and wasn’t because of his workload. Having Alexa here felt so right.

It *was* right.

And so, he wasn’t sending her back in the morning. In fact, he had to find a way to extend their window of time together. He not only needed her help with the children, but he also wanted her to stay for more *personal* reasons. The explosive chemistry they’d just discovered didn’t come around often. Hell, he couldn’t remember when he’d ever burned to have a particular woman this much. So much the craving filled his mind as well as his body.

The extension of their trip presented the perfect opportunity to follow that attraction to its ultimate destination.

Landing her directly into his bed.

* * *

Sunlight streamed through the window over the array of clothes laid out on the bed. So many clothes. Far more than she needed for a day or two.

Although as Alexa looked closer, she noticed the variety. It was as if whoever had shopped for her had planned for any contingency. Tan capris with a shabby chic blouse. A simple red cocktail dress. A sexy black bathing suit that looked far from nanny-like and made her wonder who'd placed the order. At least there was a crocheted cover-up. And for this morning's breakfast...

She wore a silky sundress, floral with coral-tinted tulips in a watercolor print. Strappy gold sandals wrapped up and around her ankles. She scraped her hair back with a matching scarf that trailed down her back.

There was a whole other shopping bag that a quick peek told her held more clothes, underwear, a nightgown and a fabric cosmetics bag full of toiletries. Once upon a time, she'd taken these kinds of luxuries for granted, barely noticing when they appeared in her room or at a hotel.

These days she had a firm grasp on how hard she would have to work to pay for even one of these designer items. What a difference a year could make in a person's life. Yet, here she was again, dancing on the periphery of a world that had almost swallowed her whole.

Steeling her resolve to keep her values firmly in place, she strode from the bedroom into the sitting area where Seth was strapping the twins into the new, top-of-the-line double stroller.

He looked up and smiled. The power of his vibrant green eyes and dimples reached across the room, wrapping around her, enticing her to move closer into the circle of that happiness. A dangerous move. She had to step away, for her own peace of mind. She wasn't wired to leap into intimacy with a stranger.

A stranger who became more intriguing by the second.

Surely a billionaire who knew how to work a stroller couldn't be totally disconnected from everyday reality. That insight buoyed her, and inspired her. Actively learning more about him would help her on many levels. Knowing more about him was wise for her work.

For work, damn it, not because of this insane attraction.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes, I believe I am." She could do this. She could keep her professional face in place, while discovering if Seth Jansen harbored any more surprises in that hulking hot body of his.

"Glad the clothes fit. Although for breakfast with the twins, we might be better off draping ourselves in rain ponchos."

Before she could laugh or reply, his phone rang and he held up a hand. "Hold on, I've got to take this. Work call coming in."

He started talking into his cell and grabbed his briefcase off the sofa. Opening the door, he gestured her ahead. She wheeled the stroller forward, out into the hall and toward the elevator.

The fabric slid sensuously against her skin with each step as she pushed the stroller into the elevator while Seth spoke on his phone to his partner... Rick... briefcase in his other hand. Each glide of the silky dress against her skin reminded her how vibrantly in tune her senses were this morning, and, as much as she wanted to credit the sunshine, she knew it was last night's kiss that had awakened something inside her.

Something that made professional goals tougher to keep in focus.

Two floors down, the doors slid open to admit an older couple dressed casually in sightseeing clothes that still shouted Armani and Prada. They fit right in with the rest of the clientele here. Except the woman carried a simple canvas bag with little handprints painted on it and signed in childlike

handwriting. Stenciled along the top of the bag were the words Grandma's Angels. Alexa swallowed a lump of emotion as she counted at least eleven different scrawled signatures.

The husband leaned closer to his wife, whispering, pointing and smiling nostalgically. The wife knelt to pick up a tiny tennis shoe and passed it to Alexa. "You have a beautiful family."

Before Alexa could correct her, they reached the lobby and the couple exited. She glanced sheepishly toward Seth and found him staring at her with assessing eyes as he tucked away his phone. Her mouth went dry. She grabbed the stroller, grateful for the support as the now increasingly predictable wobbly knees syndrome set in.

