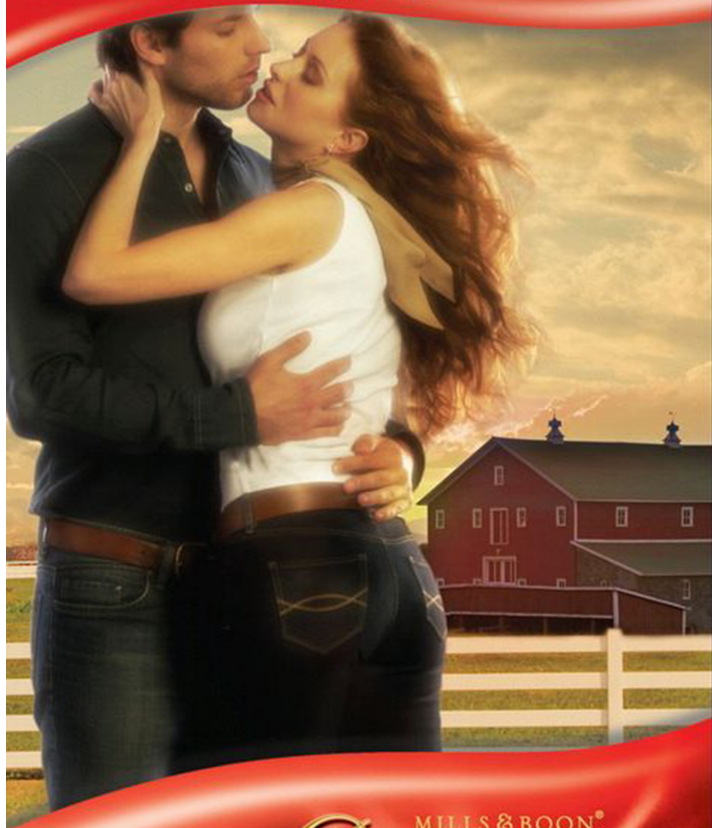


Claiming King's Baby

Maureen Child

Wyoming Wedding

Sara Orwig



MILLS & BOON®

Desire 2-in-1

Maureen Child
Sara Orwig
Claiming King's Baby /
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АННОТАЦИЯ

Her life is at stake... He's sworn to protect her, but will he steal her heart? In the Dark Heather Graham Alexandra's perfect life is crumbling. There's a killer on her trail and her mysterious ex-husband David has chosen this moment to reappear. And, when she and gorgeous protector David get trapped together, Alex wonders if her love or her life will be forfeit... Sure Bet Maggie Price Posing as newly weds, new cop Morgan is partnered with renegade Alex to investigate a series of murders. Both Alex and Morgan are reluctant to admit their desire for one another. Yet could their real passion be denied when they were so 'up close and personal'? Deadly Exposure Linda Turner Beautiful photographer Lily didn't want to depend on anyone for help – especially not pulse-stopping, jade-eyed cop Tony Giovanni. But now her only protection from the man who's threatening her life is this man who sends her heart racing...

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Claiming King's Baby by Maureen Child

“So who were you with, Maggie?” he asked, his voice a low and dark hum of sound. “Why didn’t he want his kid?”

“I was with *you*, you big jerk,” she said tightly. “I didn’t tell you about the baby before because I assumed from everything you’d said that you wouldn’t want to know.”

“What’s changed then?” he asked.

“I’m here, Justice. I came here to help you. And I decided that no matter what, you had the right to know about Jonas.”

If it were possible, Maggie would have said that Justice’s features went even harder. But what was harder than stone?

Yes, she knew he’d said he didn’t want children, but she’d been so sure that the moment he saw his son, he’d feel differently. In her little dream world, Justice would take one look at his son, then beg Maggie’s forgiveness and ask her to stay, to let them be a family. She should have known better. “Idiot.”

“I’m not an idiot,” he told her.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” she countered.

Wyoming Wedding by Sara Orwig

“You know common sense tells me to say no to you,” Brianna replied.

“I don’t see that. You stand to gain a lot and lose very little unless you can’t stand to be with me.”

“You know full well there’s no danger of any woman not being able to stand you,” she said.

“Until this moment I was beginning to wonder. This is the

coolest reception I've ever got.”

He placed his hand on the car door, blocking her from opening it. Leaning closer, he lowered his voice. “I've asked you to be my wife tonight and we've never even kissed. That's a giant unknown when there's a marriage proposal between us.”

Her pulse had raced all night, but now her heart thudded and she looked at his mouth. “I can remedy that one,” she said, tingling at the thought of kissing him.

She moved in closer, stood on tiptoe and placed her lips on his. His kiss might be her undoing.

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Claiming King's Baby

by

Maureen Child

MAUREEN CHILD is a California native who loves to travel. Every chance they get, she and her husband are taking off on another research trip. The author of more than sixty books, Maureen loves a happy ending and still swears that she has the best job in the world. She lives in Southern California with her husband, two children and a golden retriever with delusions of grandeur. Visit Maureen's website at www.maureenchild.com.

To the Estrada Family:

Steve, Rose, Alicia, Lettie, Patti and Amanda.

Good friends. Great neighbours.

We love you guys.

Dear Reader,

I can't tell you how much I enjoy writing about the King family! And I'm delighted that so many of you are enjoying them as much as I do.

Writing about this extended family is always an adventure, because no matter what, the King men always manage to surprise me.

Take Justice King for example: a typical rancher on the

surface, but underneath, Justice is a man haunted by the past and tormented by the fact that he allowed the woman he loved to walk out on him.

Maggie Ryan King is the perfect match for Justice. She's loyal and stubborn and determined to make her soon-to-be-ex-husband pay for letting what they'd had together slip away.

As a physical therapist, Maggie's temporarily back at King Ranch, helping Justice recover from a riding accident. But while his body heals, his heart is being steamrolled. By the one woman he can never forget.

These two have a lot of things to work through – and secrets to reveal – and I really hope you enjoy their story!

Happy reading,

Maureen

Chapter One

Justice King opened the front door and faced his past.

She stood there staring at him out of pale blue eyes he'd tried desperately to forget. Her long, light red hair whipped around her head in a cold, fierce wind, and her delectable mouth curved into a cynical half smile.

"Hello, Justice," said a voice that haunted his dreams. "Been a while."

Eight months and twenty-five days, he thought but didn't say. His gaze moved over her in a quick but thorough inspection. She was tall, with the same stubborn tilt to her chin that he remembered and the same pale sprinkle of freckles across her nose. Her full breasts rose and fell quickly with each of her rapid breaths, and that more than anything else told him she was nervous.

Well, then, she shouldn't have come.

His gaze locked back on hers. "What're you doing here, Maggie?"

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Nope," he said flatly. One thing he didn't need was to have her close enough to touch again.

"Is that any way to talk to your wife?" she asked and walked past him into the ranch house.

His wife.

Automatically, his left thumb moved to play with the gold wedding band he'd stopped wearing the day he had allowed her to walk away. Memories crashed into his mind, and he closed his eyes against the onslaught.

But nothing could stop the images crowding his brain. Maggie, naked, stretched out on his bed, welcoming him. Maggie, shouting at him through her tears. Maggie, leaving without a backward glance. And last, Justice saw himself, closing the door behind her and just as firmly shuttering away his heart.

Nothing had changed.

They were still the same people they'd been when they married and when they split.

So he pulled himself together, and closed the front door behind them. Then he turned to face her.

Watery winter sunlight poured from the skylight onto the gleaming wood floors and glanced off the mirror hanging on the closest wall. A pedestal table held an empty cobalt vase—there'd been no flowers in this hall since Maggie left—and the silence in the house slammed down on top of them both.

Seconds ticked past, marked only by the tapping of Maggie's shoe against the floor. Justice waited her out, knowing that she wouldn't be able to be quiet for long. She never had been comfortable with silence. Maggie was the most talkative woman he'd ever known. Damned if he hadn't missed that.

Three feet of empty space separated them and still, Justice felt the pull of her. His body was heavy and aching and everything

in him clawed at him to reach out for her. To ease the pain of doing without her for far too long.

Yet he called on his own reserves of strength to keep from taking what he'd missed so badly.

"Where's Mrs. Carey?" Maggie asked suddenly, her voice shattering the quiet.

"She's on vacation." Justice cursed inwardly, wishing to hell his housekeeper had picked some other time to take a cruise to Jamaica.

"Good for her," Maggie said, then tipped her head to one side. "Glad to see me?"

Glad wasn't the word he'd use. *Stunned* would be about right. When Maggie had left, she'd sworn that he would never see her again. And he hadn't, not counting the nights she appeared in his dreams just to torment him.

"What are you doing here, Maggie?"

"Well, now, that's the question, isn't it?"

She turned away and walked slowly down the hall, bypassing the more formal living room before stepping into the great room. Justice followed, watching as she looked around the room as if reacquainting herself with the place.

She looked from the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on two walls to the river stone hearth, tall and wide enough for a man to stand in it upright. The log walls, with the white chinking between them that looked like horizontal striping. The plush chairs and sofas she'd bought for the room, gathered together into

conversation areas, and the wide bank of windows that displayed an unimpeded view of the ranch's expansive front yard. Ancient trees spread shade across most of the lawn, flowers in the neatly tended beds dipped and swayed with the ocean wind and from a distance came the muffled roar of the ranch tractor moving across the feed grain fields.

"You haven't changed anything," she whispered.

"Haven't had time," he lied.

"Of course." Maggie spun around to face him and her eyes were flashing.

Justice felt a surge of desire shoot through him with the force of a lightning strike. Her temper had always had that effect on him. They'd been like oil and water, sliding against each other but never really blending into a cohesive whole. And maybe that was part of the attraction, he mused.

Maggie wasn't the kind of woman to change for a man. She was who she was, take her or leave her. He'd always wanted to take her. And God help him, if she came too close to him right now, he'd take her again.

"Look," she said, those blue eyes of hers still snapping with sparks of irritation, "I didn't come here to fight."

"Why are you here?"

"To bring you this."

She reached into her oversize, black leather bag and pulled out a legal-size manila envelope. Her fingers traced the silver clasp briefly as if she were hesitating about handing it over. Then a

second later, she did.

Justice took it, glanced at it and asked, "What is it?"

"The divorce papers." She folded her arms across her chest. "You didn't sign the copy the lawyers sent you, so I thought I'd bring a set in person. Harder to ignore me if I'm standing right in front of you, don't you think?"

Justice tossed the envelope onto the nearest chair, stuffed his hands into the back pockets of his jeans and stared her down. "I wasn't ignoring you."

"Ah," she said with a sharp nod, "so you were just what? Playing games? Trying to make me furious?"

He couldn't help the half smile that curved his mouth. "If I was, looks like I managed it."

