



2 in 1
GREAT
VALUE

UNWRAPPING THE
PLAYBOY

MARIE FERRARELLA

THE PLAYBOY'S
GIFT

TERESA CARPENTER

Cherish

Marie Ferrarella
Teresa Carpenter
Unwrapping the Playboy /
The Playboy's Gift
Серия «Mills & Boon Cherish»

Аннотация

Unwrapping the Playboy As rakishly handsome as he was successful, lawyer Kullen was a “love ’em and leave ’em” kind of guy. Until Lilli McCall, his long-lost love, suddenly appeared in his office – and turned his carefully crafted world upside down with the ultimate Christmas surprise!The Playboy’s Gift Skye is shocked to learn her late brother and sister-in-law have left their little daughter in the care of Rett – her brother’s best friend...and Skye’s first love. The only way to protect her heart is to help the novice daddy and baby bond, then make a graceful exit. But the sight of Rett’s strong arms cradling the baby makes Skye weak at the knees...

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A romantic couple embracing in front of a Christmas tree. The man is on the left, leaning his head against the woman's shoulder. The woman is on the right, looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a blurred Christmas tree with lights and ornaments.

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Unwrapping the Playboy

Dear Reader,

If you've been around me for any length of time, you might have noticed a pattern forming. I begin a series by setting limits for myself. Three books, four books, five books. All the series I plot have a finite number. Once I'm in the world I created, I can't say goodbye. MATCHMAKING MAMAS was supposed to be about three lifelong best friends meddling in their daughters' lives in order to find the perfect match for them. Three friends, three daughters, ta-dum, end of story. Well, not quite.

One of the friends has a son in addition to a daughter ... and

then, there are those handy relatives, who also need to find true love.

So, you see, I can't seem to help myself. I'm a compulsive storyteller and there's nothing I love more than a sequel. I know I should try to find a local branch of storytellers anonymous to join, and I would—if I wasn't having so much fun. As always, I thank you for reading and with all my heart I wish you someone to love who loves you back.

Love,

Marie Ferrarella

About the Author

USA TODAY bestselling and RITA® Award-winning author **MARIE FERRARELLA** has written more than two hundred books, some under the name of Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website at www.marieferrarella.com.

To Charlie,
who had my heart
from the moment he walked into
my second-period English class
when I was fourteen.

Chapter One

“Kullen, you need a woman in your life.”

Kullen Manetti smiled at his widowed mother across the small table at Vesuvius.

Not bad. This had to be a new record. Theresa Manetti had managed to go through the main course before she'd brought up the subject. His lack of a better half was, after all, one of his mother's top-ten topics whenever they spent more than a few moments in each other's company.

Since his sister, Kate, had succumbed some six months ago to the charms of one bank manager by the name of Jackson Wainwright, leaving him the last man standing and holding down the “single” fort in their small group of second-generation friends, his unwedded state had become his mother's number one favorite topic.

But his mother, bless her, had just missed one very obvious point with her comment.

“Mom, I have lots of women in my life,” Kullen reminded her.

Theresa's blue eyes narrowed just a bit as she stuck to her guns. In the last year, she and her best friends, Maizie and Cecilia, had arranged successful pairings for their three stubbornly single, career-obsessed daughters. Theresa had become far more confident about her abilities and her judgment than she'd been prior to this venture.

Granted, she did run her own business and had for a number of years. But on the home front, she was the quietest and shyest of the threesome, women she'd been friends with ever since they'd met—and bonded—in the third grade.

Maizie, a self-starting real estate broker, had spearheaded what she had initially referred to as Operation: Matchmaking Mamas. Cecilia had been the one who'd backed her wholeheartedly despite veiling her enthusiasm with a bit of sarcasm. But then Cecilia had always been a tad sarcastic.

As for Theresa, her way was to cross her fingers and fervently pray. On occasion, she would say something—completely unobtrusively—about wishing she could see her son and daughter settle down. Both Kate and Kullen were lawyers at what had once been their father's topflight family law firm. For all intents and purposes, Kate had been married monastically to her work for quite some time, while Kullen, equally as sharp, had somehow managed to be successful while still systematically enjoying the company of every attractive, unattached woman in a fifty-mile radius. He had no qualms about branching to outlying areas once his immediate supply was exhausted. No relationship—if it actually could be called that—went beyond a few weeks. Six weeks was the limit and those, in Kullen's opinion, were considered to be long term, as well as exceedingly rare.

It hurt Theresa's heart that her handsome, successful, dynamic son had no desire to find that one special woman who promised to turn his world on its ear and make him want to be—please,

God—monogamous.

“A *decent* woman in your life,” Theresa now qualified firmly.