Ever aware of his gaze following her, she wheeled the twins from the elevator. She needed to get her thoughts in order ASAP. She was seconds away from meeting royalty for breakfast, pretty heady stuff even given her own upbringing. Seth was certainly coming through on his promise to introduce her to prestigious connections. Knowing the Medina family could be a serious boon to her fledgling business.

Although she was confused by a person who invited twin toddlers to a business breakfast at a restaurant with silk, antiques and a ceiling hand-painted with twenty-four karat gold.

The clink of silverware echoing from the room full of patrons, she didn't have to wonder for even a second which pair of diners to approach. A dark-haired, aristocratic man stood from a table set for six, nodding in their direction. A blonde woman sat beside him, a flower tucked behind her ear.

The wheels of the stroller glided smoothly along the tile floor as they passed a waiter carrying plates of crepes on his tray. Alexa stopped by their table.

Seth shook the man's hand. "Javier, I'd like you to meet—"

The man took her hand. "Alexa Randall. A pleasure to meet you," Javier said with only a hint of an accent. He motioned to the elegant woman beside him. "This is my wife, Victoria."

"Lovely to meet you." Victoria smiled welcomingly, while tucking her fingers into the crook of her husband's arm. He covered her hand automatically with a possessive and affectionate air.

Good God, this place was chock full of couples swimming in marital bliss. First the elderly couple in the elevator. Now her dining companions for breakfast. She didn't even dare look at the couple feeding each other bits of melon at the table next to them.

The numbers of fawning couples here defied national divorce statistics. Although, now that she thought about it, she and Seth had enough breakups to even out the scales.

Leaning into the stroller, Victoria grinned at the twins and spun a rattle attached to the tray. "Would you mind if I held one of these sweethearts?"

Seth pulled back the stroller canopy. "Sure, this is Owen—" he picked up his son "—and this is Olivia."

As Victoria reached down, the little girl stretched her arms up toward Alexa instead. Alexa's heart squeezed in response. So much so, it scared her a little. These babies were quickly working their way into her affection. Victoria eased back gracefully and left Alexa to settle the baby girl into her high chair beside her brother's. The adults took their seats and placed their orders, so far, with no mishaps.

As the waitress placed each person's dish on the table, Victoria spread her linen napkin across her lap. "I told Javier he really put you on the spot insisting you bring along babies, but the twins are total dolls." She tickled Olivia's chin. "Hopefully you'll warm up to me, sweetie, so I can entertain you while Alexa eats her breakfast, too."

"I think I can manage, but thank you." She reached past her smoked salmon bagel for her goblet of juice. How well did this woman and her husband already know Seth? What kind of information might she learn during this breakfast about Seth and his possible contacts?

While Javier detailed the must-see sights in St. Augustine, Olivia and Owen fed themselves fruit—which scared Alexa to her last frazzled nerve as she watched to be sure strawberries stayed on Olivia's tray but not Owen's.

Seth shoveled in steak and eggs, spooning oatmeal into the twins' mouths, while holding a conversation. She was in awe.

And a little intimidated.

She'd almost flooded the floor last night during their bath. If he hadn't shown up early, she wasn't sure how she would have wrestled them both into clothes. Whenever she thought she'd moved everything dangerous out of their reach...

Oh, God...

She lunged for Olivia just as Seth smoothly pulled the salt shaker from her grasp. Her pulse rate doubled at the near miss with catastrophe. So much for using this breakfast to learn more about Seth from the Cortez couple. She would be lucky to make it through the meal with her sanity intact.

Victoria rested her knife at the top of her plate of half-eaten eggs Benedict. "I hope he's treating you to some vacation fun after all these stodgy business meetings are over."

"Pardon?" Alexa struggled to keep track of the twins and the conversation in the middle of a business meeting and a dining room full of tourists.

Glasses and silverware clinked and clattered. Waiters angled past with loaded trays as people fueled up for the day ahead.

Victoria swiped her mouth with the linen napkin. "You deserve some pampering for watching the kids solo here at the hotel during the day."

"I'm helping out with temporary nanny detail."

Leaning closer, Victoria whispered, "It's obvious he doesn't look at you like a nanny."

She couldn't exactly deny that since she was likely searing him with her own glances, too. "Honestly we don't know each other that well."