"Damn right you did." She walked toward him and stopped just out of arm's reach. As if she knew if she came any closer, the heat between them would erupt into an inferno neither of them would survive.

He'd always said she was smart.

"Justice, you told me months ago that our marriage was over. So sign the damn papers already."

"What's your hurry?" The question popped out before he could call it back. Gritting his teeth, he just went with it and asked the question he really wanted the answer to. "Got some other guy lined up?"

She jerked her head back as if he'd slapped her.

"This is *not* about getting another man into my life," she told

him. “This is about getting a man *out* of my life. You, Justice. We’re not together. We’re not going to be together. You made that plain enough.”

“You leaving wasn’t my idea,” he countered.

“No, it was just your fault,” she snapped.

“You’re the one who packed, Maggie.”

“You gave me no choice.” Her voice broke and Justice hissed in a breath in response.

Shaking her head, she held up one hand as if for peace and whispered, “Let’s just finish this, okay?”

“You think a signed paper will finish it?” He moved in, dragging his hands from his pockets so that he could grab her shoulders before she could skitter away. God, the feel of her under his hands again fed the cold, empty places inside him. Damn, he’d missed her.

“You finished it yourself, remember?”

“You’re the one who walked out,” Justice reminded her again.

“And you’re the one who let me,” she snapped, her gaze locked on his as she stiffened in his grasp.

“What was I supposed to do?” he demanded. “Tie you to a chair?”

She laughed without humor. “No, you wouldn’t do that, would you, Justice? You wouldn’t try to make me stay. You wouldn’t come after me.”

Her words jabbed at him but he didn’t say anything. Hell, no, he hadn’t chased after her. He’d had his pride, hadn’t he? What

was he supposed to do, beg her to stay? She'd made it clear that as far as she was concerned, their marriage was over. So he should have done what exactly?

She flipped her hair back out of her face and gave him a glare that should have set him on fire. "So here we are again on the carousel of pain. I blame you. You blame me. I yell, you get all stoic and stone-faced and nothing changes."

He scowled at her. "I don't get stone-faced."

"Oh, please, Justice. You're doing it right now." She choked out a laugh and tried to squirm free of his grip. It didn't work. She tipped her head back, and her angry eyes focused on his and the mouth he wanted to taste more than anything flattened into a grim slash. "Our fights were always one-sided. I shout and you close up."

"Shouting's supposed to be a good thing?"

"At least I would have known you cared enough to fight!"

His fingers on her shoulders tightened, and he met that furious glare with one of his own. "You knew damn well I cared. You still left."

"Because you had to have it all your way. A marriage is *two* people. Not just one really pushy person." She sucked in a breath, fought his grip for another second or two, then sighed. "Let me go, Justice."

"I already did," he told her. "You're the one who came back."

"I didn't come back for this." She pushed at his chest.

"Bullshit, Maggie." His voice dropped to a whisper, a rough

scrape of sound as the words clawed their way out of his throat. “You could have sent your lawyer. Hell, you could have mailed the papers again. But you didn’t. You came here. To *me*.”

“To look you in the eye and demand that you sign them.”

“Really?” He dipped his head, inhaled the soft, flowery scent of her and held it inside as long as he could. “Is that really why you’re here, Maggie? The papers?”

“Yes,” she said, closing her eyes, sliding her hands up his chest. “I want it over, Justice. If we’re done, I need all of this to be finally over.”

The feel of her touching Justice sparked the banked fires within and set them free to engulf his body. It had always been like this between them. Chemistry, pure and simple. Combustion. Whenever they touched, their bodies lit up like the neon streets of Vegas.

That, at least, hadn’t changed.

“We’ll never be done, Maggie.” His gaze moved over her. He loved the flush in her cheeks and the way her mouth was parted on the sigh that slipped from between her lips. “What’s between us will never be over.”

“I used to believe that.” Her eyes opened; she stared up at him and shook her head. “But it has to be over, Justice. If I stay, we’ll only hurt each other again.”

Undoubtedly. He couldn’t give her the one thing she wanted, so he had to let her go. For her sake. Still, she was here, now. In his arms. And the past several months had been so long without

her.

He'd tried to bury her memory with other women, but he hadn't been able to. Hadn't been able to want any woman as he wanted her. Only her.

His body was hard and tight and aching so badly it was all he could do not to groan with the pain of needing her. The past didn't matter anymore. The future was a hazy blur. But the present buzzed and burned with an intensity that shook him to his bones.

"If we're really done, then all we have is now, Maggie," he said, bending to touch the tip of his tongue to her parted lips. She hissed in a breath of air, and he knew she felt exactly as he did. "And if you leave now, you'll kill me."

She swayed into him even as she shook her head. Her hands slid up over his shoulder, and she drove her fingers up, into his always-too-long dark brown hair. The touch of her was molten. The scent of her was dizzying. The taste of her was all he needed.

"God, I've missed you," she admitted, her mouth moving against his. "You bastard, you've still got my heart."

"You ripped mine out when you left, Maggie," he confessed. His gaze locked with hers, and in those pale blue depths he read passion and need and all the emotions that were charging through him. "But you're back now and damned if I'll let you leave again. Not now. Not yet."

His mouth came down hard on hers, and it was as if he was alive again. For months, he'd been a walking dead man.

A hollowed-out excuse for a human being. Breathing. Eating. Working. But so empty there was nothing for him but routine. He'd lost himself in the ranch workings. Buried himself in the minutiae of business so that he had no time to think. No time to wonder what she was doing. Where she was.

Months of being without her fired the desire nearly choking him, and Justice gave himself up to it. He skimmed his hands up and down her spine, sliding them over the curve of her bottom, cupping her, pressing her into him until she could feel the hard proof of his need.

She groaned into his mouth and strained against him. Justice tore his mouth from hers and lowered his head to taste the long, elegant line of her throat. Her scent invaded him. Her heat swamped him. And he could think only of taking what he'd wanted for so long.

He nibbled at her soft, smooth skin, feeling her shivers of pleasure as she cocked her head to one side, allowing him greater access. She'd always liked it when he kissed her neck. When his teeth scraped her skin, when his tongue drew taut, damp circles just beneath her ear.

He slid one hand around, to the front of her. He cupped her center with the palm of his hand. Even through the fabric of her tailored slacks, he felt her heat, her need, pulsing at him.

“Justice...”

“Damn it, Maggie,” he whispered, lifting his head to look down at her. “If you tell me to stop, I’ll...”

She smiled. "You'll what?"

He sighed and let his forehead drop to hers. "I'll stop."

Maggie shifted her hold on him, moving to cup his face between her palms. She hadn't come here for this, though if she were to be completely honest, she'd have had to admit that she'd hoped he would hold her again. Love her again. She'd missed him so much that the pain of losing him was a constant ache in her heart. Now, having his hands and mouth on her again was like a surprise blessing from the suddenly benevolent fates.

When she'd first left him, she'd prayed that he'd follow her, take her home and make everything right. When he hadn't, it had broken her heart. But she'd tried to go on. To rebuild her life. She found a new job. Found an apartment. Made friends.

And still there was something missing.

A part of her she'd left here, at the ranch.

With him.

Looking up into the dark blue eyes that had captivated her from the first, she said, "Don't stop, Justice. Please don't stop."

He kissed her, hard and long and deep. His tongue pushed into her mouth, claiming her in a frenzy of passion so strong she felt the tide of it swamp her, threaten to drown her in an overload of sensation.

From the top of her head to the tips of her toes, Maggie felt a rush of heat that was incredible. As if she were literally on fire, she felt her skin burn, her blood boil and her heart thunder in her chest. While his mouth took hers, his clever fingers unzipped

her slacks so that he could slide one hand down the front of her, beneath the fragile elastic of her panties to the swollen, hot flesh awaiting him.

She shivered as he stroked her intimately. She parted her legs for him, letting her slacks slide down to pool on the floor. She didn't care where they were. Didn't care about anything but feeling his hands on her again. Maggie nearly wept as he pushed first one finger and then two deep inside her.

Sucking in a gulp of air, she let her head fall back as she rode his hand, rocking her hips, seeking the release only he could give her. The passion she'd only ever found with him. She heard his own breath coming hard and fast as he continued to stroke her body inside and out. His thumb worked that so sensitive bud of flesh at the heart of her, and Maggie felt her brain sizzle as tension coiled inside her, tighter, tighter.

"Come for me, Maggie," he whispered. "Let me watch you shatter."

She couldn't have denied him even if she'd wanted to. It had been too long. She'd missed him too much. Maggie held on to his shoulders, fingers curling into the soft fabric of the long-sleeved shirt he wore, digging into his hard muscles.

Her mind spun, splintering with thoughts, images, while her body burned and spiraled even closer to its reward. She'd never felt anything like this with any man before him. And after Justice...she'd had no interest in other men. He was the one. She'd known it the moment she'd met him three years before.

One look across a crowded dance floor at a charity event and she'd known. Instantly. It was as if everything in the world had held utterly still for one breathless moment.

Just like now.

There was nothing in the world but him and his hands. His touch. His scent. "Justice—I need..."

"I know, baby. I know just what you need. Take it. Take me." He touched her deeper, pushing his fingers inside her, stroking her until her breath strangled in her throat.

Until she could only groan and hold on to him. Until her body trembled and the incredible tension within shattered under an onslaught of pleasure so deep, so overwhelming, all she could do was shout his name as wave after wave of completion rolled over her, through her, leaving her dazed and breathless.

And when the tremors finally died away, Maggie stared up into Justice's lake-blue eyes and watched him smile. She was standing in the living room, with her pants down, trembling with the force of her reaction to him. She should have been... embarrassed. After all, anyone could have walked into the ranch house.

Instead, all Maggie felt was passion stirring inside again. His hands were talented, heaven knew. But she wanted more. She wanted the slide of Justice's body into hers.

Licking her lips, she blew out a breath and said, "That was..."
"...just the beginning," he finished for her.

Chapter Two

Sounded good to Maggie.

Yet...She glanced around the empty room before looking back at him. “Mrs. Carey’s not here, but—”

“Nobody’s here,” he said quickly. “No one’s coming. No one is going to interrupt us.”

Maggie sighed in relief. She didn’t want any interruptions. Justice was right about one thing—their past was gone. The future was gray and hazy. All she had was today. This minute. This one small slice of time, and she was going to relish every second of it.

Her fingers speared through his thick, soft hair, her nails dragging along his scalp. He always kept it too long, she thought idly, loving the way the dark brown mass lay across his collar. He had a day’s worth of dark stubble on his jaws, and he looked so damned sexy he made her quiver.