Beaming, Kullen leaned in closer. “Ah, well, for that I have you,” he told her, brushing a quick kiss on his mother’s temple. “And Kate. And, of course, those delightfully charming, probing friends of yours, Maizie and Cecilia.”

His mother, he knew, got together with the latter two at least once a week to play poker—allegedly. What they did, in actuality, was strategize. Now that Kate, Nikki and Jewel were spoken for, he imagined that the women were pressed for a new project. Well, much as he loved his mother and her friends—women he had thought were his aunts for the first ten years of his life—their next project sure as hell wasn’t going to be him.

Theresa drew up her small frame and sat schoolgirl straight in her chair as she scrutinized her firstborn. Kullen was tall, dark and handsome, just as his father had been. Except that Kullen’s features were finer, chiseled. Almost aristocratic in appearance. That he got from her. His wandering eye, well, that was anyone’s guess.

“Kullen—”

He knew that tone. Knew, too, that it was in his best interest to cut her off as quickly as possible before she built up a full head of steam. He didn’t want to end this pleasant lunch on a sour note. These days, the pace of his life had picked up, especially since one of the senior partners, Ronald Simmons, had retired last month. Consequently, he didn’t get the opportunity to visit

with his mother as often as he liked.

All things considered, he really did enjoy his mother's company. Theresa Manetti was kind, sympathetic and giving and he loved her for it. In true selfless-mother fashion, she put her family before herself.

His father, Kullen thought and not for the first time, had been an exceedingly lucky man. Unfortunately, Anthony Manetti had been far too consumed with his work to notice just how lucky he was. From its very inception, the family law firm, then known as Manetti, Rothchild and Simmons, had been his father's life, and it wasn't until he and then Kate had joined the firm that Anthony Manetti had taken real notice of either one of them.

Kate, Kullen knew, had had it particularly hard because, on top of being a perfectionist, their late father had been a chauvinist. Until his dying day, Anthony Manetti believed that anyone of the female gender—outside of a few outstanding women in world politics—was not as mentally equipped as a man in any field. Especially the law. He demanded twice as much from Kate just to put her on equal footing with the other junior lawyers in the firm.

Too bad, Dad. You had the devotion of two good women and you never even knew it, Kullen thought, even as he verbally headed his mother off at the pass.

“Really, Mom, I would think that you and your ladies would be far more interested in tackling your own lives, or if you must, gang up on poor, lonely Cousin Kennon.”

Like his sister and her two friends, his cousin Kennon was one of those exceedingly busy career women—she had her own decorating business—who maintained that they were far too preoccupied to invest themselves in a relationship. In his opinion, Kennon was perfect for his mother's next project.

He was not.

On the contrary, he, Kullen Manetti, was having a lot of fun and absolutely none of his so-called *dalliances*—his mother's word—were serious. Which was just the way he liked it.

This way, nothing got bruised. Not his ego, not his heart.

Both had been painfully battered once before, and it was more than enough for him. But it had happened so long ago and now felt like something he'd read about in a book or seen in a movie. Not real heartbreak.

Except that it was real.

But he'd been another person then. Naive and dumb. He liked himself better now: sharp, successful, with more than enough phone numbers of eligible young women.

Theresa tilted her head ever so slightly—a habit that Kate had picked up—and repeated with a smattering of confusion, “Our own lives?”

“Yes, last time I checked, neither you, Maizie or Cecilia were making any plans to walk down that flower-laden aisle—or even check into a hotel,” he added with a mischievous, wicked wink, then asked, “Or have you been holding out on me?”

When he looked like that—especially with that grin—Kullen

reminded her of Anthony the very first time she'd ever seen him, Theresa thought as a wave of affection washed over her. Back then, Anthony hadn't been so driven. Before life took over, Anthony Manetti had been romantic and fun, in addition to heart-stoppingly good-looking.

She missed both men terribly—the boyishly charming man Anthony had initially been and the dynamic, brilliant man he became. She just wished he hadn't left her out of the second phase. In retrospect, their time together had been much too short. Anthony had been—and always would be—the one true love of her life.

“No, I'm not ‘holding out’ on you, Kullen. Being married to your father was enough for me,” Theresa told her son. “I consider myself one of the lucky ones. I *had* my happiness.” She knew that Maizie and Cecilia felt the same way about their late husbands. “It's the kind of happiness I want for your sister—and for you.”

There was humor in his magnetic blue eyes as Kullen replied, “Oh, I'm happy, Mom.”

Her son dated women whose IQ's rivaled those of three-day-old blueberry muffins and they both knew it. Gorgeous or not, the whole lot of them were what her generation had referred to as bimbos.

“Genuinely happy,” Theresa emphasized. She tried to word it tactfully. “It's the difference between gorging yourself on a box of chocolates and having something substantial to eat that's nutritious and good for you. One does nothing but give you

excess, artery-clogging fat, the other makes you healthy and strong, able to live your life to the fullest.”