Victoria waved away her comment, her wedding rings refracting light from the chandelier. "The length of time doesn't always matter when it comes to the heart. I knew right away Javier was the one." She smiled affectionately at her new husband, who was deep in conversation with Seth. "It took us a while to find our way to each other, but if I'd listened to my heart right off, we could have been saved so many months of grief."

"It's a business arrangement," she said simply, hoping if she repeated it enough she could maintain her objectivity. "Only business."

"Of course," Victoria conceded, but her smile didn't dim. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be nosy. It's just that given what I understand from Javier, Seth has been a workaholic since his divorce. He hasn't had time for relationships."

"There's nothing to apologize for." Alexa knew full well she and Seth were sending out mixed signals. As much as she'd been determined to keep things professional with Seth the businessman, she found herself drawn to Seth the father. A man so tender with his children. At ease with a baby stroller. As adept at flying a spoonful of oatmeal into a child's mouth as he was at piloting a plane through the sky.

These surprise insights proved a potent attraction, especially after living with her own distant father and then the way her ex had checked out on her.

Victoria's voice pulled Alexa out of her musings.

"Honestly, my thoughts may be selfish. I was thinking ahead that if Javier and Seth settle on a contract, then I was hoping we would get to see more of each other. As much as I adore my husband, his world is narrow and he's suspicious of expanding the circle. I'm always grateful for some girl time."

"That would be lovely, thank you." Alexa understood perfectly about lonely inner circles, too much so. She felt a twinge of guilt over her thoughts about using the Cortezes for contacts.

All her life she'd been warned about gold diggers. She'd always known the chances of someone seeing through the money to love her for herself was slim. And still she'd made a royal mess. She didn't want to let the Cortez money and their Medina connections blind her to who they really were.

“I mean it. And regardless of how much time we spend visiting, let’s enjoy the day...let’s have fun.”

Fun? She should be home, at work. She took a deep breath. This situation would help her at work. Or she hoped so.

She couldn’t ignore the fact that her wish to stay right here was increasing by the second. “I appreciate how helpful you’ve been here at breakfast. The twins are my responsibility. We’re going sightseeing with the stroller, maybe do a little shopping.”

“Perfect,” Victoria declared. “I’m at loose ends. I love a good walk and shopping. And after that, we can wear them out at the pool.”

Alexa did have a swimsuit and she had absolutely no reason not to take Victoria up on her generous offer. No reason other than a deep-seated fear of allowing herself to be tempted back into a world she’d been determined to leave behind. A way of life embraced by Seth and his precious children. Her eyes were drawn back to the twins.

Just as Owen wrapped his fist around one of his sister’s strawberries—a food he was allergic to.

Panic gripped Alexa as she saw the baby’s lightning fast intent to gobble the forbidden fruit. “No! Owen, don’t eat that.”

Lurching toward him, she grabbed his chubby wrist just before his hand reached his mouth. His face scrunched into utter dejection as his tiny world crumbled over the lost treat. Alexa winced a second ahead of his piercing scream. Seth leaned in to soothe the temper tantrum. Before Alexa could even form the words of warning...

Olivia flipped the bowl of oatmeal straight into Javier Cortez’s lap.

Chapter 5

The cosmos must have been holding a serious grudge against him because the sight of Alexa in a bathing suit sucker-punched him clean through.

Seth stopped short by the poolside bar outside the hotel and allowed himself a moment to soak in the sunlit view, a welcome pleasure after a tense work day that had started with his kid dumping oatmeal in a prospective customer's lap. Thank goodness Javier Cortez had insisted it didn't matter.

And Alexa had acted fast by scooping up both twins and taking them away for the day.

Now, she looked anything but maternal as she rubbed sunscreen down her arms, laughing at something Victoria said. The twins slept in a playpen under the shade of a small open cabana. Only a half dozen others had stayed this late in the day—a young couple drinking wine in the hot tub and a family playing with a beach ball in the shallow end.

His attention stayed fully focused on the goddess in black Lycra.

He should be celebrating the success of his day's meeting. Javier wanted him to tour the landing strip at the king's private island off the coast of St. Augustine. Their time here was done. The king's island even came equipped with a top-notch nanny for the twins, a nanny the king kept on staff for his grandchildren's visits.