Her breasts ached for his touch and as if he’d heard that stray thought, he pulled back from her slightly, just far enough so that his fingers could work the buttons on her pale pink silk blouse. Quickly, they fell free and then he was sliding the fabric off her shoulders to drop to the floor. She stepped out of her slacks, kicked off her half boots and slipped her lacy panties off.

Then he undid her bra, tossing it aside, and her breasts were free, his hands cupping her. His thumbs moved over her peaked

nipples until she whimpered with the pleasure and the desire pumping fresh and new through her system. As if that climax hadn't even happened, her body was hot and trembling again.

Need crashed down on her, and at her core she ached and burned for him.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, drawing his mouth from hers, glancing down at her breasts, cupped in his palms. "So damn beautiful."

"I want you, Justice. Now. Please, now."

One corner of his mouth tipped into a wicked smile. His eyes flashed and in an instant he'd swept her up into his arms, stalked across the room and dropped her onto one of the wide sofas. She stared up at him as he tugged his shirt up and over his head. And her mouth watered. His skin, so tanned, so strong, so sculpted. God, she remembered all the nights she'd lain in his arms, held against that broad, warm chest. And she trembled at the rise of passion inside her.

She scooted back on the sofa until her head was resting on a pillow. Maggie held her arms out toward him. "What're you waiting for, cowboy?"

His eyes gleamed, his jaw went tight and hard. He finished undressing in a split second but still Maggie thought he was taking too long. She didn't want to wait. She was hot and wet and so ready for him that she thought she'd explode and die if he didn't take her soon.

He came to her and Maggie's gaze dipped to his erection, long

and thick and hard. Her breath caught on a gasp of anticipation as Justice leaned down, tore the back cushions off the sofa and tossed them to the floor to make more room for them on the overstuffed couch. The dark green chenille fabric was soft and cool against her skin, but Maggie hardly noticed that slight chill. There was far too much heat simmering inside her, and when Justice covered her body with his, she could have sworn she felt actual flames sweeping over them.

“I’ve missed you, babe,” he told her, bracing himself on his hands, lowering his mouth to hers, tasting, nibbling.

“Oh, Justice, I’ve missed you, too.” She lifted her hips for him, parting her thighs, welcoming him home. He pushed his body into hers with one hard stroke. She groaned, loving the long, deep slide of his flesh claiming hers. He filled her and she lifted her legs higher, hooking them around his waist, opening herself so that she could take him even deeper.

And still it wasn’t enough. Wasn’t nearly enough. She groaned, twisting and writhing beneath him as he moved in and out of her depths in plunging strokes that fanned the flames engulfing her.

It had been too long, she thought wildly. She didn’t want soft and romantic. She wanted hard and fast and frantic. She wanted to know that he felt the same crushing need she did. She wanted to feel the strength of his passion.

“Harder, Justice,” she whispered. “Take me harder.”

He looked down at her and his eyes flashed. “I’m holding back, Maggie. It’s been too long. I don’t want to hurt you.”

She cupped his face in her palms, fought to steady her breath and finally shook her head and smiled. “The only thing that hurts is when you hold back. Justice, I *need* you. All of you.”

His jaw clenched tight, he swept one arm around her back, holding her to him even as he pushed off the couch. With their bodies locked together, her legs wrapped around his waist, he eased her onto the oriental carpet covering the hardwood floors. With her flat on her back, he levered himself over her, hands at either side of her head. Grinning down at her, he muttered, “Told you when you bought ’em those damn couches were too soft.”

She grinned right back at him. “For sitting, they’re perfect. For this...yeah. Too soft.”

She lifted her hips then, taking him deeper inside. When he withdrew a moment later, she nearly groaned, but then he was back, driving himself into her, piston-ing his hips against hers and she felt all of him. Took all of him. His need joined hers.

He lifted her legs, hooking them over his shoulders, tipping her hips higher so that he could delve even deeper, and Maggie groaned in appreciation. She slapped her hands onto the carpet and hung on as he moved faster and faster, driving them both to a shuddering climax that hovered just out of reach.

“Yes, Justice,” she said, her voice nothing more than a strained hush of sound. “Just like that.”

Again and again, his body claimed hers, pushing into her soft, hot folds, taking everything she offered and giving all that she could have wanted. She looked up into his eyes, saw the flash of

something delicious wink in their depths and knew in that one blindingly clear instant that she would never be whole without him.

Without him.

That one random thought hovered at the edges of her mind and filled her eyes with tears even as her body began to sing and hum with the building tensions that rippled through her senses.

He touched her at their joining. Rubbing his thumb over that one spot that held so many incredible sensations. And as he touched her, Maggie hurtled eagerly toward the enormous climax waiting for her. As her body exploded with the force of completion, she screamed his name, and still she heard the quiet voice in the back of her mind whispering, *Is this our last time together?*

Then Justice gave himself over to his own release, her name an agonized groan sliding from his throat. When he collapsed atop her, Maggie held him close as the last of the tremors rippled through their joined bodies and eased them into oblivion.

And if her heart broke just a little, she wouldn't let him know it.

The rest of the weekend passed in a blurry haze of passion. But for a few necessary trips to the kitchen, Justice and Maggie never left the master bedroom.

After that first time in the living room, Justice made a call to his ranch manager, Phil, and told him to handle the ranch problems himself for the next few days. It hadn't exactly been a

promise of forever, but Maggie had been happy for it.

All the same, she was crazy and she knew it. Setting herself up for another fall. As long as Justice King was the man she loved, she wasn't going to find any peace. Because they couldn't be together without causing each other pain and being apart was killing her.

How was that fair?

She sighed a little, her gaze still fixed on him. The only light in the room came from the river stone hearth, where a dying fire sputtered and flickered. Outside, a winter storm battered at the log mansion, tiny fists of rain tapping at the glass. And within Maggie, a different sort of storm raged.

What was she supposed to do? She'd tried living without him and had spent the most miserable nine months of her life. She'd tried to lose herself in her work, but it was an empty way to live. The sad truth was she wanted Justice. And without him, she'd never be really happy.

He was the most amazing lover she'd ever known. Every touch burned, every breath caressed, every whispered word was a promise of seduction that kept her hovering on the brink of a new climax no matter how many times he pushed her over the edge. Her skin hummed long after he stopped touching her. She closed her eyes and felt him inside her. Felt their hearts pounding in rhythm and couldn't help wondering, as she always had, how two people could be so close and so far apart at the same time.

Now she watched him get out of bed and walk naked across

the bedroom. His body was long and lean and tanned from all the years of working in the sun. His dark brown hair hung past his shoulders. She'd always found that hair of his to be sexy as hell and what made it even sexier was that he was oblivious to just how good he looked. How dangerous. Her heartbeat quickened as her gaze moved over his back, and down over his butt. He moved with a stealthy grace that was completely innate. Everything about him was, she had to admit, fabulous. He was enough to make any woman toss her panties in the air and shout hallelujah. And she was no different.

He went into a crouch in front of the hearth. The fire was dying and he set a fresh log on the fading flames. Instantly the fire blazed into life, licking at the new wood, hissing and snapping.

Maggie watched Justice. His legs were muscled and toned from hours spent in a saddle. His back and shoulders were broad and sculpted from the hard work he never spared himself. As a King, he could have hired men to do the hard work around the ranch. But she knew it had always been a matter of pride to him that *he* be out there with those who worked for him.

Justice King was a man out of time, she thought, sweeping one arm across the empty space in the bed where he'd been lying only moments ago. He would have been completely at home in medieval times. He would have been a Highlander, she mused, her imagination dressing him in a war-torn plaid and placing a claymore in his fist.

As if he knew she was watching him, Justice turned his face

to her, and the flickering light of the fire threw dancing shadows across his features. He looked hard and strong and suddenly so unapproachable that Maggie's heart gave a lurch.

She was setting herself up for pain and she knew it. He was her husband, but the bonds holding them together were frayed and tattered. In bed they were combustible and so damn good it made her heart hurt. It was when they were *out* of bed that things got complicated. They wanted different things. They each held so tightly to their own bottom line that compromise was unthinkable.

But it was Sunday night. The end of the weekend. She'd have to return to her world soon, and knowing that this time with him was nearly over was already bringing agonizing pain.

The storm blowing in off the coast howled outside the window. Rain hammered at the glass, wind whistled under the eaves and, Justice noticed, Maggie had started thinking.

Never had been a good thing, Justice told himself as he watched his wife study him. Whenever Maggie got that look on her face—an expression that said she had something to say he wasn't going to like—Justice knew trouble was coming.

But then, he'd been halfway prepared for that since this "lost" weekend had begun. Nothing had changed. He and Maggie, despite the obvious chemistry they shared, were still miles apart in the things that mattered, and great sex wasn't going to alter that any.

Her red-gold hair spilled across her pillow like hot silk. She

held the dark blue sheet to her breasts even as she slid one creamy white leg free of the covers. She made a picture that engraved itself in Justice's mind, and he knew that no matter how long he lived, he would always see her as she was right at this moment.

He also knew that this last image of her would torment him forever.

"Justice," she said, "we have to talk."

"Why?" He stood up, crossed to the chair where he'd tossed his jeans and tugged them on. A man needed his pants on when he had a conversation with Maggie King.

"Don't."

He glanced at her. "Don't what?"

"Don't shut me out. Not this time. Not now."

"I'm not doing anything, Maggie."

"That's my point." She sat up, the mattress beneath her shifting a little with her movements.

Justice turned his head to look at her, and everything in him roared at him to stalk to her side, grab her and hold her so damn tight she wouldn't have the breath to start another argument neither of them could win.

Her hair tumbled around her shoulders, and she lifted one hand to impatiently push the mass behind her shoulders. "You're not going to ask me to stay, are you?"

He shouldn't have to, Justice told himself. She was his damn wife. Why should he have to ask her to be with him? She was the one who'd left.

He didn't say any of that, though, just shook his head and buttoned the fly of his jeans. He didn't speak again until his bare feet were braced wide apart. A man could lose his balance all too easily when talking to Maggie. "What good would it do to ask you to stay? Eventually, you'd leave again."

"I wouldn't have to if you'd bend a little."

"I won't bend on this," he assured her, though it cost him as he noted the flash of pain in her eyes that was there and then gone in a blink.

"Why not?" She pushed out of the bed, dropping the sheet and facing him, naked and proud.

His body hardened instantly, despite just how many times they'd made love over the past few hours. Seemed his dick was always ready when it came to Maggie.

"We are who we are," he told her, folding his arms across his chest. "You want kids. I don't. End of story."

Her mouth worked and he knew she was struggling not to shout and rail at him. But then, Maggie's hot Irish temper was one of the things that had first drawn him to her. She blazed like a sun during an argument—standing her ground no matter who stood against her. He admired that trait even though it made him a little crazy sometimes.