Kullen laughed, shaking his head. “Trust you to fall back on food analogies.”

While Maizie had her own real estate company and Cecilia ran a high-end cleaning service, his mother had created an enterprise from her own outstanding talent. A masterful chef, his mother owned her catering business. The woman could make a feast out of a discarded old shoe and have people begging for more.

However, he had no intentions of his mother making *anything* out of him, least of all a candidate for a blind date.

“No offense, Mom, but I’m not a meat-and-potatoes kind of guy. I’ve got a sweet tooth and chocolates suit my needs just fine.” He looked at her with affection, knowing that she said what she did out of love and he couldn’t really fault her for it. But he did have to be honest with her. “And I don’t intend to change anytime soon.”

Theresa was not discouraged. “Kate felt the same way.”

“Kate wasn’t happy,” he reminded her. “I am.” Long since finished with both his dessert and coffee, he moved both aside and leaned in closer to his mother. “Right now, you’re batting a thousand, Mom. If you put me into the mix, you’re going to see your average drop to five hundred.”

Theresa sighed softly. “It’s not even baseball season.”

Kullen’s amusement increased. He knew the effort his mother had made just to be knowledgeable about something that was

near and dear to his heart, and he loved her for it. Had things turned out differently eight years ago, he might have married someone a lot like her. But then, he'd made a fatal error in judgment.

All ancient history, he reminded himself. He had since discovered that they'd broken the mold when it came to women like his mother. Another reason for him to remain a confirmed bachelor. Why enter a relationship where arguing and discontent lay in wait for him? He was far better off the way he was—free, and happy to be that way.

“It wouldn't drop to five hundred,” his mother said with feeling. When he looked at her with a slightly bemused expression, she went on to say, “You're forgetting Nikki and Jewel.” They were Maizie and Cecilia's daughters, both successfully paired with men who were nothing short of fantastic.

“No, I didn't forget Nikki and Jewel, and even if I did, you'd be here to remind me.” He had no intention of going around and around about this. “Go out a winner, Mom,” he advised. “It's always the best way. That's why the *Seinfeld* cast called it quits after nine seasons. They knew that it was nice to go out on top.”

That could *not* win her over. Theresa pressed her lips together, wishing that Kullen would listen to reason. Worrying that something would go wrong in the *very* near future.

“This isn't a TV comedy series,” she told him. “It's your life.” “Yes,” he agreed pointedly, “it is.” It was his life and he wasn't about to allow it to get railroaded just to satisfy his mother's

dreams and the machinations of her two friends. “And I’m not twelve years old anymore,” he reminded her. At thirty he had long since become his own man.

“If you were,” Theresa folded her hands before her on the table, “we wouldn’t be having this conversation. I know enough about the law to know that it’s illegal to get married at twelve—in *any* state.”

“We’re not having this conversation,” Kullen said with a touch of humor as he rose to his feet. The check had been paid between dessert and coffee. “And I’ve got to be getting back to the office.” Kullen bent over and kissed her lightly. The faint scent of jasmine, his mother’s favorite fragrance, greeted him. “Got a full schedule laid out for this afternoon.”

Theresa suppressed a smile. She knew all about his full schedule for this afternoon. Knew something about it that he didn’t. Composing herself, she allowed a smile to enter her voice as she murmured, “My son, the successful lawyer.”

He paused for a moment. If he didn’t know better, he would have said she was scheming. “You know, Mom, for some mothers that would be more than enough.”

She couldn’t resist answering him on this point. Someday, she mused, he would put all the pieces together. But right now, they would have to remain “pieces” just a tiny bit longer. “I’m not ‘some’ mother, Kullen. I’m *your* mother.” He looked at her quizzically. She went a step further. “And as your mother—”

“You have been delightful company,” he told her, cutting in

before the conversation made yet another U-turn to the subject of his dating. “Bye. I’ve really gotta go.”

And with that, he began to make his retreat. But her voice stopped him.

“Kullen—”

Something in his mother’s voice caught his attention. He turned around and waited. “Yes?”

Because she was an honest woman, Theresa felt compelled to be up-front with her son. In this case, that would entail telling him that last weekend she had catered a rather large charity luncheon for Anne McCall, Lilli McCall’s mother. The conversation got around to their children. When Anne had told her that her daughter was back in Bedford and, coincidentally, was in dire need of a good family lawyer, Theresa’s heart had begun to race.

More than anything, Theresa wanted to tell her son that she’d been quick to mention he had become a lawyer and that she’d given his number to a greatly relieved Anne. She very much wanted to tell him that this afternoon he would be seeing Lilli, a woman, she’d discovered quite by accident, that he’d dated briefly in law school.