And yet, Seth was all the more determined than ever to keep Alexa with him, to win her over, to seduce her into his bed again and again until he worked this tenacious attraction out of their systems. He hadn't yet attained that goal but was determined to keep her around until he succeeded.

The black bathing suit was more modest than the strings other women wore that barely held in the essentials. Still, there was no denying her sensuality. Halter neckline, plunging deeply until the top of her belly button ring showed.

A simple gold hoop.

His hands itched to grasp her hips and slide his fingers along the edges, slipping inside to feel the satiny slickness he knew waited right there. For him.

Splashing from the deep end snapped him back to reality. Damn, he seriously needed to rein in those kinds of thoughts out here in public. Even when they were alone. He needed to be patient. He didn't want to spook her into bailing on this time they had together.

He thought back to how fast she'd retreated after their kiss. She'd been undeniably as turned on as he was and yet, she'd avoided him that morning as they'd prepared for the day. Although he thought he sensed a bit of softening in her stance as the day wore on. At breakfast he'd thought he caught her eyes lingering on him more than once. He could see the memory of their kiss written in her eyes as she stared at him with a mixture of confusion and attraction.

Shoving away from the bar, Seth strode alongside the pool toward Alexa. "Good afternoon, ladies."

Jolted, she looked over at him. Her eyes widened and he could have sworn goose bumps of awareness rose along her arms. She yanked her crocheted cover-up off the glass-topped table and shrugged into it almost fast enough to hide her breasts beading with arousal. His own body throbbed in response, his hands aching to cradle each creamy globe in his palms.

"Seth, I didn't expect you back this early."

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Victoria gather her beach bag. "Since you're done for the day, I take it my husband's free, so if you'll both excuse me..."

The woman made a smooth—and timely—exit.

Seth sank down into her vacated lounge beside Alexa as a teenager cannonballed into the deep end. "Did you and the babies have a good afternoon?"

“No problems or I would have called you. I wrote down everything the children ate and when they went to sleep. The pool time wore them out.” She toyed with the tie on her cover up—right between her breasts.

He forced his gaze to stay on her face. “I want you to extend your time with us for a couple more days.”

Her jaw went slack with surprise before she swallowed hard. “You want me to stay with you and the children?”

“Precisely.”

“My business is a small operation—”

“What about your partner?”

“I can’t dump everything on her indefinitely and still meet our obligations.”

His point exactly as for why hers wasn’t the company for Jansen Jets—hers wasn’t large enough and didn’t have adequate backup resources. He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. “I thought you were cleaning my plane to meet with me.”

“That certainly was my intent—and to impress you with A-1’s work.” She hugged her legs. “But I do clean other aircraft in addition to my obligations to office work.”

“That doesn’t leave much time for a private life.” Late day sun beating down on his head, he shrugged out of his suit jacket and draped it over the back of the lounge. He loosened his tie. God, he hated the constraining things.

“I’m investing in my future.”

“I understand completely.” His eyes gravitated toward his children, still sleeping peacefully in the playpen—Olivia on her tummy with her diapered butt up in the air, Owen on his back with his arms flung wide.

“You’ve achieved your goals. That’s admirable. I’m working on my dream now.” Determination coated each word as fully as the sunscreen covered her bared skin.

He *really* didn’t need to be thinking about her exposed body right now.

Already, he was on the edge of a new deal with Javier Cortez to supply charter jets for the royal Medinas. That huge boon would take his company to the next level and free him up to set up an entire volunteer, nonprofit foundation devoted to search and rescue operations. His first love, what had drawn him into flying in the first place. That love of flying had helped him develop and patent the airport security device that had made him a mint. Once he took his business to the next level, funding and overstretched government budgets wouldn’t be an issue...

So damn close to achieving all his business dreams.

Yet, still he was restless. “Let’s forget arguing about tomorrow and business. We can hash that out later. Right now, I’m off the clock. I want to make the most of our time left in St. Augustine tonight.”

“What exactly did you have in mind?” She eyed him suspiciously.

Had he imagined her softening on the all-business stance? There was only one way to find out. Standing, he snagged his suit coat. “We’re going to spend the evening out.”

“With twins? Don’t you think breakfast was pushing our luck?”

He grinned, scooping up his groggy daughter. “Trust me. I can handle this.”

