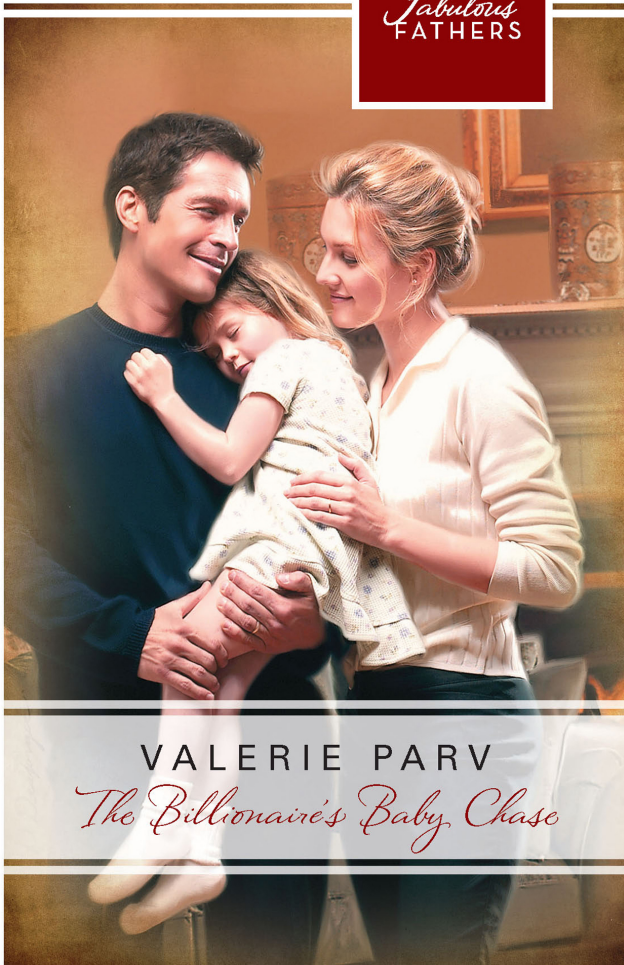


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FATHERS



VALERIE PARV  
*The Billionaire's Baby Chase*

# Valerie Parv

## The Billionaire's Baby Chase

### Аннотация

Billionaire James Langford had money, power, influence...but none of it mattered. Finding his missing child consumed his every waking thought. Because he needed to locate young Genevieve and claim her as his rightful heir...before time ran out. But when James finally found his precious daughter, she came with a strong-willed, beautiful guardian who proved to be a formidable rival. And with little time to spare, James knew that the alluring Zoe Holden would simply have to become his bride....

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Dear Genevieve,

One day you'll be old enough to ask where I was during those early months of your life after you were taken away from me. I want you to know that you were never out of my thoughts. Every time I saw a little girl around the right age, it tore me up inside. I never stopped looking for you or gave up hope of finding you.

When I finally did, my first sight of you gave me that lump-in-the-throat feeling you get when you see a perfect sunset, or hear "Silent Night" playing. Then your tiny hand crept into mine, and the waiting was over.

Thanks to Zoe, who took such good care of you while we were apart, I've heard about the milestones in your small life. I only pray I can share the big ones still ahead of you. If something should happen to me, you'll always have Zoe and the certainty that I loved you enough to find you and bring you home. Always remember you mean the world to me.

Love,  
Dad

# The Billionaire's Baby Chase

## Valerie Parv



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

# VALERIE PARV

With twenty-five million copies of her books sold internationally, including many Waldenbooks bestsellers, it's no wonder Valerie Parv is known as Australia's queen of romance and is the recognized media spokesperson for all things romantic.

Valerie lives in Australia's capital city of Canberra, where she is a volunteer zoo guide. She draws on this and other aspects of her life for many of her novels, having spent almost thirty-eight years happily married to her romantic hero, Paul. As she says, "Love gives you wings—romance helps you fly."

For Margie and Tony,  
my favorite parent role models.  
And for Paul, always.

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# Prologue

Bill Margolin gave a sigh of frustration but he should have known it would have no effect on his patient who kept his back turned and his gaze on the spectacular view of the Sydney Harbor beyond the plate-glass window.

It was a shame all his patients didn't keep themselves in such great shape, the doctor thought, watching the tall man shrug into his shirt. With what James was facing, he'd need every bit of his strength if he was to survive. Bill hated to be the bearer of bad news, but as a doctor as well as a friend he had to make James understand the risk he was taking.

A wry smile tugged at Bill's mouth. When had anyone ever made James Langford do anything? The man was the original immovable object, a goal-seeking missile who went over or around obstacles if he could, but through them if he had to. But generally they were business obstacles. There was no way he could go around this particular problem and it was Bill's job to convince him.

With another sigh he returned his attention to the X rays clipped to a lighted board in front of him. When they were students together there had been times when Bill would have killed to have a physique like his friend, to say nothing of James's fabled charm with women—but now wasn't one of those times. "You can't put the operation off much longer," he repeated in his

most authoritative doctor-voice.

With decisive movements, James finished dressing then skewered his friend with a look of such blue-eyed intensity that it wasn't hard to see why women flocked around him. James had a knack of giving you his full attention, which made you feel as if you were the most important person in the world at that moment.

James swung a chair around and straddled it, his fingers drumming a tattoo on the back. "You said the bullet hasn't moved since my last scan."

"It hasn't, but that doesn't mean it won't. It's already pressing against a nerve in your spine, which is why you're getting these blinding headaches."

James gave him a rueful glance, massaging his left arm as if the memory was lodged there. "And the tingling and numbness in my arm. No need to remind me."

"If I don't, you'll keep putting off the operation until you keel over for good."

James frowned. "After I got shot by that Middle Eastern fanatic who objected to foreigners working in his country, the doctors assured me operating to remove the bullet would do more harm than good."

"But that was before it started to move. We've been over this already, James. Surgery is your only option. I wish there was another way but there isn't. You have to let me schedule the operation."

"So you can kill me a lot sooner?" It was unfair taking this out

on Bill, but right now he was the only target James had. All he needed was another three months, then the doctor could do what he had to and the outcome wouldn't matter so much.

“So you can have a fighting chance to live.” The doctor ground out the words. “I know the operation is risky, but leaving the bullet alone until it paralyzes or kills you is a whole lot riskier.”

James flattened both palms against his friend's desk and met his concerned gaze squarely. “The bottom line, Bill. Will three months make that much difference?”

Anger flared in the doctor's expression. “You want me to quote you the odds on your survival? I'm a doctor, not a mathematician. I can't encourage you to risk your life so you can complete some business deal.”

James's full mouth tightened into a grim line. “You know me better than that, Bill. This isn't about business.”

“Then what's so damned urgent it can't wait until you have the surgery?”

“My daughter's future.” He leaned over, reveling in the shock on his friend's craggy face, a mirror of his own expression when he'd heard the news earlier today. “The investigators think they've located Genevieve, Bill.”

The doctor cleared his throat noisily, a sure cover for an incipient emotional outburst. “Are you sure? After eighteen months, I thought you'd given up hope of finding her.”

He should have known that giving up wasn't in James's vocabulary, either. “Not a chance. As soon as you told me

I needed the operation, and the risk it entailed, I had the investigators step up their efforts. I have no intentions of dying on that operating table of yours without seeing my daughter again, and installing her in her rightful place as my heir.”