"Damn it, Justice!" She stalked to the chair where she'd left her clothes and grabbed her bra and panties. Slipping them on, she shook her head and kept talking. "You're willing to give up what we have because you don't want a child?"

Irritation raced through him; he couldn't stop it. But he wasn't going to get into this argument again.

"I told you how I felt before we got married, Maggie," he reminded her, in a calm, patient tone he knew would drive her to distraction.

As expected, she whipped her hair back out of her eyes, glared at him fiercely, then picked up her pale pink blouse and put it on. While her fingers did up the buttons, she snapped, "Yes, but I just thought you didn't want kids that instant. I never thought you meant *ever*."

"Your mistake," he said softly.

"But one you didn't bother to clear up," she countered.

"Maggie," he said tightly, "do we really have to do this again?"

"Why the hell not?" she demanded. Then pointing to the bed, she snapped, "We just spent an incredible weekend together, Justice. And you're telling me you feel *nothing*?"

He'd be a liar if he tried. But admitting what he was feeling still wouldn't change a thing. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to," she told him. "The very fact that you're willing to let me walk...*again*...tells me everything I need to know."

His back teeth ground together until he wouldn't have been surprised to find them nothing more than gritty powder in his mouth. She thought she knew him, thought she knew what he was doing and why, but she didn't have a clue. And never would, he reminded himself.

“Hell, Justice, you wouldn’t back down even if you did change your mind, would you? Oh, no. Not Justice King. His pride motivates his every action—”

He inhaled deeply and folded his arms across his bare chest. “Maggie...”

She held up one hand to cut off whatever else he might say, and though he felt a kick to his own temper, he shut up and let her have her say.

“You know what? I’m sick to death of your pride, Justice. The great Justice King. Master of his Universe.” She slapped both hands to her hips and lifted her chin. “You’re so busy arranging the world to your specifications that there is absolutely no compromise in you.”

“Why the hell should there be?” Justice took a half step toward her and stopped. Only because he knew if he got close enough to inhale her scent, he’d be lost again. He’d toss her back into the bed, bury himself inside her—and what would that solve? Not a thing. Sooner or later, they’d end up right here. Back at the fight that had finally finished their marriage.

“Because there were *two* of us in our marriage, Justice. Not just you.”

“Right,” he said with a brief, hard nod. He didn’t like arguments. Didn’t think they solved anything. If two people were far enough apart on an issue, then shouting at each other over it wasn’t going to help any. But there was only just so much he was willing to take. “You want compromise? We each give a little? So

how would you manage that here, Maggie? Have *half* a child?"

"Not funny at all, Justice." Maggie huffed out a breath. "You knew what family meant to me. What it still means to me."

"And you knew how I felt, too." Keeping his gaze steady and cool on hers, he said, "There's no compromise here, Maggie, and you know it. I can't give you what you want, and you can't be happy without it."

As if all the air had left her body, she slumped, the flash of temper gone only to be replaced by a well of defeat that glimmered in her eyes. And that tore at him. He hated seeing Maggie's spirit shattered. Hated even more that he was the one who'd caused it. But that couldn't be helped. Not now. Not ever.

"Fine," she said softly. "That's it, then. We end it. Again."

She picked up her slacks and put them on. Shaking her head, she zipped them up, tucked the tail of her shirt into the waistband and then stepped into her boots. Lifting her arms, she gathered up the tangle of her hair and deftly wound it into a knot at the back of her head, capturing that wild mass and hiding it away.

When she was finished, she stared at him for a long moment, and even from across the room Justice would have spared her this rehashing of the argument that had finally torn them apart. But this weekend had proven to him as nothing else ever would, that the best thing he could do for her was to step back. Let her hate him if she had to. Better for her to move the hell on with her life.

Even if the thought of her moving on to another man was enough to carve his heart right out of his chest.

Maggie picked up her purse, slung it over her shoulder and stared at him. “So, I guess the only thing left to say is thanks for the weekend.”

“Maggie...”

Shaking her head again, she started walking toward the door. When she came close to him, she stopped and looked up at him. “Sign the damn divorce papers, Justice.”

She took another step and he stopped her with one hand on her arm. “It’s pouring down rain out there. Why don’t you stay put for a while and wait out the storm before you go.”

Maggie pulled her arm free of his grasp and started walking again. “I can’t stay here. Not another minute. Besides, we’re not a couple, Justice. You don’t have the right to worry about me anymore.”

A few seconds later, he heard the front door slam. Justice walked to the windows and looked down on the yard. The wind tore her hair free of its tidy knot and sent long strands of red flying about her face. She was drenched by the rain almost instantly. She climbed into the car and fired up the engine. Justice saw the headlights come on, saw the rain slash in front of those twin beams and stood there in silence as she steered the car down the drive and off the ranch.

Chest tight, he watched until her taillights disappeared into the darkness. Then he punched his fist against the window and relished the pain.

Chapter Three

Justice threw his cane across the room and listened to it hit the far wall with a satisfying clatter. He hated needing the damn thing. Hated the fact that he was less than he used to be. Hated knowing that he needed help, and he sure as hell hated having his brother here to tell him so.

He glared at Jefferson, his eldest brother, then pushed up and out of the chair he was sitting in. Justice gathered up his pride and dignity and used every ounce of his will to make sure he hobbled only a little as he lurched from the chair to the window overlooking the front yard. Sunlight splashed through the glass into the room, bathing everything in a brilliant wash of light.

Justice narrowed his eyes at his brother, and when he was no more than a foot away from him, he stopped and said, "I told you I can walk. I don't need another damn therapist."

Jefferson shook his head and stuffed both hands into the pockets of what was probably a five-thousand-dollar suit. "You are the most stubborn jackass I've ever known. And being a member of this family, that's saying something."

"Very amusing," Justice told him and oh-so-casually shot out one hand to brace himself against the log wall. His knuckles were white with the effort to support himself and take the pressure off his bad leg. But he'd be damned if he'd show that weakness to Jefferson. "Now, get out."

“That’s the attitude that ended up bringing me here.”

“How’s that?”

“You’ve chased off three physical therapists in the past month, Justice.”

“I didn’t bring ‘em here,” he pointed out.

Jefferson scowled at him, then sighed. “Dude, you broke your leg in three places. You’ve had surgery. The bones are healed but the muscles are weak. You need a physical therapist and you damn well know it.”

“Don’t call me ‘dude,’ and I’m getting along fine.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Jefferson shot a quick glance to Justice’s white-knuckled grip on the wall.

“Don’t you have some inane movie to make somewhere?” Justice countered. As head of King Studios, Jefferson was the man in charge of the film division of the King empire. The man loved Hollywood. Loved traveling around the world, making deals, looking for talent, scouting locations himself. He was as footloose as Justice was rooted to this ranch.

“First I’m taking care of my idiot brother.”

Justice leaned a little harder against the log wall. If Jefferson didn’t leave soon, Justice was going to fall on his ass. Whether he wanted to admit it aloud or not, his healing leg was still too weak to be much good. And that irritated the hell out of him.

A stupid accident had caused all of this. His horse had stumbled into a gopher hole one fine morning a few months back. Justice had been thrown clear, but then the horse rolled across

his leg, shattering it but good. The horse had recovered nicely. Justice, though, was having a tougher time. After surgery, he now carried enough metal in his bones to make getting through airport security a nightmare, and his muscles were now so flabby and weak it was all he could do to force himself to move.

“It’s your own damn fault you’re in this fix anyway,” Jefferson said, as if reading Justice’s mind. “If you’d been riding in a ranch jeep instead of sitting on top of your horse, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Spoken like a man who’s forgotten what it was like to ride herd.”

“Damn right,” Jefferson told him. “I put a lot of effort into forgetting about predawn rides to round up cattle. Or having to go and find a cow so dumb it got lost on its own home ranch.”

This is why Jeff was the Hollywood mogul and Justice was the man on the ranch. His brothers had all bolted from the home ranch as soon as they were old enough, each of them chasing his own dream. But Justice’s dreams were all here on this ranch. Here is where he felt most alive. Here, where the clear air and the open land could let a man breathe. He didn’t mind the hard work. Hell, he relished it. And his brother knew why he’d been astride a horse.

“You grew up here, Jeff,” he said. “You know damn well a horse is better for getting down into the canyons. And they don’t have engines that scare the cattle and cause stress that will shut down milk production for the calves, not to mention running the

jeeps on the grasslands only tears them up and—”

“Save it,” Jeff interrupted, holding up both hands to stave off a lecture. “I heard it all from Dad, thanks.”

“Fine, then. No more ranch talk. Just answer this.” Justice reached down and idly rubbed at his aching leg. “Who asked you to butt into my life and start hiring physical therapists I don’t even want?”

“Actually,” Jefferson answered with a grin, “Jesse and Jericho asked me to. Mrs. Carey kept us posted on the situation with the therapists, and we all want you back on your feet.”

He snorted. “Yeah? Why’re you the only one here, then?”

Jefferson shrugged. “You know Jesse won’t leave Bella alone right now. You’d think she was the only woman in the world to ever get pregnant.”

Justice nodded, distracted from the argument at the moment by thoughts of their youngest brother. “True. You know he even sent me a book? *How to Be a Great Uncle*.”

“He sent the same one to me and Jericho. Weird how he did this turnaround from wandering surfer to home-and-hearth expectant father.”

Justice swallowed hard. He was glad for his brother, but he didn’t want to think about Jesse’s imminent fatherhood. Changing the subject, he asked, “So where’s Jericho?”

“On leave,” Jefferson told him. “If you’d open your e-mails once in a while, you’d know that. He’s shipping out again soon, and he had some leave coming to him so he took it. He’s soaking

up some sun at cousin Rico's hotel in Mexico."

Jericho was a career marine. He loved the life and he was good at his job, but Justice hated that his brother was about to head back into harm's way. Why hadn't he been opening his e-mails? Truth? Because he'd been in a piss-poor mood since the accident. He should have known, though, that his brothers wouldn't just leave him alone in his misery.

"That's why you're here, then," Justice said. "You got the short straw."

"Pretty much."

"I should have been an only child," Justice muttered.

"Maybe in your next life," Jefferson told him, then pulled one hand free of his slacks pocket to check the time on his gold watch.

"If I'm keeping you," Justice answered with a bared teeth grin, "feel free to get the hell out."

"I've got time," his brother assured him. "I'm not leaving until the new therapist arrives and I can make sure you don't scare her off."

Wounded pride took a bite out of Justice and he practically snarled at his brother. "Why don't you all just leave me the hell alone? I didn't ask for your help and I don't want it. Just like I don't want these damn therapists moving in here like some kind of invasion." He winced as his leg pained him, then finished by saying, "I'm not even gonna let this one in, Jeff. So you might as well head her off."