But because Theresa knew that he would see this as a setup on her part and thus would most likely palm the whole case off on Kate, Theresa forced a smile and merely told him, “Have a nice afternoon, dear.”

Returning her smile, he said, “Thanks, I will.” And then, her six-foot-two, dark-haired, handsome son went off, utterly

unsuspecting, to start his afternoon.

And just possibly, Theresa fervently hoped, to begin the rest of his life.

Lilli McCall wasn't sure that this was such a good idea.

Before leaving the house, she'd picked up the phone three times to call Kullen's office to cancel her appointment. But each time she began to press the numbers she stopped. If she broke this appointment, she would have to find another lawyer. And find one in a hurry.

Time was running out on her. She couldn't just close her eyes and pretend that everything was all right—because it so wasn't. It hadn't been all right since she'd opened Elizabeth Dalton's registered letter several weeks ago, completely out of the blue. The letter that had made her move back to Bedford in hopes of eluding the woman. She should have known better. The woman had tentacles that reached everywhere.

A second letter had found her here.

The letter, written on fine linen, dripped with condescension and sarcasm. Worse, it had contained a threat that even a seven-year-old couldn't miss.

A threat that she wouldn't allow to happen. She intended to fight Elizabeth Dalton with her dying breath, if it came to that.

But that meant going to court—or at least getting a damn good lawyer who would not just fight the good fight for her, but win. Win by any means possible.

If she could fight a clean fight, she would, but she wasn't

so naive she believed for one moment that Elizabeth Dalton intended to fight fairly. The widow of a man who had been heir to a pharmaceutical empire, she detested people who opposed her and loved getting her way.

Loved winning.

Lilli had no doubt that the rich socialite would instruct her lawyer to use every dirty trick in the book to get what she wanted.

And what the woman wanted was her son.

Elizabeth's grandson.

The problem was that she didn't know any lawyers, good *or* bad. Why should she? Despite three quarters of a year of law school behind her, she'd never needed one before, never knew anyone who'd needed one before, which now left her at a terrible disadvantage.

But she knew Kullen. Knew that he was good and kind and caring, so that was a start. Because he had turned out to be a lawyer and was still right here in Bedford, maybe fate was finally being kind to her.

Still, arriving ten minutes early for her appointment, Lilli sat in her small, tidy blue car in Rothchild, McDowell and Simmons's parking lot, debating one last time the wisdom of what she was about to do. Debating, again, canceling her appointment.

She'd even pushed his office number on her keypad, her finger hovering over the send button, before she flipped her phone closed, shoved it into her purse and then got out of the car. She

all but marched into the six-story building. But when she stepped into the elevator, Lilli felt not unlike a doomed soul walking the last mile. Or riding up to it, as it were.

Jonathan, think of Jonathan, she told herself. Jonathan is all that matters. You have to keep him out of that woman's clutches. Or she'll turn him into a carbon copy of his father.

And that, Lilli knew, would be a fate worse than death.

The elevator door opened all too quickly and she got out.

As she walked the short distance to the impressive offices of Rothchild, McDowell and Simmons, Lilli fervently prayed she was doing the right thing.

Because she was putting her son's future—and his fate—into the hands of a man she'd walked out on all those years ago.

Chapter Two

There were days, Kullen thought, when life seemed like a reenactment of the Indianapolis 500. But instead of cars, the minutes and hours madly whizzed by him. It was all he could do to keep things remotely straight.

If he were honest, he doubted he could keep his sanity if it wasn't for the woman his father had hired as his chief secretary so many years ago.

Selma Walker was no longer a secretary. These days, she was an administrative assistant, a title that seemed to annoy her at times, or “vex” her, as she was wont to say. She liked “calling a rose a rose,” and she was a secretary. A damn good secretary. And proud of it.

Selma was only slightly less old than the proverbial hills. A small, thin bit of a woman with unnaturally black hair, she was, despite her steamroller attitude and undisclosed age, sharp as a tack. It was Selma who kept Kullen's—as well as everyone else's—schedule straight. She personally filled in appointments on his desk calendar as well as, reluctantly, his computer. She really distrusted anything electronic and this included the elevator. Every morning and evening, she took the stairs.

The woman had told him more than once that she liked the feel of pen and paper and that, come a power failure—or a sunspot—everything electronic would be rendered useless. At that point,

all the old-fashioned methods, heavily relying on brain power, would be called into service because the traditional methods, she maintained, were the best.

If Selma had an actual failing, other than her less than sunny disposition, it was her handwriting. Surprisingly for one of her generation, it was far worse than chicken scratch. When this was pointed out, she took umbrage, tersely saying that she could read every word. This placed her in a very small group that numbered exactly one.

Which was why, although he'd glanced at his desk calendar, Kullen wound up caught completely off guard when he heard the knock on his door and instructed the person on the other side, his new client, to come in.