He didn't add if it's the last thing I do, because they both knew it could be. No point in laboring the obvious, James thought. Bill nodded slowly. “I see why you need your three months.”

“Do I have them?”

The doctor ran wiry fingers through his hair, which had been graying since they were at university together. “It's a hell of a risk. I'd want to monitor your condition closely, and you'd need to guarantee to take things as easy as possible.”

“Done and done,” James assured him. “Thanks, Bill.”

The doctor shook his head. “Don't thank me. I probably need my head examined for letting you walk out of here without a firm date for surgery, but I know what it's been like for you since Ruth disappeared with the baby. Where did you locate them finally?”

“Right here in Sydney. They were practically under my nose the whole time and I never knew it,” James said grimly.

“Does Ruth know you're on to her?”

A shadow darkened James's features. “Ruth's dead. Sailing accident in the harbor.”

Bill didn't waste his breath on platitudes. Any love his friend had known for his wife had been extinguished the day she ran away with their child. After working in the security business in the Middle East where she and James met, Ruth had known

how to cover her tracks well. Only a handful of close friends, Bill among them, knew what hell James had endured because of Ruth. He hardly dared to ask, “What about your daughter?”

James reached into his briefcase and pulled out a folder, opening it on the doctor’s desk. “I got this two hours ago.” On top lay a black-and-white photograph, the edges slightly blurred as if it had been taken covertly from some distance away, which was probably the case. “This woman was taking care of Genevieve for Ruth when she died. The P.I. is certain the child with her is my daughter.” His voice dipped huskily as he shoved the photo across the desk.

Bill studied the picture. It showed a tiny girl about four or five years old astride a pony at the beach. The child’s delight fairly leapt off the page at him. At the pony’s head stood an equally compelling-looking woman. About five foot six, the doctor estimated, and ideally proportioned for her height. The only excessive thing about her seemed to be the mass of curls tumbling to her shoulders.

Margolin found himself smiling involuntarily as the woman’s sunlit pleasure communicated itself to him through the grainy photograph. She looked windblown but happy, her heart-shaped face mirroring the child’s pleasure. All her attention was focused on the child astride the pony, as if nothing else mattered in the world. As a father himself, the doctor knew how that felt.

He glanced at James in concern. His friend’s eyes were fixed on the photo, the hunger in them almost palpable. “What are you

going to do?” Bill asked quietly, feeling his chest tighten. If this turned out to be another false lead, it was going to hit James hard.

His friend dragged his eyes away from the picture as if the effort cost him a great deal. The look he turned on Bill burned with purpose. “By the time I get back to my office, I’ll have absolute confirmation that she’s my daughter. Then I want to see her, find out how she’s been living since she was taken away. This woman, Zoe Holden, apparently fostered her when her family couldn’t be traced.”

“So she doesn’t know who the child belongs to?” A sigh gusted past Bill’s lips as James shook his head. “This will come as quite a shock to her.”

James’s hands balled into fists before he made an obvious effort to relax them. “I’m well aware of how it’s going to feel. I’ve been there, remember?”

“Maybe you should let the authorities handle the initial approach,” Bill suggested, knowing it was futile as soon as James flashed him a fierce look.

“If I’d left this to the authorities, I’d still be waiting,” he said. “This time I’ll handle it my way.” He flicked the folder closed. “Zoe Holden is a property manager with a local real estate agency. As it happens, my firm has been looking for somewhere to house executives visiting from overseas and her agency has been advertising a suitable place. I’ve arranged to inspect the property. It will give me the perfect opportunity to find out what this Zoe Holden is like and what sort of home she’s been

providing for Genevieve.”

Bill whistled soundlessly. “Sounds a bit cloak-and-dagger to me, but it’s one way to check her out without tipping your hand. When will you see her?”

James consulted the gold Rolex gleaming on his tanned wrist. “I have an appointment with her this afternoon. As you’ve spent the morning drumming into me, I don’t have the luxury of time to waste. The sooner I get my daughter back, the sooner you can operate. Do we have a deal?”

The doctor frowned. “You can’t bargain with your health, but if you follow my orders and take things easy, maybe you can postpone the operation a little longer. Lord knows, you’re stubborn enough. And if there is a chance of getting Genevieve back, I can’t stand in your way. Now get out of here. I have sick people waiting who are willing to let me help them.”

In spite of a lingering headache courtesy of the doctor’s poking and prodding, James managed to whistle as he strode through the waiting rooms and headed for the elevator that would deliver him to the underground car park.

Back in his car again he reached for the photo supplied by the private investigator. He must have studied it a hundred times since it was delivered until every detail was burned into his memory, but he still hadn’t tired of it. After eighteen months of enduring a wrenching sense of loss every time he set eyes on a four-year-old, he was entitled to feel elated at the sight of this particular child. From her huge dark eyes to a smile that

could light up a room by itself, everything about her screamed a rightness he could feel deep inside. This was his daughter. He knew it.

But this time he found his eyes drawn to the woman holding the pony and a different kind of awareness clawed through him, astonishing him with its power and unexpectedness. She was beautiful. Not the kind of beauty you saw on magazine covers, but rather more natural, with a vibrancy that invited attention. Unaware she was being photographed, she looked relaxed and happy, dressed for the beach in figure-hugging shorts and a skimpy T-shirt. James had a momentary vision of himself clasping her around that incredibly slender waist and whirling her around into the air, just to find out if her laugh was as silvery as her smile promised.

Nerves leapt along his spine, aggravating the tender spot where the bullet was lodged in the side of his neck and the jolt of pain brought him back to reality. He took deep, steadying breaths until the pain passed, telling himself all the while that his reaction to the woman was a result of seeing her with his child. That was all it was and all it could ever be. Because once she found out who he was and what he wanted she would sooner cut out his heart than waste a smile on James Langford.

# Chapter One

The child planted tiny fists on small hips. “Mummy, what’s a spitting image?”

Zoe looked up from the property brief she was studying and suppressed a smile. “It means a person who looks very much like somebody else. Where did you hear that?”

Genie frowned. “Simon’s mummy says he’s the spitting image of his daddy.” She paused, wrinkling her face in concentration. “Am I the spitting image of you?”

Zoe fought to keep her feelings from registering on her face. Genie was far from being her spitting image. The child was as dark as she herself was fair. Genie’s eyes, fixed expectantly on her, were a vivid blue in contrast to her own eyes, which were the color of autumn leaves.

A heart-wrenching rush of love for those self-same features tore through Zoe, making her eyes blur with tears of happiness and gratitude. She was blessed to have the chance to be a mother to a child as beautiful both in looks and nature as Genie. They didn’t have to look alike to share a bond she could feel like a steel filament stretching between them.

To cover the torrent of emotions flooding through her, she ruffled Genie’s thick chestnut hair, so unlike her own tangle of straw-colored curls. “You don’t need to be anyone’s spitting image, sweetheart. You’re a beautiful, precious one-of-a-kind.”

Genie sighed heavily. “I don’t want a mummy who went away. I want to be borned your little girl so I could be your spitting image.”

Zoe felt another jolt deep inside her even as she masked the reaction with a loving smile. Genie so seldom mentioned her real mother that it came as a shock to be reminded of the reality.