"Oh," Jefferson told him with a satisfied smile, "I think you'll

let this one stay.”

“You’re wrong.”

The doorbell rang just then and Justice heard his housekeeper’s footsteps as she hustled along the hall toward the door. Something way too close to panic for Justice’s own comfort rose up inside him. He shot Jefferson a quick look and said, “Just get rid of her, all right? I don’t want help. I’ll get back on my feet my own way.”

“You’ve been doing it your own way for long enough, Justice,” Jefferson told him. “You can hardly stand without sweat popping out on your forehead.”

From a distance, Justice heard Mrs. Carey’s voice, welcoming whoever had just arrived. He made another try at convincing his brother to take his latest attempt at help and leave.

“I want to do this on my own.”

“That’s how you do everything, you stubborn bastard. But everybody needs help sometimes, Justice,” his brother said. “Even you.”

“Damn it, Jefferson—”

The sound of two women’s voices rippled through the house like music, rising and falling and finally dropping into hushed whispers. That couldn’t be a good sign. Already his housekeeper was siding with the new therapist. Wasn’t anyone loyal anymore? Justice scraped his free hand through his hair, then scrubbed his palm across his face.

He hated feeling out of control. And ever since his accident,

that sensation had only been mounting. He'd had to trust in daily reports from his ranch manager rather than going out to ride his own land. He'd had to count on his housekeeper to take care of the tasks that needed doing around here. He wanted his damn life back, and he wasn't going to get it by depending on some stranger to come in and work on his leg.

He'd regain control only if he managed to come back from his injuries on his own. If that didn't make sense to anyone but him, well, he didn't care. This was *his* life, his ranch and, by God, he was going to do things the way he always had.

His way.

He heard someone coming and shot a sidelong glance at the open doorway, preparing himself to fire whoever it was the minute she walked in. His brothers could just butt the hell out of his life.

Footsteps sounded quick and light on the wood floor, and something inside Justice tightened. He had a weird feeling. There was no explanation for it, but for some reason his gut twisted into knots. Glancing at his brother, he muttered, "Just who the hell did you hire?"

Then a too-familiar voice announced from the doorway, "Me, Justice. He hired me."

Maggie.

His gaze shot to her, taking her in all at once as a man dying of thirst would near drown himself with his first taste of water. She was wearing blue jeans, black boots and a long-sleeved,

green T-shirt. She looked curvier than he remembered, more lush somehow. Her hair was a tumble of wild curls around her shoulders and framing her face with fiery, silken strands. Her blue eyes were fixed on him and her mouth was curved into a half smile.

“Surprise,” she said softly.

That about covered it, he thought. Surprise. Shock. Stunned stupid.

He was going to kill Jefferson first chance he got.

But for now he had to manage to stay on his feet long enough to convince Maggie that he didn’t need her help. Damn it, she was the absolute last person in the world he wanted feeling sorry for him. Lifting his chin, he narrowed his gaze on her and said, “There’s been a mistake, Maggie. I don’t need you here, so you can go.”

She flinched—actually flinched—and Justice felt like the bastard Jefferson had called him just a moment or two ago. But it was best for her to leave right away. He didn’t want her here.

“Justice,” his brother said in a long-suffering sigh.

“It’s okay, Jeff,” Maggie said, walking into the room, head held high, pale blue eyes glinting with the light of battle. “I’m more than used to your brother’s crabby attitude.”

“I’m not crabby.”

“No,” she said with a tight smile, “you’re the very soul of congenial hospitality. I just feel all warm and fuzzy inside.” Then she took a hard look at him. “Why are you standing?”

“What?”

Beside him, Jeff muffled a laugh and tried to disguise it with a cough. It didn't work.

“You heard me,” Maggie said, rushing across the room. When Justice didn't move, she grumbled something unintelligible, then dragged a chair over to him. She pushed him down onto it, and it was all Justice could do to hide the relief that getting off his feet gave him. “Honestly, Justice, don't you have any sense at all? You can't put all your weight on your bad leg or you'll be flat on your back again. Why aren't you using a cane at least?”

“Don't have one,” he muttered.

“He threw it across the room,” Jeff provided.

“Of course he did,” Maggie said. She spotted the cane, then walked to retrieve it. When she came back to his side, she thrust it at him and ordered, “If you're going to stand, you're going to use the cane.”

“I don't take orders from you, Maggie,” he said.

“You do now.”

“In case you didn't notice the lack of welcome, I'm firing you.”

“You can't fire me,” she told him, leaning down to stare him dead in the eye. “Jefferson hired me. He's paying me to get you back on your feet.”

“He had no right to.” Justice sent his brother a hard glare, but Jefferson was rocking back and forth on his heels, clearly enjoying himself.

Maggie straightened up, fisted her hands at her hips and stared

down at him with the stern look of a general about to order troops into battle. “He did hire me, though, Justice. Oh, and by the way, I’ve heard about the other three therapists who’ve come and gone from here—”

Justice looked past her to glare at his brother but looked back to Maggie again when she continued.

“—and you’re not going to scare me off by throwing your cane. Or by being rude and nasty. So no need to try.”

“I don’t want you here.”

“Yes,” she said and a flicker of something sharp and sad shot through her eyes. “You’ve made that plain a number of times. But you can just suck it up. Because I’m here. And I’m staying. Until you can stand up without brackets of pain lining the sides of your mouth or gritting your teeth to keep from moaning. So you know what? Your best plan of action is to do exactly what I tell you to do.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because, Justice,” she said, bracing her hands on the arms of his chair and leaning in until their faces were just a breath apart, “if you listen to me, you’ll heal. And the sooner that happens, the sooner you’ll get rid of me.”

“Can’t argue with her there,” Jeff pointed out.

Justice didn’t even glance at his brother. His gaze was locked with Maggie’s. Her scent wafted to him like the scent of wildflowers on a summer wind. Her eyes shone with a silent challenge. Now that he was over the initial shock of seeing her

walk into his life again, he could only hope to God she walked back out really soon.

Just being this close to her was torture. His body was pressing against the thick denim fabric of his jeans. Good thing she'd pushed him into a chair so damn fast or she and his brother would have been all too aware of the kind of effect she had on him.

Maggie stared into Justice's eyes and felt her heart hammer in her chest. Seeing him again was like balm to an open wound. But seeing him hurt tore at her. So she was both relieved and miserable to be here.

Yet how could she have turned down Jefferson's request that she come to the ranch and help out? Justice was still her husband. Though he probably didn't realize that. No doubt he'd never even noticed that though he had signed the divorce papers and mailed them to her, she had never filed them with the courts. Naturally, even if he had noticed, Justice would have been too stubborn to call her and find out what was going on.

And as for Maggie? Well, she had had her own reasons for keeping quiet.

Strange. The last time she'd left this ranch, she'd been determined to sever the bond between her and Justice once and for all. But that plan had died soon enough when things had changed. Her life had taken a turn she hadn't expected. Hadn't planned for. A rush of something sweet and fulfilling swept through her and Maggie almost smiled. Nothing Justice did or said could make her regret what her life was now.

In fact, that was one of the reasons she'd come to help him, she told herself. Of course she would have come anyway, because she couldn't bear the thought of Justice being in pain and needing help he didn't have. But there was more. Maggie had leaped at Jefferson's request to come to the ranch, because she'd wanted the chance to show her husband what he was missing. To maybe open his stubborn eyes to the possibilities stretched out in front of him.

Now, though, as she stood right in front of him and actually *watched* a shutter come down over his eyes, effectively blocking her out, she wondered if coming here had been the right thing to do after all.

Still, she *was* here. And since she was, she would at least get Justice back on his feet.

"So, what's it going to be, Justice?" she asked. "Going to play the tough, stoic cowboy? Or are you going to cooperate with me?"

"I didn't ask you to come," he told her, ignoring his brother standing just a foot or so away.

"Of course you didn't," Maggie retorted. "Everyone knows the great Justice King doesn't need anyone or anything. You're getting along fine, right?" She straightened up and took a step back. "So why don't you just get up out of that chair and walk me to the door."

His features tightened and his eyes flashed dangerously, and just for a second or two Maggie was half afraid he'd try to do

just that and end up falling on his face. But the moment passed and he only glared at her. “Fine. You can stay.”

“Wow.” She placed one hand on her chest as if she were sighing in gratitude. “Thank you.”

Justice glowered at her.

Jefferson cleared his throat and drew both of their gazes to him. “Well, then, looks like my work here is done. Justice, try not to be too big of an ass. Maggie,” he said, moving to plant a quick kiss on her forehead, “best of luck.”

Then he left and they were alone.

“Jefferson shouldn’t have called you,” Justice said quietly.

“Who else would he call?” Maggie looked at his white-knuckled grip on the cane he held in his right fist. He was angry, she knew. But more than that, he was frustrated. Her husband wasn’t the kind of man to accept limitations in himself. Having to use a cane to support a weakened leg would gnaw at him. No wonder he was as charming as a mountain lion with its foot caught in a trap.

He blew out a breath. “I could get Mrs. Carey to throw you out.”

Maggie laughed shortly. “She wouldn’t do it. She likes me. Besides, you need me.”

“I don’t need your help or your pity. I can do this on my own.”

A flare of indignation burst into life inside her. “That is so typical, Justice. You go through your life self-sufficient and expecting everyone else to do the same. Do it yourself or don’t

do it. That's your style."

"Nothing wrong with that," he argued. "A man's got to stand on his own."

"Why?" She threw both hands high and let them fall. "Why does it always have to be your way? Why can't you see that everyone needs someone else at *some* point?"

"I don't," he told her.

"Oh, no, not you. Not Justice King. You never ask for help. Never admit to needing anyone or anything. Heck, you've never even said the word *please*."

"Why the hell should I?" he demanded.

"You're a hard man," Maggie said.

"Best you remember that."

"Fine. I'll remember." She stepped up close to him, helped him up from the chair despite his resistance and when he was standing, looked him dead in the eye and said, "As long as *you* remember that if you want to get your life back, you're going to have to take orders from me for a change."

Late that night Justice lay alone in the bed he used to share with his wife. He was exhausted, in pain and furious. He didn't want Maggie looking at him and seeing a patient. Yet, all afternoon she'd been with him, taking notes on his progress, telling him what he'd been doing wrong and then massaging his leg muscles with an impersonal competence that tore at him.

Every time she'd touched him, his body had reacted. He hadn't been able to hide his erection, but she'd ignored it—which

enraged him. It was as if he meant nothing to her. As if this were just a job.

Which it probably was.

Hell, what did he expect? They were divorced.

Grabbing the phone off the nightstand, he stabbed in a number from memory and waited impatiently while it rang. When his brother answered, Justice snapped, "Get her out of my house."