Up until that point, all he'd known about the new client was that she was female and single. He'd learned to recognize what in Selma's handwriting passed for either "Mrs." or "Mr." The former had one scribbled letter more. The third title, Ms., Selma refused to acknowledge or insert. To her, unmarried women were Miss, not Ms. She insisted that Ms. was an abbreviation for manuscript and wouldn't attach it to a human being. Thus, the name he'd fleetingly looked at had no title before it.

While the client's actual name was a mystery to him, Kullen saw no reason for concern. The name of this single female would inevitably come out during the introductions. He'd long since given up verbally dueling with Selma over her handwriting, preferring to have his wits challenged by his new client rather

than his stubborn administrative assistant.

Knowing his new client's gender and general marital status left Kullen entirely unprepared for the actual sight of that same new client when she entered.

Eight years had passed but he would have known her anywhere.

Lilli.

For the longest time, Lilli's delicate, almost waif-like image had been stitched on his heart and even now, although shut away, it still occupied a small, darkened corner of his soul.

Surprise, joy and anger swirled around within Kullen. Along with deep confusion. Why was she here?

It took him a second to remember that regular breathing was essential to keep from keeling over, head first, onto his desk, and that he'd stopped breathing the moment he'd seen her enter.

Rising to his feet, Kullen felt as if his body didn't quite belong to him. Felt, instead, as if this was a small segment of a recurring dream that still, on occasion, haunted him. Breaking up into tiny fragments once he was fully awake.

But he was awake now.

Wasn't he?

"Lilli?" he whispered uncertainly.

Part of him expected the client to eye him quizzically, not recognizing the name because there was no earthly reason for this to be the woman who had bolted out of his life the night after he'd produced an engagement ring and asked her to marry

him. Not only bolted, but disappeared without a trace. No one knew where she'd gone or why she'd suddenly dropped out of law school—and, for all intents and purposes, out of life.

But this *was* Lilli standing before him. Kullen would have bet his soul on it.

The next moment, as a small, incredibly sad smile curved her lips, his silent wager was validated and he held on to his soul a little longer.

“Hello, Kullen.” The slender blonde he'd once envisioned spending the rest of his life with stood behind the black leather, ergonomically correct chair that faced his desk, making no move to claim it. “May I sit?” she asked him in a soft, melodic voice that seemed to drift to him on an invisible cloud.

He felt as if he'd just been struck dumb. It took another long moment for him to engage his brain properly, to clamp down on the cauldron of emotions still bubbling up.

“Yes. Sit. Please.” All things considered, he was surprised his tongue still worked.

Kullen gestured toward the soft leather chair. Belatedly, he slowly sank into his own. It amazed him how, despite her rather diminutive size, Lilli seemed to fill up the room with her presence.

He couldn't take his eyes off her, a very small part of him still fully expecting her to disappear because his mind was playing a terrible trick on him.

But it wasn't playing a trick. Taking a deep breath, he went

on automatic pilot, saying things he'd said to other clients scores of times before. Doing his best to shake off this surreal feeling that held him captive.

"Can I offer you something to drink?" he asked, nodding toward the narrow black-lacquered side table, where various necessities of life stood at the ready. "Coffee? Tea? Bottled water?"

She shook her head with each choice. "No, thank you. I'm not thirsty."

He nodded, rigidly taking his seat again. "All right then, maybe you'll tell me what you are," he suggested tersely.

Kullen caught himself before he went any further. With effort, he banked down the bitterness swelling in his chest and crowding his throat. He squared his shoulders ever so imperceptively and asked the only logical question.

"What are you doing here, Lilli?"

She cut to the heart of it, because she knew he had every right to turn her away.

If he did that, she didn't know what she would do.

Start over again, the way you did the last time.

In the years since she'd abruptly left him, Lilli had discovered that she was stronger than she'd ever believed. It was amazing how someone small and helpless depending on her could transform her. She was a survivor now.

"I'm here to ask for your help," she said.

The simple words seemed to pierce his chest.

Kullen wanted to know what gave her the right to surface now, after all this time. What gave her the utter gall to ask him for his help?

Eight years ago he would have done anything for her. All she had to do then was to ask. He would have been willing to literally give up his life for her. She had to have known that. But even so, she had all but spit in his face. And left.

The seconds stretched out into a minute as he sat, looking at her. Studying her. Finally, in a deceptively calm voice, he asked, “So all the other men in the world are dead?”

She stared at him, confused. The question made no sense. “Excuse me?”