She was annoyed with herself for reacting badly to the reminder now, instead of counting her blessings. A child was one blessing her ill-fated marriage to Andrew hadn’t bestowed, although she had dreamed of it long and hard enough. There was nothing physically wrong, doctor after doctor had assured her, not unless you counted deep unhappiness. But Andrew’s jealous behavior had frozen something deep inside her.

Her life had settled onto a much more even keel since her husband died, although she still shuddered to think of how quickly everything had changed. He simply hadn’t believed she was attending a business seminar with a workmate. Convinced she was on her way to meet a man, Andrew had followed her, slamming his car into a telegraph pole in his unseeing rage. He had died instantly.

Zoe no longer allowed herself to dream of an ideal relationship, although the longing for a child of her own was harder to subdue. That she hadn’t even been close to managing it had become obvious the day she got the chance to foster Genie and love her as her own. No child could have been more cherished.

Zoe set the folder aside and took Genie's chubby hands in her own. "Don't I tell you almost every day that you are my little girl in every way that matters and I love you very, very much?" The child nodded solemnly and Zoe pulled in a deep breath. "Do you remember the teddy bear I made for your last birthday?"

Genie nodded again. "Yes."

"And Big Ted that Santa brought you before that?"

"When I was little," Genie confirmed so seriously that Zoe had to make an effort not to laugh.

"Do you love Big Ted any less because I didn't make him for you?"

Genie looked affronted at the very idea. "Course not. I love both my teddies zackly the same."

Zoe enveloped the child in a hug, feeling her eyes threatening to brim again. "Now you know how I feel about you. You're my special little girl and it doesn't matter one bit that you didn't grow inside me."

"Or if Santa brought me." Genie finished on a triumphant note. Then she added more hopefully, "Maybe if I asked Santa —"

"Santa doesn't bring children," Zoe interjected before Genie could embellish the notion. "Any more than he brought you."

Genie chewed her lower lip. "I know, but it would be fun if he could bring me a baby brother or sister."

A pang gripped Zoe. She knew just how Genie felt. Maybe she was getting greedy, but sometimes her arms ached to hold a

baby and feel its mouth nuzzling against her breast. The desire for another child to grow with Genie, to share her games and discoveries, and the outpouring of maternal love Zoe knew she had to offer was almost more than she could bear. Not for the first time she made herself count her blessings. She had Genie to love and care for, and it was more than she had ever dreamed would be hers. She managed a tremulous smile. “Speaking of fun, isn’t it time you got ready to go to playgroup?”

To Zoe’s intense relief, the distraction worked as it usually did. “Are you coming, too?” Genie demanded, all thoughts of Santa and babies miraculously forgotten.

Zoe wished she could distract herself so easily. She shook her head. “Simon’s mummy is taking you both today.” Simon’s mother, Julie, lived next door and was Zoe’s friend and self-appointed morale officer. “I have to show a house to a nice man who’s coming all the way from the country to see it.”

Genie made a face. “Do you have to? Why can’t he look at a house by his own self?”

Zoe laughed at the child’s persistence. “Because he can’t, that’s why. Now scoot. Auntie Julie will be here any minute.”

The child scampered off down the hall to her bedroom. In minutes she was back, carrying her koala backpack and favorite Barbie doll, just as the doorbell pealed. As soon as Zoe opened it, Genie launched herself at Simon and his mother, who were waiting outside. Amid promises to be good and hugs all around, they left in a flurry of chatter and excitement.

Zoe barely had time to assemble the documents she would need for the house inspection when the doorbell pealed again.

James Langford waited with barely leashed impatience. When he had asked his secretary to arrange the appointment with Zoe Holden, he had not expected to meet her at what was obviously her own home. He had been fully prepared to spin some tale that would end in her inviting him home after they had inspected the Strathfield mansion.

Being invited here was beyond all his expectations and he could barely suppress a shiver of anticipation. He was so close to finding his daughter he could practically taste his success.

The signs of a child in residence made him catch his breath, his chest tightening painfully. A battered tricycle lay on its side on the front lawn while a ball made a splash of scarlet beneath a rosemary bush. In the report which had awaited him on his desk after he returned from the doctor's office the investigators had noted these signs and more.

A good deal more.

The child living with Zoe Holden was unquestionably Genevieve Langford.

It had taken James half an hour before he recovered sufficiently to read beyond that simple statement to the proof the investigators had amassed, and the background they had supplied on the Holden woman.

It seemed she hadn't always worked as a property manager.

Until she obtained her real estate agent's license, she'd been a live-in nanny. Her late husband had lived next door to her employer, which was how they'd met. After the husband died, she'd supported herself by looking after other people's children in her home, while she studied for her present career.

According to the report, Ruth had left their child with Zoe frequently while she made a new life for herself under a false name. Thinking of what sort of life she'd chosen, James felt his features tighten. Freed of the constraints of their marriage, she had thrown herself into all sorts of wild adventures, trying everything from parachuting to whitewater rafting and, finally, to sailing on Sydney Harbor. She hadn't survived her last escapade.

James's jaw muscles worked as he considered what could have driven his wife to do such crazy things. Was she trying to prove something to herself? Or was she thumbing her nose at James himself, knowing he would never approve of her life-style?

Damn it, he wasn't a tyrant, expecting his wife to sit at home and be a meek little wife and mother. But he did believe that parenthood conveyed some responsibilities, not least of which was surviving to see your child grow to adulthood.

He dragged in a strangled breath. Even though it had happened eighteen months before, finding out about Ruth's death so abruptly had hit him harder than he had expected. Not because he still loved her. He wasn't that much of a fool. But because her death had been so senseless. Like the proverbial candle in the wind, she had burned herself out long before her time. And

because she had never discussed her feelings with him, he had no idea what part he himself might have played in the tragedy.

By hiding herself and Genevieve under a false identity, Ruth had left the authorities no way to trace him after her death. According to the investigator's report, all avenues of inquiry had been tried, many of them by Zoe Holden herself. When any family had proved impossible to trace, she had finally fostered the little girl.

There was no doubt that his search was almost over, but he couldn't let himself accept it. Not yet. Until he was reunited with Genevieve, he was reluctant to trust any amount of evidence. But he would trust his instincts. They had urged him to follow just one more hopeless lead and not to give up. Thank providence he hadn't, or he wouldn't be standing here now with his throat drying and his palms sweating while his heart raced a mile a minute. Setting up a modern telecommunications network for a volatile Middle Eastern country hadn't reduced him to this state.

Drawing in a steadying breath, he let his hand edge toward the doorbell again. Before he could press it, the door swung open and he was confronted by the woman whose face he had been studying in photographs all day.

The first thing he realized was that she was more attractive by far than the grainy picture had suggested. She was slighter, too, and as he had suspected, he could have spanned her waist with both hands. What the photo hadn't revealed was the determined lift to her chin and the flash of challenge in her amber eyes which

made him feel as if he'd been king-hit. The crackle of awareness arced through him again, stronger now that she was before him in the flesh. It was even more of an effort to gain control of his vocal cords. Only years of top-level business negotiations gave him the skills to conceal her effect on him. "Zoe Holden?" he made himself ask, although he already knew the answer.

She swallowed hard, looked away and then back at him. Could he possibly be having a similar effect on her? To her credit, she sounded composed when she said, "You must be James Langford."

The woman's eyes had widened at the sight of him and although he was used to the reaction, he felt a perverse satisfaction at knowing he had impressed her. He knew his six-foot-two height could be intimidating. His sister accused him of working out deliberately to pack solid muscle around nature's formidable packaging. She was wrong, of course. These days fitness was a business asset. If it made his rivals think twice about crossing him, it was an added bonus.