"No."

"Damn it, Jefferson," Justice raged quietly with a quick look at the closed door of his bedroom. For all he knew Maggie or Mrs. Carey was out wandering the hall, and he didn't want to be overheard. Which was the only thing that kept his voice low. "I don't want her here. I made my peace with her leaving, and having her here again only makes everything harder."

"Too bad," Jefferson shot back. "Justice, you need help whether you want to admit it or not. Maggie's a great therapist and you know it. She can get you back on your feet if you'll just swallow your damn pride and do what she tells you."

Justice hung up on his brother, but that didn't make him feel any better. *Swallow his pride?* Hell, his pride was all he had. It had gotten him through some tough times—watching Maggie walk out of his life, for instance—and damned if he was going to let it go now, when he needed it the most.

He scooted off the edge of the bed, too filled with frustration to try to sleep anyway. He could watch the flat-screen television he'd had installed a year ago, but he was too keyed up to sit still

for a movie and too pissed off already to watch the news.

Disgusted by the need for it, Justice reached for his cane and pried himself off the mattress, using the thickly carved oak stick for balance. His injured leg ached like a bad tooth, and that only served to feed the irritation already clawing at his insides. Shaking his head, he hobbled toward the window but stopped dead when he heard...something.

Frowning, he turned toward the doorway and the hall beyond. He waited for that noise to come again, and when it did, his scowl deepened. What the hell?

He made his way to the door, flung it open and stood on the threshold, glancing up and down the hallway. The wall sconces were lit, throwing golden light over the narrow, dark red-and-green carpet, which lay like a path down the polished oak floors. The hallway was empty, and yet...

There it was again.

Sounded like a cat mewling. Justice moved toward the sound with slow, uncertain steps. Just one more reason to hate his damn cane and his own leg for betraying him. A few months ago he'd have stalked down this hallway with long strides. Now he was reduced to an ungainly stagger.

He followed the sound to the last door at the end of the hallway. The room Maggie was to stay in while she was on the ranch. At least he'd been able to order *that* much. He'd wanted her as far from his bedroom as possible to avoid the inevitable temptation.

Outside her door he cocked his head and listened. The house made its usual groaning noises as night settled in and the temperature dropped. Seconds ticked past and then he heard it again. That soft, wailing sound that he couldn't quite place. Was she crying? Missing him? Regretting coming to the ranch?

He should knock, he told himself. But if he did and she told him to go away, he'd have to. So instead, Justice turned the knob, threw open the door and felt the world fall out from beneath his feet.

Maggie.

Holding a baby.

She looked up at him and smiled. "Hello, Justice. I'd like you to meet Jonas. My son."

Chapter Four

“What? Who? How? What?” Justice jolted back a step, hit the doorjamb and simply stared at the woman and baby on the wide, king-size bed.

Maggie’s gaze locked on his as she answered his questions in order. “My son. Jonas. The usual way. And again, my son.”

Pain like Justice had never known before shot through him with a swiftness that stole his breath and nearly knocked him off his feet.

Maggie had a son.

Which meant she had a lover.

She was with someone else.

Everything in him went cold and hard. Amazing, really, how big the pain was. He’d told himself he was over her. Assured himself that their marriage was done and that it was for the best. For both of them. Yet now, when he was slapped with the proof that what they’d shared was over, the sharp stab of regret was hard enough to steal his breath. The thought of Maggie lying in another man’s arms almost killed him. But then, what had he expected? That they’d get a divorce and she’d join a convent? Not his Maggie. She had too much fire.

Clearly, it hadn’t taken her too long to move on. Her son looked to be several months old, which meant that she’d rolled out of his bed into someone else’s real damn fast. Which made

him wonder whether she'd been involved with someone else already when they'd had that last weekend together. That thought chewed on Justice, too. All the time they'd been rolling around in his bed, she'd had another guy waiting for her? What the hell was up with that?

He wanted to shout. To rage. But he didn't. He locked up everything inside him and refused to let her see that he was affected at all. Damned if he'd give her the satisfaction of knowing that she still had the power to cut him.

He had his pride, after all.

"Not going to say anything else?" she asked, swinging her legs off the bed and lifting the baby to sit at her hip.

He wiped one hand across his whiskered jaw and fought for indifference. "What do you want me to say? Congratulations? Fine. I said it." His gaze stayed locked on hers. He wouldn't look at the chubby-cheeked infant making insensible noises and gurgles.

"Don't you want to know who his father is?" she asked, moving closer with small, deliberate steps.

Why the hell was she doing this? Did she really enjoy rubbing the fact of her new relationship in his face? He hoped she was enjoying the show because, yeah, he did want to know. Then he wanted to find the guy and beat the crap out of him. But that wasn't going to happen. "None of my business, is it?"

"Actually, yes," she said, turning her head to plant a kiss on the baby's brow before looking back at Justice. "It sort of is.

Especially since *you're* his father.”

Another jolt went through Justice, and he wondered idly how many lightning strikes a man could survive in one night. Whatever game she was trying to run wouldn't work. She didn't have any way of knowing it, of course, but there was no possible way he was that baby's father.

So why the hell would she lie? Was the real father not interested in his kid? Is that why Maggie sought to convince Justice that he was the father instead? Or was it about money? Maybe she was trying to get some child support out of this. That would be stupid, though. All it would take was a paternity test and they'd all know the truth.

Maggie wasn't a fool. Which brought him right back to the question at hand.

What was she up to?

And why?

He stared at her, reading a challenge in her eyes. He still couldn't bring himself to look at the child. It was there, though, in his peripheral vision. A babbling, chortling statement on Justice's failure as a husband and Maggie's desire for family, provided by some other guy.

Pain grabbed at him again, making the constant ache in his leg seem like nothing more substantial than a stubbed toe.

“Nice try,” he said, fixing his gaze on her with a cold distance he hoped was easily read.

“What's that mean?”

“It means, Maggie, I’m *not* his father, so don’t bother trying to pawn him off on me.”

“*Pawn him—*” She stopped speaking, gulped in air and tightened her hold on the baby, who was slapping tiny fists against her shoulder. “That’s not what I’m trying to do.”

“Really?” Justice swallowed past the knot in his throat and managed to give her a tight smile that was more of a baring of his teeth than anything else. “Then why is he here?”

“Because I am, you dolt!” Maggie took another step closer to him, and Justice forced himself to hold his ground. With the weakness in his leg, if he tried to step back, he might just go down on his ass, and wouldn’t that be a fine end to an already spectacular day?

“I’m his mother,” Maggie told him. “He goes where I go. And I thought maybe his daddy would like a look at him.”

One more twist of the knife into his gut. He hadn’t been able to give her the one thing she’d really wanted from him. Now seeing her with the child she used to dream of was torture. Especially since she was looking into his eyes and lying.

“I’m not buying it, Maggie, so just drop it, all right? I’m not that kid’s father. I’m not anybody’s father. So why the song and dance?”

“How can you know you’re not?” she argued, clearly willing to stick to whatever game plan she’d had in mind when she got here. “Look at Jonas. Look at him! He has your eyes, Justice. He has your hair. Heck, he’s even as stubborn as you are.”

As if to prove her point, the baby gave up slapping at her shoulder for attention, reached out and grabbed hold of Maggie's gold, dangling earring. He gave it a tug, squealing in a high-pitched tone that made Justice wince. Gently, Maggie pried that tiny fist off her earring and gave her son a bright smile.

"Don't pull, sweetie," she murmured, and her son cooed at her in delight.

That softness in her voice, the love shining in her eyes, got to him as nothing else could have. Justice swallowed hard and finally forced himself to look at the child. Bright red cheeks, sparkling dark blue eyes and a thatch of black hair. He wore a diaper and a black T-shirt that read Cowboy in Training and was waving and kicking his chubby arms and legs.

Something inside him shifted. If he and Maggie had been able to have children, this is just what he would have expected their child to look like. Maybe that's why she thought her ploy would work on him. The kid looked enough like Justice that she probably thought she could convince him he was the father and then talk him out of a paternity test.

Sure. Why would she think he'd insist on that anyway? They had been married. The timing for the child was about right. She'd have no reason to think that he wouldn't believe her claims. But that meant that whoever had fathered the boy had turned his back on them. Which, weirdly, pissed him off on Maggie's behalf. What the hell kind of man would do that to her? Or to the baby? Who wouldn't claim his own child?

He watched the boy bouncing up and down on Maggie's hip, laughing and drooling, and told himself that if there were even the slightest chance the boy was actually his, Justice would do everything in his power to take care of him. But he knew the truth, even if Maggie didn't.

"He's a good-looking boy."

Maggie melted. "Thank you."

"But he's not mine."

She wanted to argue. He could see it in her face. Hell, he knew her well enough to know that there was nothing Maggie liked more than a good argument. But this one she'd lose before she even started.

He couldn't be Jonas's father. Ten years before, Justice had been in a vicious car accident. His injuries were severe enough to keep him in a hospital for weeks. And during his stay and the interminable testing that was done, a doctor had told him that the accident had left him unlikely to ever father children.

The doctor had used all sorts of complicated medical terms to describe his condition, but the upshot was that Jonas couldn't be his. Maggie had no way of knowing that, of course, since Justice had never told anyone about the doctor's prognosis. Not even his brothers.

Before he and Maggie got married, when she started talking about having a family, he'd told her that he didn't want kids. Better to let her believe he chose to remain childless rather than have her think he was less than a man.

His spine stiffened as that thought scuttled through his brain. He hadn't told her the truth then and he wouldn't now. Damned if he'd see a flash of pity in her eyes for him. Bad enough that she was here to see him struggle to do something as simple as *walk*.

"So who were you with, Maggie?" he asked, his voice a low and dark hum. "Why didn't he want his kid?"

"I was with *you*, you big jerk," she said tightly. "I didn't tell you about the baby before because I assumed from everything you'd said that you wouldn't want to know."

"What's changed, then?" he asked.

"I'm here, Justice. I came here to help you. And I decided that no matter what, you had the right to know about Jonas."

If it were possible, Maggie would have said that Justice's features went even harder. But what was harder than stone? His eyes were flat and dark. His jaw was clenched. He was doing what he always had done. Shutting down. Shutting her out. But why?

Yes, she knew he'd said he didn't want children, but she'd been so sure that the moment he saw his son, he'd feel differently. That Jonas would melt away his father's reservations about having a family.

She'd even, in her wildest fantasies, imagined Justice admitting he was wrong for the first time in his life. In her little dream world, Justice had taken one look at his son, then begged Maggie's forgiveness and asked her to stay, to let them be a family. She should have known better. "Idiot."

“I’m not an idiot,” he told her.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” she countered. He was so close to her and yet so very far away.