“All right, if you’re sure.”

“Absolutely.” He palmed his daughter’s back as she wriggled in his arms and tugged at his collar. “Wait until you see what I have planned. You’ll want to dress comfortably, though. And we should probably pack extra clothes for the kids in case they get dirty.”

Alexa pulled up alongside him, Owen in her arms. Seth reached for the door inside—

Until her gasp stopped him short.

“Did you forget something?” he asked.

When Alexa didn't answer, he glanced and found her staring back at him with horror. What the hell? Except as she raised a shaking hand to point, he realized she wasn't looking at him. Her attention was focused fully on Olivia.

More precisely, on Olivia's bulging left nostril.

* * *

Sitting on the edge of the hotel sofa in their suite, Alexa struggled to contain the squirming little girl in her lap while pushing back the welling panic. The whole ride up in the elevator had been crazy, with Seth attempting to check his daughter's nose and the child growing more agitated by the second.

How in the world had Olivia wedged something up her nostril? More importantly, *what* had she shoved into there?

Alexa winced at the baby's bulging left nostril. She hadn't taken her eyes off Olivia for a second during their time at the pool—except when Olivia had been sleeping. Had she woken up? Found something in the playpen? Perhaps something blew inside the pen with her?

Panic gripped her. What the hell had she been thinking, allowing herself to believe she could care for these two precious children? She willed herself to stop shaking and deal with the crisis at hand.

Seth knelt in front of her, trying to grasp his daughter's head between his palms. "I can get this out if you will just hold her still long enough for me to push my thumb down the outside of her nose."

"Believe me, I'm trying my best." Alexa's heart pumped as hard and fast as Olivia's feet as the little girl screamed, kicking her father in the stomach. Her face turned red; her skin beaded with sweat from hysteria.

Sinking back on his haunches, Seth looked around their suite. "Is there any pepper left from last night's dinner?"

"Housekeeping cleared away everything. Oh, God, I am so sorry. I don't know how this happened—"

A crash echoed through the room.

Alexa looked at Seth, her panic mirrored in his eyes. "Owen!"

They both shot to their feet just as a pitiful wail drifted from behind the velvet sofa. Holding Olivia around the waist, Alexa ran fast on Seth's heels, only to slam against his back when he stopped short.

Owen sat on the floor, blessedly unharmed, just angry. His "tower"—which consisted of a chair, a pillow and the ice bucket—now lay on its side by the television. Handprints all over the flat screen testified to his attempt to turn on the TV by himself.

Seth knelt beside his son, running his hands along the toddler's arms and legs. "Are you okay, buddy? You know you're not supposed to climb like that." His thumb brushed over his son's forehead, along the eyebrow that still carried a scar from past stitches. "Be careful."

Picking up Owen, Seth held him close for a second, a sigh of relief racking through his body so visibly Alexa almost melted into the floor with sympathy. God, this big manly guy who plowed through life and through the skies alone had the most amazing way of connecting with his kids.

What would it have been like to grow up with a father like him? A dad so very present in his children's lives?

Standing, Seth said, "I'm going to have to take Olivia to the emergency room. Swap kids with me. You can stay here with Owen."

"You still trust me?"

"Of course," he responded automatically even though his mouth had gone tight. With frustration? Fear?

Or anger?

He leaned toward her. Olivia let out a high-pitched shriek and locked her arms tighter around Alexa's neck, turning her face frantically from her father.

Seth frowned. "It's okay, kiddo. It's just me."

Patting Olivia's back, Alexa swayed soothingly from side to side. "She must think you're going to pinch her nose again."

"Well, we don't have much choice here. I need to take her in." He set down Owen and clasped his daughter.

Olivia's cries cranked up to earsplitting wails, which upset her brother who started sobbing on the floor. If Olivia kept gasping would whatever was in her nose get sucked in? And then where would it go? Into a lung? The possibilities were horrifying. This parenting thing was not for the faint of heart.

"Seth, let me hold her rather than risk her becoming even more hysterical." She cradled the little girl's head, blond curls looping around Alexa's fingers as surely as the child was sliding into Alexa's heart. "You and I can go to the emergency room and take both kids."