Intimidated or not, the woman extended her hand and James felt a quick flaring of respect for her. Although her hand was swamped by his larger one, her grip was firm and businesslike. "I'm Zoe, pleased to meet you."

The musical cadence of her voice was as startling as her handshake, although not quite as startling as the mass of golden curls, which crowned an almost classically sculptured head and neck. She was beautiful enough to take a man's breath away. If

he had been no more than a client she was to show over a house, he would have been seriously tempted to invite her to discuss the deal with him over dinner that night.

He was seriously tempted, he admitted to himself, but was stopped by the certainty that she would want nothing further to do with him once she knew the real reason he was here. “Call me James,” he said and she nodded.

She opened the door wider. “Fine, James. I’ll get the paperwork for the Strathfield house and we can be on our way.”

James waited at the door while Zoe gathered the papers together and slid them into a leather document case. She was aware of his dark eyes following her movements. The attention had an odd, uplifting effect on her mood.

Most of her clients were elderly investors who treated her like a daughter, sometimes inviting her to their family gatherings. It wasn’t often she dealt with a man of the caliber of James Langford. She knew him by reputation, of course, as most people did. His company had pioneered satellite communications in Australia and now operated all over the world. He presided over a pay-television network, radio stations and something to do with computer software. The office had supplied her with some background details on him as soon as he showed an interest in the Strathfield mansion.

However, no amount of research could prepare her for the sheer physical impact he had on her. It wasn’t only his size,

although it was daunting to discover that she only reached his shoulder even in high heels. His eyes were an arresting blue which would have given Paul Newman tough competition.

Coming on top of a long, lean body which had serious athlete written all over it, the effect was thoroughly arresting. But it was more than his appearance that made her catch her breath. He projected a sense of elemental power that was almost mesmerizing. It wasn't hard to see why he was so successful. His air of command had struck her like a physical force as soon as she opened the door. Yet he bore the mantle of power so easily she had the sense that his genes must go all the way back to Alexander the Great in an unbroken line.

She almost laughed aloud at herself. After her disastrous marriage, what did she know about men and their genes? Alexander the Great, indeed. The man was a client. A rich, successful, incredibly virile and attractive one, but still a client. She had no business constructing an entire fantasy around a greeting and a handshake.

Her friend Julie was probably right. She was spending too much time either on her own or with Genie. Maybe she should make the effort to circulate more. If she allowed the memory of her marriage to Andrew to sour the rest of her life, she would let him defeat her twice.

Circulating was one thing, she knew. Allowing herself to get involved with a man, especially a take-charge man like James Langford, was quite another. Nobody knew better than Zoe that

getting involved meant giving up control of your life. In Andrew's case, it had meant giving up every shred of control, becoming accountable to him for every minute of her time. She had no intentions of putting herself in such a position again.

By the time she rejoined James, document case under her arm, her smile was coolly professional. "Shall we go? My car's parked outside."

"We'll be more comfortable in mine." He indicated a sleek black Branxton Turbo that managed to make her sedan, of which she was normally quite proud, look positively shabby. How did you make a car gleam like this anyway?

"But I know the way," she countered, wondering why it was suddenly important to her to win this round. She told herself she was being practical, insisting on her own transportation, but the reason went deeper. For some reason, James Langford set her senses on automatic alert, although she couldn't think why.

It wasn't his stature or his wealth. In the property management business she'd learned to operate at all levels. And oddly enough, she felt her honor was safe with him, although he'd probably find such an old-fashioned notion laughable, if not a slight to his manhood.

No, there was something else about him which counseled caution, even if it was only her imagination, which seemed to be working overtime today.

She was mildly surprised when he slid into the passenger seat of her car without further discussion, reaching across to open her

door from the inside. He seemed to take up a great deal of space inside the compact car, she noticed.

“Have you inspected many properties in Sydney?” she asked, trying to switch into professional mode before her thoughts ran away with her again. Around James it seemed all too easy.

“My deputy has looked at a number of them, but none entirely suits the company’s needs.”

She cast a sidelong look at him, almost disappointed that the conversation had switched to business so readily. “What are your company’s needs exactly?”

“A top location, naturally. A substantial parcel of land. And a property that has heritage value so our visiting executives gain some sense of the Australian character while they’re here.”

“Then you’re not buying for yourself?”

He shook his head. “Not to live in, no. I already keep a penthouse in the city and my main residence on the border of the Watagan State Forest, a few miles north of Sydney.”

Her eyes widened with delighted surprise. “I know it. My grandparents lived not far from Wollombi. I used to hand-feed kangaroos outside their back door.”

His interest was clearly piqued. “Perhaps I know them.”

A pang shot through her. “They died some years ago, within months of each other. I haven’t been up that way in a long time.”

She couldn’t have been more than fourteen the last time she stayed with her grandparents, although she’d visited them often as an adult. The memory of walking through lush green rain

forests and trying to carry on a conversation over the summer evening anthem of cicadas remained with her.

Was it because her grandparents' house was the only real home she'd known as a child? Her parents had been botanists, well enough known in their respective fields, but genteelly impoverished. Most of their time had been spent out in the field while their only daughter was farmed out to relatives, since they couldn't afford boarding-school fees.

After her father succumbed to a rare tropical disease on an expedition to South America, her mother had retired to the south coast of New South Wales, amid a jungle of a garden where she grew medicinal herbs.

By then mother and daughter were so estranged that Zoe couldn't imagine living with her mother. Fortunately by then she was working as a nanny, living with her charge's family, so the question never arose. Her mother wouldn't have enjoyed an enforced family existence any more than Zoe herself would.

"And your husband?"

James's voice snapped Zoe back to the present with a jolt, banishing the floodgate of memories opened by his mention of her childhood home. "My husband died two years ago in a car accident," she said quietly.

She accepted James's murmured condolences with a nod, not feeling inclined to explain to him that the only sorrow she felt on Andrew's behalf was over his untimely death, not to any sense of loss of her own.

It had taken her months to stop feeling guilty because Andrew's death had freed her from his obsessive jealousy. At first she had wondered what sort of woman she was, not to grieve for her husband, until Julie had reminded her sternly that Andrew himself had killed her love for him.

"I noticed the toys on your front lawn," James went on. "How many children do you have?"

Surprise shot through her. Usually male clients weren't the slightest bit interested in her domestic affairs once they established whether or not she was married. She told herself James was only making polite conversation.

She paid attention to the road. The turnoff to the Strathfield place wasn't far. Then she became aware that James was regarding her steadily, awaiting her answer.

"I don't have any children of my own," she said flatly, wondering at the same time why she was telling him more than he probably wanted to know. "I have a foster daughter, Genie, who's at playgroup this afternoon."

He moved restively, his athletic body tensing against the restraining seat belt. Already regretting his interest in her family, she concluded. Well, he needn't worry. She wasn't about to drag out a sheaf of baby pictures.

His next comment caught her off guard. "I had a little girl of my own. They can be a source of great joy."

His use of the past tense didn't escape her. Had his child died? Her own all-consuming love for Genie made it easy to understand

the anguish the loss of a child would mean. “Did something happen to her?” she asked gently.

Her sidelong glance caught the hardening of his jaw. “Yes, but it wasn’t some childhood ailment. That would have made some sense.”