The house was quiet, tucked in for the night. Outside the windows was the moonlit darkness, the ever-present sea wind blowing, rattling the windowpanes and sending tree branches scratching against the roof.

Justice stood not a foot from her, close enough that she felt the heat of his body reaching out for her. Close enough that she wanted to lean into him and touch him as she’d wanted to during the therapeutic massage she’d given him earlier.

Instantly, warmth spiraled through her as she remembered his response to her hands moving on the weakened muscles in his leg. His erection hadn’t been weak, though, and hadn’t been easy to ignore, especially since being near him only made her want the big dummy more than ever.

“Look,” Justice muttered, breaking the spell holding Maggie in place, “I’m willing to do the therapy routine. I don’t like it, but I need to get back on my feet. If you can help with that, great. But if you staying here is gonna work, you’re going to have to drop all of this crap about me being your baby’s father. I don’t want to hear it again.”

“So you want me to lie,” she said.

“I want you to stop lying.”

“Fine. No lies. You are Jonas’s father.”

He gritted his teeth and muttered, “Damn it, Maggie!”

“Don’t you swear in front of my son.” She glanced at Jonas and though he was only six months old, she could see that he was confused and worried about what was happening. His big eyes looked watery, and his lower lip trembled as if he were getting ready to let a wail loose.

Justice barked out a harsh laugh. “You think he understood that?”

She glanced at the baby’s big blue eyes, so much like his father’s, and stroked a fingertip along his jaw soothingly. “I think he understands tone,” she said quietly. “And I don’t want you using that tone in front of him.”

He blew out a breath, scowled ferociously for a second, then said, “Fine. I won’t cuss in front of the kid. But you quit playing games.”

“I’m not playing.”

“You’re doing something, Maggie, and I can tell you now, it’s not going to work.”

She stared up at him and shook her head. “I knew you were stubborn, Justice, but I never imagined you could be *this* thick-headed.”

“And I never figured you for a cheat.” He turned and started to painstakingly make his way out of the room into the hall.

Just for a second she watched him walk away and her heart ached at the difficulty he had. Seeing a man as strong and independent as Justice leaning on a cane tore at her. His injuries weren’t permanent, but she knew what it was costing his pride to

haltingly move away from her.

But though she felt for him, she wasn't about to let him get away with what he'd just said.

"*Cheat? A cheat?*" Maggie inhaled sharply, cast another guilty glance at her son and gave him a smile she didn't feel. She wouldn't upset her baby for the sake of a man who was so blind he couldn't see the truth when it was staring him in the face. "I am not a cheat or a liar, Justice King."

He didn't look back at her. He just kept moving awkwardly down the hall, his cane tapping against the floor runner. If his plan was to escape her, he'd have to be able to move a lot faster than that, Maggie told herself. Quickly, she walked down the hall, stepped out in front of him and forced him to stop.

"Get out of the way," he murmured, staring past her, down the hall at his open bedroom door.

"You can think whatever you like of me, but you will, by God, not ignore me," she told him, and the fact that he kept avoiding meeting her eyes only further infuriated her. This had so not gone the way she'd hoped and expected.

When Jefferson called her, asking her to come help Justice, she'd taken it as a sign. That this was the way they would come together again. That the time was finally right for Justice to meet the son he didn't know about. Apparently, she had been wrong.

"Are you too cowardly to even look at me?" she demanded, knowing that the charge of coward would get his attention.

Instantly, he turned his dark blue gaze on her and she saw

carefully banked anger simmering up from their depths. Well, good. At least he was feeling *something*.

“Don’t push me, Maggie. For both our sakes. If you want me to watch my tone around your son, then don’t you push me.”

He was furious—she could see that. But beyond the anger there was hurt. And that tore at her. He didn’t have to be hurt, darn it. She was offering him their son, not the plague.

“Justice,” she said softly, smoothing one hand up and down her baby’s back, “you know me better than anyone. You know I wouldn’t lie to you about this. You are my son’s father.”

He snorted.

Insulted and stung by his obvious distrust, she stepped back from him. How could he believe that she was lying? How could he have ever claimed to love her and *not* know that she was incapable of trying to trick him in this way? What the hell kind of a husband was he, anyway?

“I’m trying to be understanding,” she said, but her temper simmered just beneath the words. “I know this is probably all a surprise.”

“You could say that.”

“But I’m not going to say it to you again. I won’t argue. I won’t force you to admit your responsibilities—”

“I always face my responsibilities, Maggie. You should know that.”

“And you should know I’m not a liar.”

He blew out a breath, cocked his head to one side and stared

into her eyes. “So what? We call it a draw? A standoff? An armed truce?”

“Call it whatever you want, Justice,” Maggie said, before he could say something else that would hurt her. “All I’m going to say is that if you don’t believe me about Jonas, then it’s your loss, Justice. We created a beautiful, healthy son together. And I love him enough for both of us.”

“Maggie...”

She placed one hand on the back of her son’s head, holding him to her tenderly. “And in case you were wondering why I waited until now to tell you about Jonas...It’s because I was worried about how you’d react.” She laughed shortly, sharply. “Imagine that. Wonder why?”

He muttered something under his breath, and judging by the expression on his face, she was just as happy she’d missed it.

“The sad truth is, Justice, I never wanted my son to know that his own father hadn’t wanted him.”

His eyes went colder, harder than before, and Maggie shivered a little under his direct gaze. A second passed, then two, and neither of them spoke. The hall light was soft and golden, throwing delicate shadows around the wide, empty passage. They were alone in the world, the three of them, with an invisible and apparently impenetrable wall separating Maggie and her son from the man who should have welcomed them with open arms.

At last, Justice turned his gaze to the boy who was watching him curiously. Maggie watched her husband’s features soften

briefly before freezing up into that hardened, take-no-prisoners expression she knew so well. After several long moments he lifted his gaze to hers, and when he spoke, his voice was so soft she had to hold her breath to hear him.

“You’re wrong, Maggie. If I *was* his father, I would want him.”

Then he brushed past her, the tip of his cane making a muffled thumping sound as he made his way to his room. He didn’t look back.

And that nearly broke Maggie’s heart.

Chapter Five

“Run the calves and their mamas to the seaward pasture,” Justice told Phil, his ranch manager, three days later. “You can leave the young bulls in the canyons for now. Keep them away from the heifers as much as you can.”

“I know, boss.” Phil turned the brim of his hat between his hands as he stood opposite the massive desk in Justice’s study.

Phil was in his early fifties, with a tall, lanky body that belied his strength. He was a no-BS kind of guy who knew his job and loved the ranch almost as much as his boss. Phil’s face was tanned as hard and craggy as leather from years spent in the sun. His forehead, though, was a good two shades lighter than the rest of him, since his hat was usually on and pulled down low. He shifted uneasily from foot to foot, as if eager to get outside and back on his horse.

“We’ve got most of the herd settled into their pastures now,” he said. “There was a fence break in the north field, but two of the boys are out there now fixing it.”

“Okay.” Justice tapped a pen against the top of his desk and tried to focus the useless energy burning inside him. Sitting behind a desk was making him itchy. If things were as they should be, he’d be out on his own horse right now. Making sure things were getting done to his specifications. Justice wasn’t a man to sit inside and order his people around. He preferred

having his hand in everything that went on at King Ranch.

Phil Hawkins was a good manager, but he wasn't the boss.

Yet even as he thought it, Justice knew he was lying to himself. His itchy feeling had nothing to do with not trusting his crew. It was all about how he hated being trapped in the damn house. Now more than ever.

The past few days, he'd felt as if he was being stalked. Maggie was following him around, insisting on therapy sessions or swims in the heated pool or nagging at him to use the damn cane he'd come to hate. Hell, he'd had to sneak away just to get a few minutes alone in his office to go over ranch business with Phil.

Everywhere he went, it seemed, there was Maggie. Back in the day, they'd have been falling into each other's arms every other minute. But nothing was as it had once been. These days, she looked at him as if he were just another patient to her. Someone to feel bad for. To fix up. To take care of.

Well, he didn't need taking care of. Or if he did, he'd never admit it. He didn't want her being *paid* to be here. Didn't want to be her latest mission. Her cause. Didn't want her touching him with indifference.

That angry thought flashed through his mind at the same time a twinge of pain sliced at his leg. Damn thing was near useless. And three days of Maggie's torture hadn't brought him any closer to healing and getting on with his life. Instead, she seemed to be settling in. Making herself comfortable in the log house that used to be her home.

She was sliding into the rhythm of ranch life as if she'd never left it. She was up with the dawn every day and blast if it didn't seem she was deliberately close enough to him every morning so that Justice heard her talking to her son. Heard the baby's nonsensical prattle and cooing noises. Could listen in on what he wasn't a part of.

She was everywhere. Her or the baby. Or both. He heard her laughing with Mrs. Carey, smelled her perfume in every room of the house and caught her playing with her son on several occasions. She and the baby had completely taken over his house.

There were toys scattered everywhere, a walker with bells, whistles and electronic voices singing out an alphabet song. There was a squawking chicken, a squeaky dog and a teddy bear with a weird, tinny voice that sang songs about sharing and caring. Hell, coming down the stairs this morning, he'd almost killed himself when his cane had come down on a ball with a clown's face stamped on it. There were cloth books, cardboard books and diapers stashed everywhere just in case the kid needed a change. That boy had to go through a hundred of them a day. And what was with all the books? It was not as if the baby could read.

“Uh, boss?”

“What?” Justice shook his head, rubbed at his aching leg and shifted his gaze back to Phil. That woman was now sneaking into his thoughts so that he couldn't even *talk* about ranch business. “Sorry,” he said. “My mind wandered. What?”

Phil's lips twitched as if he knew where his boss's mind had slipped off to. But he was smart enough not to say anything. "The new grasses in the east field are coming in fine, just like you said they would. Looks like a winner to me."

"That's good news," Justice said absentmindedly. They'd replanted one of the pastures with a hardier stock of field grass, and if it held up to its hype, then the herd would have something to look forward to in a few months.

Running an organic cattle ranch was more work, but Justice was convinced it was worth it in the long run. The cowboys he had working for him spent most of their time switching the cattle around to different pastures, keeping the grass fresh and the animals on the move. His cows didn't stand in dirty stalls to be force-fed grains. King cattle roamed open fields as they'd been meant to.

Cattle weren't born to eat corn, for God's sake. They were grazers. And keeping his herds moving across natural field grasses made the meat more tender and sweet and brought higher prices from the consumer. He had almost sixty thousand acres of prime grassland here on the coast and another forty thousand running alongside his cousin Adam's ranch in central California.

Justice had made the change over to natural grazing and organic ranching nearly ten years ago, as soon as he took over the day-to-day running of King Ranch. His father hadn't put much stock in it, but Justice had been determined to run the outfit his way. And in that time, he'd been able to expand and even open

his own online beef operation.