Plowing a hand through his hair, Seth looked around the suite again as if searching for other options. Finally he nodded and picked up his son. "That's probably for the best. We just have to get a car." He grabbed the room phone and dialed the hotel operator. "Seth Jansen here. We need transportation to the nearest E.R. waiting for us. We're headed to the elevator now."

She jammed her feet into the flip-flops she'd worn to the pool, grateful she'd at least had time to change out of her swimsuit, and followed Seth out into the hall. The elevator opened immediately—thank God—and they plunged inside the empty compartment. He jostled his restless son while she made *shhh, shhh, shhh* soothing sounds for Olivia, who was now hiccupping. But at least the little girl wasn't crying.

The floors dinged by, but not fast enough. The doors parted and the elderly couple they'd seen on their way down to breakfast stepped inside.

Dressed to the nines in jewels and evening wear, the woman wasn't carrying her canvas bag made by her grandchildren, but she still radiated a grandma air. She leaned toward Olivia and crooned, "What's the matter, sweetie? Why the tears?"

Lines of strain and worry pulled tighter at the corners of Seth's mouth. "She shoved something up her nose," he said curtly, his gaze locked in on the elevator numbers as if willing the car to move faster. "We're headed to the E.R."

As if sensing her dad's intent, Olivia pressed her face into Alexa's neck.

The grandmother looked back at her husband and winked knowingly. The older gentleman, dressed in a tuxedo, reached past Alexa so quickly she didn't have time to think.

He tugged Olivia's ear. "What's that back there behind your ear, little one?" His hand came back around with a gold cuff link in his palm. "Was that in your ear?"

Olivia peeked around to see and like lightning, the grandmother reached past and swiped her finger down Olivia's nose. A white button shot out and into the woman's hand. She held it up to Seth's shirt. A perfect match. They hadn't even noticed he was missing one from near his neck.

Surprise stamped on his handsome face, Seth stuffed the button into his pocket. "She must have pulled it off when I picked her up by the pool."

Alexa gasped in awe at how easily the couple had handled mining the button from Olivia's nose. "How did you two manage that so smoothly?"

The grandpa straightened his tuxedo bow tie. "Lots of practice. You two will get the knack before you know it."

In a swirl of diamonds and expensive perfume, the couple swept out of the elevator, leaving Alexa and Seth inside. The doors slid closed again. She sagged back against the brass rail. Relief left her weak-kneed all the way back to the penthouse floor while Seth called downstairs on his cell to cancel their ride to the E.R.

Stopping just outside their door, he tucked his phone in his pocket and slid a hand behind her neck. "Thank you."

“For what? I feel like I’ve let you down.” The emotions and worry after the scare with Olivia had left her spinning. She could only imagine how he must feel.

“Thank you for being here. Chasing these two is more challenging than flying a plane through a thunderstorm.” He scrubbed a hand over his jaw. “My family tells me I’m not too good at asking for help. But I gotta admit having an extra set of hands and eyes around made things easier just now.”

His emerald-green gaze warmed her along with his words. Given her history with men, the whole trust notion was tough for her. But right now, she so desperately wanted to believe in the sincerity she saw in his eyes. She felt appreciated. Valued as a person.

Giving that much control to another person scared her spitless. “You’re welcome.”

She thought for a moment he was going to kiss her again. Her lips tingled at the prospect. But then he glanced at the two children and eased back. “Let’s get the diaper bag so we can move forward with our night out on the town.”

Blinking fast, she stood stock-still for a second, barely registering his words. They still had a whole night ahead of them? She was wrung out, as if she’d run an emotional marathon. With her defenses in the negative numbers, an evening out with Seth and his children was too tantalizing, too tempting a prospect. Hell, the man himself was too tempting. Not that she had the choice of opting out.

She just really hoped the evening sucked.

* * *

The evening hadn’t sucked.

In fact, Seth had followed through with the perfect plans so far, starting off with a gourmet picnic at a park near a seventeenth century fort by the harbor. The children had toddled around, eaten their fill and gotten dirty. So precious and perfect and far more normal than she would have expected.

Then Seth had chartered a carriage ride through the historic district at sundown. Olivia and Owen had squealed with delight over the horse. And the last part of the outing hadn’t ended in a half hour as she’d expected.

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