Her knuckles whitened around the steering wheel. Oh, no, not a kidnapping. His prominence in the business world made the possibility frighteningly real. “Then what?”

“My wife decided our marriage wasn’t to her liking,” he said. “She took my daughter to another country and used an assumed name to make sure I couldn’t find them.”

The pain in his voice vibrated through Zoe. Although she and Andrew had never had a child, she could imagine her despair if he had done such an awful thing to her. She blinked hard. “Do you know where they are?”

Her peripheral vision caught his taut nod. “It’s taken me a long time, but I do now.”

He added no more details, leaving her to speculate that wherever his wife had gone, there was no chance he could retrieve his daughter. Otherwise, she suspected, he would move heaven and earth to do so.

“How old is your foster daughter?” he asked.

The strain in his voice tugged at her. Far from being a polite question, it suggested that he wanted to discuss her child, perhaps to distract himself from thinking of his own loss.

“She’s four and a half,” she said, obliging him. “She starts

school in a few months. I don't know how I'll get through the days without her."

"You and your husband never had children of your own?"

"It...didn't work out for us. We had a few problems," she added with difficulty. Even now it was hard to talk about her marriage, which had started so well until Andrew's true character emerged. "Genie has more than made up. She's an adorable child, full of mischief like most children her age, but so loving that I can't stay annoyed with her for long."

James folded his arms across his broad chest. "Does that mean you spoil her?"

She flashed him a wry smile before returning her attention to the road. "Is it possible to spoil a four-year-old? She doesn't get everything her own way, but when it comes to loving her, I don't believe you can go overboard, do you?"

His weight shifted on the seat beside her, attracting her attention. In profile, his features were half in shadow. "Unfortunately I didn't get the chance to find out."

Horrified with herself, she fell silent. What was she thinking of, going on and on about the joys of parenthood when it only reminded him of his loss? He had started the conversation, she told herself, but she could have framed her answers with a little more sensitivity. With relief she sighted their turnoff. "We're almost there."

If he sensed her relief, he gave no indication. Nor did he take more than a cursory interest in his first sight of the mansion as

the electronically operated gates swung open to admit them. Was he acting disinterested as a prelude to some hard bargaining? He had seemed far more animated when discussing their children than he did as they got out of the car and approached the house, their footsteps crunching on the freshly raked gravel driveway.

Apart from a caretaker who lived in a cottage on the grounds, the property was unoccupied. Her sense of unease returned. She put it down to the silence settling around them as soon as she switched off the engine. "Would you like to see the house or the grounds first?" she asked, unaccountably hoping he would choose to explore the garden.

"The house," he decided. "There are six bedroom suites, I understand."

Her unsettled feeling was probably due to the discussion about his missing daughter, she thought. Knowing how she would feel under the same circumstances was bound to affect her. She was thankful to be able to switch the conversation to the virtues of the mansion.

He responded in kind, asking shrewd questions about the house, its history and the land surrounding it. By the time she had shown him everything, over an hour had gone by. Apart from his questions, his demeanor gave her no clues as to whether or not she had a sale.

Somehow she also found herself talking more about her own life, she noticed. His questioning was so subtle that it wasn't until the inspection was almost over that she realized they'd talked

more about her than about the house.

“If you want to see the house again, I’ll be happy to arrange a second inspection,” she told him as they walked back to her car.

“There’s no need. I’ll take it.”

She could hardly believe her ears. A million-dollar property and he would take it, just like that? The commission from this one sale alone would take care of most of Genie’s needs for some time to come.

“You will?” she said, professionalism failing slightly as elation gripped her. “That’s great. I had a feeling it was right for you when you explained your company’s requirements.”

He nodded briskly. “The company will want to make some changes. Add a few more modern conveniences and more secure car parking, of course.”

“I’m authorized to discuss offers,” she assured him, mentally calculating the cost of the improvements he’d outlined. No doubt he would expect the final selling price to reflect them.

He named a figure only slightly below the asking price, which she had privately decided was above market value anyway. Evidently James agreed with her because his offer was exactly the one she would have made in his shoes. She was sure her clients would accept his offer without further negotiation.

At her car she swung around to face him. “I’ll call the vendors on the way back to my place. I’m sure your offer will be acceptable, so we can go to my office and get the preliminary paperwork under way this afternoon if you like.”

He braced an arm against the roof of her car, meeting her gaze with disturbing directness. A woman could drown in those blue pools, she thought. She had the uncanny sensation that he knew everything there was to know about her—every secret, every dark place. And found it intriguing.

She shook her head slightly to clear it. More fantasies, Zoe? What was the matter with her today? It must be the thrill of making such an important sale. She refused to believe her state of mind could be blamed on James's effect on her.

His slightly lopsided smile warmed her. "Do you have the offer document with you?"

She nodded and drew it out of her portfolio. He barely glanced at the fine print before writing in the price they'd discussed and scrawling his signature at the bottom. It was as firm and bold as everything else about him, she noticed.

"There, you have my offer in writing," he confirmed. "Everything else will be handled by my deputy, Brian Dengate, at my head office."

A faint sense of disappointment rippled through her. So he wasn't to be involved in the purchase beyond today's inspection. She dismissed the thought with surprising difficulty. "In that case, it's been a pleasure doing business with you, James." She slid into the driver's seat and he got in beside her. "I'll have you back at your car in fifteen minutes."

"There's no hurry," he said, catching her unawares. "I still have some matters to discuss with you."

Unaccountably her spirits lifted. He probably wanted to question her about the local zoning laws and heritage listing requirements, but it didn't seem to matter. She only knew she was happy to continue the conversation.

They had reached her house before she realized he hadn't asked any of his questions, talking instead about inconsequential matters. "Would you like to come in for coffee?" she offered and found herself holding her breath as she waited for his answer.

He nodded, his face impassive. She couldn't tell whether he was as drawn to her as she was to him, but at least he hadn't refused. Her step was light as she led the way inside.

Her home was modest but well-cared-for. Not what he would be accustomed to, she thought as they stepped over toys in the hallway to reach the living room. She'd decorated it herself with cream wallpaper, a handwoven Mexican rug and a few inventive touches such as a pottery jar holding giant paper sunflowers.

James settled himself on the sofa while she fetched coffee and homemade walnut cake. But he refused the cake and his coffee sat untouched at his elbow as he leaned toward her. "I have something to tell you, Zoe."

He looked so serious that alarm shrilled through her. "If you're worried about the heritage listing—"

"This isn't about the property." He forestalled her. "It's about Genevieve."

For a moment the name confused her, then the truth dawned. "You mean Genie. What about her?"

James reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a sheaf of documents. “There’s no easy way to tell you this, but there’s absolutely no doubt. The child you know as Genie is my daughter, Genevieve. All the proof you need is in these reports.”

## Chapter Two

Zoe felt as if she had stepped off a sandbank into deep water, which was rapidly closing over her head. Her skin turned icy and every breath became a huge effort. This was how it felt to drown, she thought, as if seeing her own reaction from a distance.

“She’s what?”

“She’s the daughter who was taken from me eighteen months ago. Her real name is Genevieve Matilda Langford.”

The drowning sensation went on and on, but there was also the sense of seeing herself from above as Zoe dispassionately noted every detail of her pose which miraculously hadn’t altered.