He only wished his father had lived to see what he'd made of the place. But his parents had died in the same accident that had claimed Justice's chances of ever making his own family. So he had to content himself with knowing that he'd made a success of the family spread and that his father would have been proud.

"Oh, and we got another offer on Caleb," Phil was saying, and Justice focused on the man.

"What was it?"

"Thirty-five thousand."

"No," Justice told him. "Caleb's too valuable a stud to let him go for that. If the would-be buyer wants to pay for calves out of Caleb, we'll do that. But we're not selling our top breeding bull."

Phil grinned. "That's what I told him."

Some of Justice's competitors were more convinced it was his breeding stock that made his cattle so much better than others, and they were continually trying to buy bulls. They were either too stupid or too lazy to realize that fresh calves weren't going to change anything. To get the results Justice had, they were going to have to redo their operations completely.

The door to the study swung open after a perfunctory knock, and both men turned to look. Maggie stood in the open doorway. Faded jeans clung to her legs and the King Cattle T-shirt she wore in bright blue made her eyes shine like sapphires. She gave Phil a big smile. "You guys finished?"

"Yes, ma'am," Phil said.

“No,” Justice said.

His ranch manager winced a little as he realized that he’d blown things for his boss.

Maggie looked at her husband. “Which is it? Yes or no?”

Frowning, Justice scowled at his foreman, silently calling him *traitor*. Phil just shrugged, though, as if to say it was too late now.

“We’re finished for the time being,” Justice reluctantly admitted.

“Good. Time for your exercises,” Maggie told him, walking into the room and heading for his desk.

“Then I’ll just go—” Phil waved his hat in the direction of the door “—back to work.” He nodded at her. “Maggie, good to see you.”

“You, too,” she said, giving the other man the kind of brilliant smile that Justice hadn’t seen directed at him in far too long.

“He hasn’t changed at all,” Maggie mused.

“You haven’t been gone that long.”

“Funny,” she said, “feels like a lifetime to me.”

“I guess it would.” Justice didn’t want her in here. This was his office. His retreat. The one room in the whole place that hadn’t been colored by her scent. By her presence. But it was too late now.

As she wandered the room, running her fingertips across the leather spines of the books in the shelves, he told himself that from now on, he’d see her here. He’d feel her here. He’d be able to close his eyes and imagine her with him, the sound of her voice,

the sway of her hips, the way the sunlight through the window made her hair shine like a fire at midnight.

Squirming uncomfortably in his chair now, Justice said, “You know, if you don’t mind, I’ve got some paperwork to catch up on. Things pile up if you don’t stay on top of them. Think I’ll skip the exercises this morning.”

She gave him the sort of smile she would have given a little boy trying to get away with cutting school. “I don’t think so. But if you want, we can change things up a little. Instead of a half hour on the treadmill, we could walk around the ranch yard.”

Sounded like a plan to him. He hated that damn treadmill with a raging passion. What the hell good was it, when a man had the whole world to walk in? Who would choose to walk on a conveyor belt? And if she didn’t have him on that treadmill, she had him doing lunges and squats, with his back up against the wall. He felt like a lab rat, moving from one maze to the next. Always inside. Always moving and getting exactly nowhere.

The thought of getting outside was a blessing. Outside. Into the air, where her perfume would get lost in the wind rather than clinging to every breath he took. “Fine.”

He pushed up from his black leather chair, and as he stepped around the edge of the desk, Maggie approached and held out his cane. He took it, his fingers brushing against hers just enough to kindle a brand-new fire in his gut. He pulled back, tightened his grip on the head of the blasted cane and started for the door.

“You’re walking easier,” she noted.

Irritation spiked inside him. He remembered a time when she had watched his ass for a different reason. “Yeah,” he admitted. “It still hurts like a bitch, but maybe it’s a little better.”

“Wow. Quite the compliment to my skills.”

He stopped and turned to look at her. “Maybe I’m doing well enough to just cut the therapy short.”

“Ooh, good effort,” she said and walked past him toward the front door.

Now it was his turn to watch her ass, and he for damn sure wasn’t doing it to check out her ability to walk. Then something struck him: the fact that she didn’t have her son on her hip. “Uh, don’t you have to watch...”

“Jonas?” she provided.

“Yeah.”

“Mrs. Carey has him. She loves watching him,” Maggie said, striding down the hall to the front door. Her boots, which clacked against the wood floor, sounded like a quickening heartbeat. “Says he reminds her so much of you it’s almost eerie.”

Justice scowled at her back. She managed to get one or two of those pointed digs in every day. Trying to make him see something that wasn’t there. A connection between her son and him.

He should just tell her, he thought, snatching his battered gray felt hat off the hook by the door. Tell her that he was sterile and be done with it. Then she could stop playing whatever game she was playing and he wouldn’t have to put up with any of this

anymore.

But if he did that, she'd know. Know everything. Why he'd let her go. Why he'd lied. Why he felt less than a man because he hadn't been able to give her the one thing she'd wanted. And, damn it, once he told her the truth, she'd feel sorry for him—and he couldn't stand that. Better for him if she thought him a bastard.

Maggie listened to the uncertain steps of her husband coming up behind her and stopped on the porch to wait for him. She took that moment to admire the sweep of land stretching out in front of her. She'd missed this place almost as much as she'd missed Justice. The wide yard was neatly tended, the flower beds were spilling over with bright, colorful blossoms and from somewhere close by, the lowing of a cow sounded almost like a song.

Just for a second or two, all of Maggie's thoughts and worries drifted away, just drained out of her system as if they'd never been there. She took a deep breath of the sweet air and smiled at two herd dogs, a mutt and a Lab, chasing each other across the front yard. Then she sensed Justice coming up behind her, and in an instant tension coiled deep in the pit of her stomach.

She would always sense him. Always be aware of him on a deep, cellular level. He touched something inside her that no one else ever had. And when they were apart, she felt his absence keenly. But feeling connected to a man who clearly didn't share the sentiment was just a recipe for disaster.

"It's really beautiful," she whispered.

“It is.”

His deep voice rumbled along her spine and tingled through her system. Why did it have to be *him* who did this to her? she wondered and glanced over her shoulder at him. He wasn't looking at the ranch; he was watching her, and her knees went a little wobbly. Maggie had to lock them just to keep upright. The man's eyes should be illegal. His smile was even more lethal—thank heaven she didn't see it often.

“You used to love it here,” he said quietly, letting his gaze slide from her to where the dogs chased each other in dizzying circles.

“I did,” she admitted and took a deep breath.

From the moment she had first seen this ranch, it had felt like home to her. As if it had only been waiting for her to arrive, the ranch had welcomed her. Maggie had always been amazed that she could stand on her porch and feel as though she were in the middle of the country, when in reality the city was just a short freeway ride away.

Here on the King Ranch it was as if time had not exactly stood still but at least had taken a break, slowed down. She'd always thought this would be a perfect place for her children to grow up. She'd imagined watching four or five King kids racing through the yard laughing, running to her and Justice for hugs and kisses and growing up learning to care for the ranch as much as their father did.

But those dreams had died the night she'd left Justice so many months ago.

Now she was nothing more than a barely tolerated visitor, and Jonas would never know what it was like to grow up among his father's memories.

Or to grow up with his father's love.

Justice was deliberately closing himself off from not only her but also the child they'd made together. That was something she couldn't forgive. Or understand. Justice had always been a hard man, but he was also a man devoted to family. To his brothers and the King heritage. So how could he turn his back on his own son?

In the past three days, Justice had done everything in his power to avoid so much as being in the same room with Jonas. Her heart twisted painfully in her chest, but she wouldn't *force* him to care, even if she could. Because then his love wouldn't mean a thing. To her or her son. So she would be professional and keep her emotions tightly leashed if it killed her.

"Loving this place didn't keep you here," he pointed out unnecessarily.

"No, it didn't," she said. "It couldn't."

He shook his head and frowned, squinting out from beneath the brim of his hat. "It could have. You chose to leave."

"I'm not going over that same old argument again, Justice."

"Me neither," he said with a shrug. "I'm just reminding you."

Maggie inhaled slowly, deeply. She told herself to bank her temper, to not let him get to her. It wasn't easy, especially since Justice had always known exactly which of her buttons to push

to get a reaction. But as satisfying as it would be to shout and rage and give in to her frustration by telling him just what she was thinking, it wouldn't do a darn bit of good.

“We should walk.” She spoke up fast, before her temper could override her more rational side. Then she turned to offer him her arm so she could assist him getting down the short flight of steps leading from the porch to the yard.

Instantly, he scowled at her and stepped around her, the tip of his cane slamming down onto the porch. “I'm not completely helpless, Maggie. I can get around without holding on to your arm. You're half my size.”

“And trained to help ambulatory patients get around. I'm stronger than I look, Justice. You should remember that.”

He shot her one hard, stony glare. “I'm not one of your patients, damn it.”

“Well, yeah,” she countered, feeling the first threads of her patience begin to unravel, “technically, you are.”

“I don't want to be—don't you get that?”

She felt the cold of his stare slice right into her, but Maggie had practice in facing down his crab-ass attitude. “Yes, Justice. I get it. Despite the great trouble you've taken in trying to hide how you feel about me being here, I get it.”

His mouth flattened into a grim line, and she glared right back at him.

“You still won't leave, though, will you?”

“No. I won't. Not until you're on the mend.”

“I am mending.”

“Not fast enough and you know it. So suck it up and let’s get the job done, all right?”

“Stubbornest damn woman I’ve ever known,” he muttered darkly and, using his cane to take most of his weight, took the steps to the drive. The minute his feet hit the drive, both ranch dogs stopped their playing, leaped up, ears perked, then with yips of delight, charged at him.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Maggie jumped out in front of him to keep the too-exuberant dogs from crashing into Justice and bowling him right over, but it wasn’t necessary.

“Angel. Spike.” Justice’s voice was like thunder, and when he snapped his fingers, both dogs instantly obeyed. As one, they skidded to a stop and dropped to the ground, their chins on their front paws as they looked up at him.

Maggie laughed in spite of herself. Going down on one knee, she petted each of the dogs in turn, then looked up at the man watching her. “I’d forgotten just how good you were at that. The dogs always did listen to you.”

One corner of his mouth quirked briefly. “Too bad I could never get you to do the same.”

Straightening up, Maggie met his gaze. “I never was the kind of woman to jump at the snap of your fingers, Justice. Not for you, not for anyone.”

“Wouldn’t have had you jump,” he told her.

“Really. And what command would you have had me follow

if you could?”

He shifted his gaze from hers, looked toward the barn and the pastures beyond and said softly, “Stay.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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