“That was the way you made me feel when you took off, that you wouldn’t have anything to do with me even if I was the last man on earth. Since you’re here, I’m assuming that for some reason, all the other men in the world have been mysteriously terminated, although I have to say I don’t see how that’s possible, since I passed a few of them in the hall not fifteen minutes ago.” He lifted his shoulders in a casual, dismissive shrug. “I guess I must have missed the Armageddon that took place in the last ten minutes.” He leaned forward over his desk, his voice lowering to a rumble. “Or did it happen in less?”

Lilli recoiled emotionally despite sitting ramrod straight.

She knew she had that coming. That and probably more. Lost in her own predicament, she’d treated him shamefully.

Lilli took a breath. She should have known better than to

come. Though Kullen had every right to be angry at her, even to hate her, hearing his cold, emotionless voice as he addressed her hurt far too much for her to withstand.

Hurt, because even with everything that had happened, everything that she'd done, she knew in her heart that Kullen Manetti was the only man who had ever mattered to her. The only man who *would* ever matter to her.

The only man she'd ever loved—even if she had put him through hell. And he was better looking than ever. Then he'd been almost pretty. Maturity had found him and now he was breathtakingly handsome. She felt the attraction immediately. Just as she had all those years ago.

“This was a mistake,” she told him stiffly. Pushing against the floor, she moved back her chair. “I shouldn't have come.” As she rose to her feet, she told him, “I didn't mean to bother you.”

Logically, Kullen knew he should just let her walk out. It had taken him a long time, but he had managed to successfully reinvent himself, to become a different man. He didn't want to go back to that place where feelings had such overwhelming power over him. That place where he'd ached so badly he didn't think he could survive the night without the woman he loved.

He needed to remember that, remember the price he'd paid for letting down his guard.

For loving her.

The pep talk wasn't working. He could feel himself weakening. Slipping.

Despite his resolve, something in those light blue eyes of hers spoke to him, pulled at him, just the way it had that first time so many years ago.

“What was a mistake,” he told Lilli crisply, struggling with the insane urge to take her into his arms and just hold her, “was your disappearing on me eight years ago.”

On the verge of leaving his office, Lilli stopped just shy of the door. She didn’t turn around. Her voice was flat as she addressed her words to the beveled glass. “I had my reasons.”

“Which you didn’t think enough of me to share,” he pointed out. He never meant to say this out loud, but the question tumbled out anyway. “Did you really hate me that much?”

Stunned, Lilli swung around to face him. “Hate you?” she echoed incredulously. “I didn’t hate you. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“And that’s why you ripped out my heart and threw it down the garbage disposal? So you wouldn’t hurt me?” he demanded. “C’mon, Lilli, you can do better than that.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to seal away the tears that had suddenly welled up. “You don’t understand,” Lilli whispered.

It wasn’t easy to hold his ground, not when everything inside him, despite all that had gone down, just wanted to comfort her. To hold her and remember what life had once been like.

Only self-preservation managed to hold him in check. “Then explain it to me.”

But she just shook her head. There was too much ground to cover. And too much time had passed. Had life not scarred her before he had come on the scene, Kullen would have been perfect for her. For the Lilli she'd once been.

Before.

Lilli shook her head again. "It's complicated. I can't ..." Her voice threatened to break. "I've got to go." Her hand went to the doorknob.

Kullen cut the distance between them in strides he didn't remember taking. One moment he was across the room, the next, he was beside her. Closing the door with the flat of his hand, he became a physical obstacle that prevented her escape.

"Why did you come?" he asked, just barely taking the edge out of his voice. "What is it you need help with?"

Maybe things would be all right after all. Maybe coming here *wasn't* a mistake. Lilli pressed her lips together as she raised her eyes to his. "I need help to save my son."

His breath left him.

Kullen felt as if he'd actually been sucker punched in the gut. For a second, he allowed the words to sink in.

"You have a son?"

He could remember that when they'd been together those few short, glorious months, in the beginning she'd all but shrank away from his touch. The first time that had happened, he'd been more puzzled than offended. Challenged, charmed by her, he worked hard to gain her trust. And he'd taken her at her word when she'd

told him that she wanted to go slow. He'd thought she was one of those rare girls who was serious about "saving herself" for the right man. Saving herself for her husband.

He'd been so crazy about her, he would have gone along with anything she'd said as long as it meant that she'd remain in his life. That eventually, she would marry him and be his.

He supposed that made him incredibly naive and stupid, in light of the situation—as well as what she'd told him just now. She hadn't been saving herself; she'd just been keeping herself from him.

"Yes," Lilli replied quietly. "I have a son." *And I'll do anything to save him. Anything.*

Kullen glanced down at her left hand. There was no ring on it. No ring and no faint, pale lines to indicate that there once had been. Had everything she'd once told him been a lie?

"What about a husband?" he asked her evenly. "He around anywhere?"

She raised her chin and her eyes met his. "I don't have one."

"Divorced?" he guessed. His temper started to flare. "Widowed? How about just separated from a significant other? Got one of those around?"