She sat frozen with one slim leg crossed over the other in a calm precision which now seemed to mock her other self, watching from above. She had actually thought that James wanted to prolong their meeting for other than business reasons. The truth chilled her beyond belief. All his interest in her marriage and her child had been designed to draw her out, to confirm what he must already have known. Like a panther toying with its prey, he had been waiting for the right moment to deliver his devastating news.

With an agonizing rush she inhabited her body again, feeling every nuance of the pain squeezing her heart relentlessly. Her bones felt liquid and she knew she couldn’t have stood up to save her life.

She was aware of James's tension as if they were connected by invisible wires. The denials she held back in her throat vibrated along the connection like the ghostly echo of a million callers down a telephone line. He watched her silently, apparently waiting for her to say something. But her mind was gripped by so much pain and confusion that speech seemed beyond her.

He had come to claim Genie. The realization burned through her tortured mind, erasing all other coherent thoughts. Her beautiful, beloved daughter belonged to him.

It couldn't be true. It was all some terrible nightmare from which she would awaken at any moment. She would feel Genie's insistent tug on her hair and she would pry her eyes open to protest that it was too early to get up. "But the sun's awake, Mummy," Genie would insist. Laughing, Zoe would swing her legs over the edge of the bed and catch the child's squirming body to her for a good-morning hug.

"Zoe? Are you all right?"

It wasn't Genie's voice but James's vibrant baritone, which banished the vision and replaced it with a harsh reality that refused to be denied. Without knowing it, Zoe had squeezed her eyes shut. She opened them now, knowing that the full extent of her pain would be visible to James who was reaching out to her.

She shrugged away his offered hand. "I'm all right. I just... this is... I don't know what to say."

He looked down at his long-fingered hands then back to her again, his cerulean gaze mirroring her torment. "There's nothing

to say. You've done a wonderful job of taking care of her."

She recoiled from the decisive edge in his voice. Done, past tense. She found her voice with an effort. "You make it sound as if it's over."

His head jerked up. "You know it is, Zoe. You were only able to foster her while her family couldn't be traced. Now she has family. I'm her father and she belongs with me."

"But Ruth told me..." Zoe clamped her jaw shut on the accusations welling up inside her. Ruth had managed to convince her that Genie's father was an unfeeling brute who didn't care about his wife and daughter.

James gave a resigned sigh. "Whatever she told you about me is probably as much a fabrication as the identity she used."

Confusion coiled through Zoe. Throughout the house inspection she'd begun to feel compassion toward him. Yet Ruth had described him as hard and uncaring, too preoccupied with business affairs to have much time for his family. Which was the real James Langford? she wondered.

His public image was of a stop-at-nothing entrepreneur who had built a global communications business from nothing. The Aussie Bulldozer, Time magazine had called him. Now Zoe was standing in the bulldozer's path, and he would go over her if she forced him to. But he would not be stopped, that much she knew with a numbing certainty.

She clutched at another straw. "You said your wife took your daughter to another country." Perhaps this was some ghastly case

of mistaken identity.

He nodded. “She did—Australia. My company was setting up a satellite communications network in the Middle East when we met. Ruth was handling security for the project. Neither of us planned on what happened, but it was a forbidding, lonely place for a foreigner. The political situation was delicate, and we couldn’t move outside our headquarters without an armed escort.” He gave a wry grimace. “In a situation like that, people turn to each other and form bonds more quickly than they might under normal conditions.”

Her throat felt gravelly. “You were married in the Middle East?”

“We hadn’t planned to until Ruth became pregnant.” He frowned at Zoe’s sharply indrawn breath. “Don’t look so scandalized. We took precautions, but Ruth suffered a bout of food poisoning and her contraception failed. Ruth wasn’t really the marrying kind, and I doubt if she would have said yes if not for her pregnancy.”

From her short acquaintance with his wife, Zoe suspected he was right. Ruth had given the impression that she enjoyed flaunting her power over men, but hated being pinned down for long. As a mother, she took little interest in the childish milestones Zoe had dutifully reported to her each day.

In many ways Ruth had reminded Zoe of a butterfly, moving restlessly from flower to flower, hating to be impeded in her travels. She hadn’t struck Zoe as a woman for whom marriage

and motherhood were natural choices.

James watched the expressions moving over her face. “I see you know what she was like.”

“I only knew her for a short time when she moved into an apartment across the road,” Zoe explained, her voice deepened by the ache in her throat. “She called herself Ruth Sullivan and said she was working as a courier in the city. Sometimes she left Genie with me overnight, so I was accustomed to having her sleep here. But when Ruth didn’t return to collect her for two days, I went to her address to see if she was ill. There was no answer and her neighbors hadn’t seen her in days, so I contacted the police.”

“Who traced her movements and discovered she’d been killed in that sailing accident,” James supplied. His tone said he was still adjusting to the discovery. In the midst of her own desolation, Zoe felt an unexpected wave of compassion for him.

“According to the police, she was involved with a pretty reckless crowd who encouraged her to try all sorts of dangerous sports,” Zoe added.

His sigh of resignation hissed between them. “Knowing Ruth, she wouldn’t have needed much encouragement. She enjoyed living on the edge. It made her feel alive. Working in the Middle East suited her need for adventure. I should have known better than to expect her to settle into domesticity with me.”

“What happened between you?” Through her hurt, Zoe felt compelled to ask the question, to know everything about Genie’s brief life before she came to Zoe. Until now she’d only had Ruth’s

account to go by.

A shadow crossed his chiseled features. “When we found out she was pregnant, I suggested returning to Australia so the baby could be born here.” He lapsed into a long, nerve-stretching silence before continuing. “For a while, things seemed to work out, but Ruth became restless. I had to return to the Middle East to complete our contract. Ruth wanted to come with me, but Genevieve was not yet two. I tried to cut my trip as short as I could. I was only supposed to be gone for a month.”

His deep voice cracked. The pain caused by his memories enfolded Zoe as if it was her own—which in a way, it was. But for these events triggered half a world away, she would not now be facing the worst moment of her life.

“She couldn’t wait a month?” she managed to ask, saying the unsayable for him. How could any woman, the mother of his child, not wait a lifetime for the man she loved, if that was what was required?

“In the end...circumstances...intervened. It was much longer than a month before I was able to return,” he rasped. “By the time I got back she was gone, taking my daughter with her.”

A distant part of her mind noticed that he made no attempt to explain what circumstances had kept him away. Was it the pressure of business? Or, heaven forbid, another woman? Neither were excusable when he had a wife and baby waiting for him at home.

Whatever had happened was none of her business except as it

concerned Genie, she told herself. He was probably only telling her the story at all to help her understand how Genie came to be in Zoe's care. The crazy part was she did understand. In his shoes she would have done everything in her power to find her child, just as James had. But the mother in her railed against it with every breath in her body. How in the name of all that was right and true could she face giving Genie up?

"I know this must be hard for you," James conceded. Distantly she registered that he felt badly about what he was doing. Yet she also sensed that nothing she said or did, no amount of tears or pleading, would change his course any more than one rock can alter the eventual course of a mighty river.

"Hard?" she echoed, her eyes blurring as she lifted them to him. "This goes way beyond hard, all the way to impossible. I doubt if you have the slightest idea how hard this is, Mr. Langford."

It registered that familiarity had gone, along with any sense of the attraction she had begun to feel toward him.

He gestured toward the documents lying between them on the coffee table. "Are you sure I don't know how this feels? If you come back to my office, I can show you files stacked higher than that table with reports and false leads, rumors and red herrings, as well as hard intelligence gathered inch by painstaking inch since the day Genevieve was taken away from me." His jaw hardened. "So don't tell me I can't understand how it feels."

The difference was that he had had longer to adjust to the

situation, if that helped any. Somehow she doubted it. And if he got his way, she would have to live without Genie a lot longer than James had. She forced herself to ask, “What do you intend to do now?”

He paced to the window, parting the curtain to survey the suburban vista beyond before swinging back to face her. Compassion softened the lines etched around his features, but his eyes shone with purpose. “I intend to get to know my child, be a father to her again. We’ve been kept apart quite long enough.”

Her mind refused to deal with any of this. Even acknowledging that she had heard him would lead to discussing ways and means. Suddenly she understood how bereaved people could prattle on about trivial matters, anything to avoid facing the reality of their loss.

She locked her hands around her knees, her thoughts stupidly sticking on the Strathfield mansion. Why had he wanted to see it if he had no real interest in the property? “This whole meeting was a sham, wasn’t it?” she said woodenly. “Have you enjoyed playing cat and mouse with me all afternoon, relishing the moment when you could spring your trap?”

Anger flashed in his vivid gaze. “It wasn’t a sham,” he denied. “My company does intend to purchase a property where we can accommodate visiting executives. But you’re right, it wasn’t why I made the appointment with you.” He glanced around. “I wanted to see for myself what you were like and how my child has been living.”

Zoe drew herself up to her full height, anger running like a river through her. She had a fair idea how inadequate her modest home must seem to someone with his background. “How dare you come here and check me out in such an underhanded way?” she demanded. “I may not have your resources, but Genie has wanted for nothing while she’s been in my care.”

James’s face clouded. He remained as still as a statue at the window, but his hands balled into fists at his sides. “If our roles were reversed, you’d have done exactly the same thing. Fortunately the team of private investigators I’ve had on the case since she disappeared assure me that Genevieve has flourished in your care. What I’ve seen for myself this afternoon bears it out, so you have no need to be angry on that score. On the contrary, I’m eternally grateful for all you’ve done.”

His appreciation fell on deaf ears as she recoiled almost physically at the idea of being investigated. It reminded her all too vividly of Andrew’s endless suspicions and questioning, even to the extent of watching her from his car to make sure she was indeed going to the supermarket and not to a meeting with another man.

“You’ve had me under investigation?” she repeated, revulsion sending shivers arrowing down her spine. “It didn’t occur to you to simply knock on the door and ask me anything you wanted to know?”

He spread his fingers wide. “I didn’t wish to confront you until I was sure of my facts. Over the months I’ve had to deal with a

string of false leads and disappointments. If the child had turned out not to be my daughter, you would never have known of my interest.”

Iced water slid along her veins. “I can’t believe you had me watched and every detail of my life investigated without me knowing anything about it. It’s almost...” She sprang to her feet, her mind groping for the right word. “Voyeuristic. How many other people have you spied on without their knowledge, pawing through the details of their lives?”

He was beside her in two long strides, his hands firm as they gripped her upper arms and he forced her to look at him. “Stop this, Zoe. I know you’re shocked and you have every right to be. But I refuse to apologize for using every trick in the book, dirty or otherwise, to find my child. She is what matters here, not my feelings and not yours.”

To her horror she felt two tears slide gracelessly down her hot cheeks. He swore beneath his breath and his hold tightened until she was cradled against the hard wall of his chest. His fingers wound through her hair in a comforting caress. “Don’t, please.”

It was the sort of embrace she might have used to comfort Genie. Yet without Zoe being sure when or how it happened, it swiftly turned into something more. She knew she was vulnerable and her judgment was not to be trusted at this moment, but neither could she deny the lightning flash of awareness that arced between them as his hands slid down her neck and settled on her trembling shoulders.

It came as absolutely no surprise when his lips found the top of her head. Rather, it felt almost inevitable, as if the awareness she had sensed the moment she opened the door to him was no more than a prelude to finding herself in his arms.

Her pulses went haywire as his lips traveled to her forehead. Slowly the shudder of suppressed sobs became something deeper, more elemental. It took every bit of self-control she possessed to remember who he was and why she was in his embrace.

Genie.

Desperately she focused on her child's name and felt her strength of will flowing back. As soon as she placed her palms against the padded muscle of his shoulders, he released her. But he remained no more than a step away as if expecting her to crumble again, his hair-trigger reflexes set to catch her.

"I'm sorry," she said as if apologizing only for the momentary weakness.

His quick, wry smile stressed his understanding of her need to deny what they both knew had just happened. It was an explosive situation. Emotions were running at fever-pitch. His expression told her he didn't believe she was apologizing for her weakness any more than she did, but he was decent enough to let it serve. "No need for apologies," he said, finally moving away so she could release the breath she'd been unaware of holding. "It's a tough situation all around."

Holding all the cards, he could afford to be generous. Still she

couldn't dismiss the gentleness with which he'd held her or the fiery way his lips had burned through her skin when he kissed her.

Spying on her to gain his own ends made him no better than Andrew, she reminded herself although it was an effort. The thought gave her the courage to meet his gaze. "Will you give me some time? I need to examine your documents..." Her voice trailed off. The paperwork was almost certainly in order. A man like James Langford wouldn't make his move until he knew it was the right one. She was the one who needed time to come to terms with a life forever changed.

Then she needed to prepare Genie to deal with another huge upheaval in a short life that had already seen more disruption than was good for her. That was going to be the most heart-tearing job of all.

James nodded reluctantly. "Take whatever time you need. The papers are self-explanatory, but you can ask me anything and I'll do my best to answer."

Only one question burned in her mind: how could he do this to her? It was the one question she couldn't ask and he wouldn't answer. Because he had already dismissed it as irrelevant. She was a painful but necessary step in his quest to retrieve his child.

"In the meantime," he continued implacably, "I want to see Genevieve."

Zoe felt the color drain from her face. "You aren't going to simply tell her who you are?"

James locked gazes with her. “What do you think I am? No, don’t answer. If it helps you to cast me as the villain, go right ahead. But it won’t dissuade me from getting to know her again so she can accept me into her life. There will be time enough for the whole story when she’s ready to cope with it.”

He was being fairer than she had any right to expect. And he was right, she was trying to cast him as the villain, if only to have a target for her distress. The real villain was Ruth for involving them all in this terrible situation in which there could be no real winners.

Zoe nodded painfully. “You have the right to see her, of course.” More than she herself did if it came down to it. Inspiration came to her. “I’m taking her to our local street fair on Saturday. One of the highlights is a charity auction I’m involved in. Could you meet us there? It won’t seem as strange to her as if you came here.”

His expression underwent a sea change. Too late she realized how revealing her suggestion must look to him. She had as good as admitted that she wasn’t in the habit of introducing strange men to Genie. Her pride balked at such an admission. Would he think she had succumbed to his embrace because she was starved for affection? It shouldn’t matter what he thought. She only knew it did.

“I mean, I don’t want to give her the wrong idea about you and me...about us.” She stumbled on.

A glimmer of amusement lit his vivid blue gaze. “Heaven

forbid she should get the wrong idea about...us,” he said with a mocking lilt. Then he drew himself back to business. “The street fair is a good idea. I would wish to see her sooner, but perhaps we all need the time to adjust.”