"No. No. No." Lilli answered each question in turn.

Then, apparently, there was only one conclusion to be reached. The words were on his lips before he could think to stop himself. "Did I miss the announcement of another Immaculate Conception?"

The moment he said it, he saw the walls literally go up. He read her body language and blocked her as she reached for the door again. His anger had gotten the best of him. What he'd just said was beneath him, and he knew it.

“All right, I'm sorry,” he apologized. “But I did feel I had a right to say that.” The walls around her remained up. “When we were together,” he reminded her, “you said you were saving yourself.”

“I never actually said that in so many words,” Lilli pointed out. She hadn't said those words because, through no fault of her own, they wouldn't have been true. She'd let him believe what he wanted because the truth had been too painful for her to face.

Even now it was difficult.

His eyes narrowed. “Then I was just some idiot you were laughing at?”

“No!” she protested with feeling. “You were sweet and kind and sensitive—”

His scowl deepened. “In other words, an idiot,” he said.

She shook her head with feeling. “No, not an idiot, a hero.” Her eyes held his. He saw the passion within them as she told him, “You saved me.”

He had no recollection of any heroic act on his part, other than exercising an almost superhuman effort to restrain his raging hormones and abide by her wishes even though, more than anything on earth, he longed to be intimate with her.

“Saved you?” he echoed.

Lilli nodded. “If you hadn’t been so patient with me, so kind, if you hadn’t gone out of your way to *be* there for me,” she underscored, “I would have killed myself.” And she meant it. She’d been completely hopeless, and he’d given her hope.

I would have killed myself.

It was a phrase tossed around easily, especially by younger people. He was all ready to discount it, but he saw the look in her eyes. Young, talented, smart, she had everything to live for, but she was obviously dead serious.

“Why?”

She shook her head again. “I don’t want to go into that, Kullen,” she told him solemnly, then drew herself up to her short stature. “I’m sorry I wasted your time like this. Send me the bill for this appointment and I’ll reimburse you. It’s the least I can do.”

No, the least she could do was explain herself, but he knew better than to press her. Instead, as Lilli reached for the doorknob a third time, he asked, “Where are you going?”

“I have to find a lawyer.”

“I’m a lawyer,” he reminded her. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing. But I thought that you don’t want to take my case —”

Kullen had no idea what he would do next or how any of this would turn out. Despite everything, he didn’t want to see her walk out that door.

“I didn’t say that. I don’t even know what your case is,” he

reminded her. “What, exactly, *is* your case?”

She put it into terms as succinctly as she could. “It’s a custody battle.”

“Then there is a father,” he concluded. And whoever the man was, he wanted custody of the child they’d had together.

“No, there’s a grandmother.”

Saying the words, she caught herself almost smiling. The flamboyant Elizabeth Dalton would have balked at the label, telling whoever called her a grandmother what he could do with the label and where he could put it. In the eyes of the press, Elizabeth Dalton strove to be seen as an ageless, benevolent goddess of timeless beauty. Her image, her reputation, were all-important to her.

Lilli had no doubts that if Elizabeth won custody of Jonathan, her well-adjusted little boy would be a emotional wreck in a matter of months. Perhaps sooner. All she had to do was remember the way Elizabeth’s son had turned out. And what he did. It put cold fear into Lilli’s heart.

“Your mother?” Kullen guessed.

“No, Elizabeth Dalton,” she told him.

The mention of the high-profile socialite threw him for a moment. “The widow of the pharmaceutical heir?” he questioned. Lilli nodded. “What does she have to do with it?” he asked.

“She’s the one who wants custody of my son.” Lilli took a deep breath, as if trying to protect herself from the words she

was saying. “And she’s already told me in no uncertain terms that she will stop at nothing to get it.”

Chapter Three

Like a traffic cop, Kullen held up his hand, stopping her before she went off in another direction.

“Back up. Why does Elizabeth Dalton want your son?” The flamboyant socialite took to the spotlight like the proverbial moth to the flame, but this sounded a little bizarre even for her. “Exactly what right does she have to him?”

As he waited for an explanation, he watched the wariness entering Lilli’s eyes. How many times had he seen that before? Eight years ago it had taken him weeks to get her to trust him, to realize that all he wanted was for her to be happy.

She pressed her lips together before saying, “I’d rather not go into all the details right now.”

There were those damn walls again. Isolating her. Keeping him out.

But this time it was different. This time it wasn’t personal. She’d sought him out in his professional capacity. She wanted his help as a lawyer, and as such he needed to establish some ground rules for them.

“If I’m going to be any use at all to you, Lilli,” he said, cupping her elbow and ever so subtly guiding her back to his desk, “I’m going to have to know everything.” He pulled out the chair for her but Lilli remained standing, in silent, stubborn defiance of his request. “Any lawyer will need all the details in order to properly

represent you and your case.”