For a moment his face became shadowed and a depth of longing almost beyond bearing darkened his eyes. The ache around Zoe’s heart grew as she realized she was asking him to wait yet another couple of days for a reunion that had already been postponed beyond most people’s endurance.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say, “Wait, she’ll be home in a little while. You don’t have to endure another day without seeing her.” But it was her own yearning speaking, so she closed her lips on the betraying words. No doubt he would have accepted her offer with alacrity, and part of her admitted the justice in making it. But she wasn’t ready yet. According him his due as Genie’s father was harder than anything she’d ever been asked to do.

It spelled the end of her life with her child. The end of her world.

The offer remained unspoken as she walked him to the door. She was distantly aware that they made some sort of arrangement to meet at the fair, but the details barely registered with her. Somehow she knew that James wouldn’t forget. He didn’t have her reasons.

The documents proving Genie’s parentage stared up at her in mute accusation when she went back inside. She looked at them for a long time before forcing herself to reach for the folder.

## Chapter Three

To Zoe it felt like a century since James had dropped his bombshell about Genie, but in reality only two days had passed by the time the day of the street fair dawned. They were the longest two days of Zoe's life. Over and over she asked herself why she had agreed to meet James at the fair?

She had little choice, she acknowledged as she went through the motions of getting ready to go. The alternative—inviting James to her home again—was even more unsettling.

He had a right to see his child. Even Zoe couldn't deny the fact. But he didn't have to see her under Zoe's roof. A public place was better, she told herself. Neutral ground. He would see what a wonderful mother she was and decide to leave Genie where she was.

And pigs might fly.

She started as a small figure appeared at her bedroom door. "I'm ready, Mummy. Can we go now?" The child jiggled up and down with impatience.

Zoe swallowed the maternal pride that threatened to swamp her. "As soon as I'm ready, sweetheart. I won't be long."

Genie's features creased with suspicion. "You're wearing your best dress, and your hair's all funny and crinkly. You won't be able to go on the Ferris wheel with me."

Zoe dropped to her knees beside the little girl. "Of course

I will. I felt like dressing up and curling my hair because... well, just because.” Impressing James Langford had absolutely nothing to do with it, she told herself.

Genie’s nose twitched. “You smell different, too.”

Okay, so she had used some of the Chanel No. 5 one of her clients had given her last Christmas. “Must you be so observant?” she asked Genie, hugging her tightly.

Genie struggled free. “What does surfant mean?”

Zoe stood up, smoothing down her one and only designer dress, a simple sheath in a pale avocado silk. The severely tailored lines were softened by a row of amber beading stitched into the neckline. Her neighbor Julie called it a drop-dead dress. “In it, you can tell anyone to drop dead,” she’d explained when Zoe hesitated over spending the money. Was that the reason Zoe wanted to wear it today, to put her on a more equal footing with James? She wouldn’t consider that it had anything to do with his attractiveness as a man.

“Observant means you notice everything,” she explained wryly as she finished dusting fine powder over her even features. All right, so she was overdressed for a street fair, but today she needed all the morale boosting she could get.

Coral lipstick outlined a smile even she had to admit looked shaky. She forced her lips into a more convincing arc and swung around. “Let’s go.”

There was no sign of James when they reached the main street, which had been closed off for the day. A crowd already thronged

the fairground attractions and street stalls, but she could have spotted James in any crowd. Not only did his unusual height make him stand out, but he radiated an aura of power and authority that drew all eyes like a magnet.

Zoe's nerves were now strung wire-taut. She was glad when Genie begged for a turn on a huge inflatable jumping castle that already held several shrieking children.

"I'll sit over there and have a cup of coffee where I can watch you," she told the excited child as she paid for a ticket. She chose a seat at an outdoor table surrounded by lush green potted plants and sank gratefully onto a wooden chair. "Cappuccino, thank you," she told the waiter who appeared at her side.

"Make it two," a deep voice contributed.

Reaction blistered through her as James took a seat opposite her. She had almost convinced herself he wasn't coming, that everything would be all right. Now he was here and her stomach churned. She regretted not forcing herself to have some breakfast this morning. His presence made her feel abruptly light-headed.

"You look pale. Perhaps you should eat something," he suggested with uncanny insight.

"I'm fine," she denied. Anything she tried to eat under these conditions would probably refuse to stay down.

He nodded distractedly, his gaze sweeping the attractions around them. "Where is Genevieve?"

Her flashing glance gave him the answer. His eyes followed her gaze to the inflatable castle where Genie bounced up and

down, tumbling over then righting herself, all the while shrieking with delight.

His reaction was a sharply indrawn breath. “The photographs didn’t begin to show how beautiful she is.”

Against her will, Zoe’s gaze lifted to his taut features. They radiated a look she’d seen in the mirror countless times—a look of pure parental pride. Pain pierced her like an arrow. She hadn’t wanted to see such a look on his face. It would be easier to bear if Ruth had been right and he didn’t care.

But it was all too apparent that he did and his intent expression revealed just how much. “She is beautiful in nature as well as in looks,” she agreed softly, unable to keep her anguish from seeping into her tone.

He brought his gaze back to Zoe with obvious reluctance, as if it was all he could do to tear his eyes away from the happy child. “You’ve done a fine job raising her,” he said, his tone husky with emotion.

Zoe had promised herself she wouldn’t beg, but the words came out anyway. “Then why not let me go on doing it?”

A waiter placed coffee in front of them, obscuring James’s face for a moment, but there was no mistaking the challenge in his voice. “If our roles were reversed, could you walk away?”

She sprinkled sugar over the cocoa frosting of the cappuccino and watched the froth start to dissipate like so many of her hopes and dreams. “No, I couldn’t.”

A muscle worked along his jawline. “Yet you expect me to be

able to?”

“You’ve been out of her life for almost two years, two years in which I’ve been the only mother she’s known. You said yourself I’ve done a good job.” She didn’t add that they were years in which she had fixed him in her mind as an uncaring monster. Confusion spilled through her as she was forced to confront the reality of a man determined to get his child back at all costs. Hardly the image of a monster.

“It doesn’t change the facts. I’m her father,” he said, confirming her turbulent thoughts. He cupped both hands around his coffee, then flexed his fingers as if reaching a decision. “I hoped we could reach an agreement without this, Zoe, but your stubbornness leaves me no option.”

Iced water trickled down her spine. “To do what?”

He looked up, his eyes alight with purpose. “I’ve been checking. I thought you simply sold real estate, but you hold a much more senior job in property management, don’t you?”

What was he getting at? “Yes,” she admitted cautiously. “I’m only handling the sale of the Strathfield place as a favor to the owner.”

“For whom you manage several apartment blocks?” She nodded again. “Which means you collect the rents, find tenants, solve their problems and generally take care of things for the owner. It must take up a lot of your time.”

“I have plenty of time to be a mother to Genie, if that’s what you’re implying.”

His eyes snapped fire. “I’m not implying anything. I’m stating facts. Your work takes up a good deal of time.”

A hollow sensation invaded her. His spies must have been thorough for him to know so much about her. “It doesn’t mean Genie’s neglected,” she asserted. “I love her. I work hard to give her everything she deserves. As a foster mother, I get a welfare payment but it doesn’t stretch to the life I want for her.”

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