Her case.

That made it sound so austere, so clinical. It wasn't a case, she silently insisted. It was a boy. A beautiful, sweet-tempered, innocent, blond-haired little boy. A little boy who was her reason for getting up in the morning, for her very existence. And she would die to protect him, to keep him safe and out of Elizabeth Dalton's clutches.

Lilli was still silent. Kullen sighed, attempting another approach. He sat down. “All right, I'll fill in the blanks. Stop me if I'm wrong. Elizabeth's son is the boy's father.”

He paused a moment for her to contradict him, even though he was certain that, given the circumstances, she couldn't. Lilli sat down, but the uncomfortable silence continued.

“And now, out of the blue,” Kullen went on, “he and his mother want custody of the boy.”

Lilli looked down at her hands. “Not ‘he,’ just his mother,” she corrected woodenly.

Kullen went with the tide. “Okay, so the boy's father doesn't want him—”

“His father *didn't* want him,” she said tersely, changing the tense that he'd used.

Kullen paused. “Did something happen to make Dalton change his mind?”

“No,” Lilli answered. Her voice sounded hollow to her own ears, stripped of emotion. It was the only way, even after all this

time, that she could bring herself to talk about the man who had so savagely changed her life. “He’s dead.”

The moment she mentioned Dalton’s death, Kullen vaguely recalled hearing a sound bite on the news one evening summarizing Erik Dalton’s shallow life. If he remembered correctly, that was about six months ago. Thinking, he tried to summon up the details of the incident.

“It was a skiing accident, wasn’t it?” he asked.

Lilli shook her head. “Boating,” she corrected, then added, “From what I heard, he liked people thinking of him as some kind of a daredevil.” She used the impersonal pronoun *he*, unable to make herself even say Erik Dalton’s name.

Kullen continued studying her. There was so much she wasn’t saying, he thought. “And that daredevil image didn’t include being a father,” he guessed.

Lilli could feel hateful, disparaging words rising to her lips. She’d never hated anyone, but she hated Erik Dalton with the last fiber of her being. But she had always been a truthful person and, in all fairness, in this particular situation Dalton didn’t technically deserve to be called a self-centered scum.

She shrugged, trying to seem indifferent. “I never gave him the chance to turn that role down.”

Damn it, Lilli, I loved you. I would have put the world at your feet if you’d married me. Was this why you left? To run into this soulless jerk’s Armani-covered arms?

Kullen struggled to keep the anger out of his voice but he

couldn't help asking, "Exactly what was it that you *did* give him?"

Here come the tears again, she thought, fighting to will them back. Despite her mental pep talk to the contrary, she felt terribly vulnerable and exposed. She didn't know why she felt that way, but she did.

Maybe it had to do with seeing Kullen after all these years.

Even so, Lilli absolutely refused to allow herself to cry, refused to come across as some helpless little waif, the hapless victim of a spoiled, overly privileged, rich narcissist who thought he was entitled to everything and anything he wanted.

"A note," she replied. "I wrote him a note when Jonathan was born, telling him that I thought he had a right to know that he had a son. I also told him that I didn't want anything from him. I intended to raise Jonathan on my own."

She couldn't read Kullen's expression and waited for him to say something.

When he finally spoke, it wasn't what she expected to hear. "That was rather foolish, don't you think?" he asked. "By having nothing to do with Dalton, you were denying your son a life of privilege."

His assumption made her angry. "No," she contradicted firmly, "I was protecting my son and giving him a life filled with love." She fisted her hands in her lap.

"I want Jonathan to be someone, to make something of himself and give a little back to the world. I want his life to count," she told him with passion. "I *didn't* want him to learn how

to use people, how to treat them all as if they were beneath him.”

His eyes never left hers. “Still, Jonathan could have had every need seen to. He can *still* have that,” he pointed out.

Lilli watched him for a moment, heartsick and disappointed. Who *was* this person? The Kullen Manetti she remembered had a nobility about him. During one of their study sessions, he’d confided that he wanted to fight for the underdog. His father expected him to join *his* firm, but the thought of doing that left him feeling empty. After graduation he intended to go to work for a nonprofit organization, helping people who had nowhere else to turn.

Obviously somewhere along the line, he’d changed. He still looked like Kullen, but he no longer was that man.

Gripping the armrests on either side of her, Lilli pushed herself up to her feet again. “I guess you’re not the one to help me after all.” She steeled herself. “Sorry I wasted your time.”

“You’re repeating yourself,” he told her mildly. “I’ll be the one who tells you if my time’s being wasted.” She looked at him, perplexed. “Right now, I’m just playing devil’s advocate,” he continued.

“I don’t need a devil’s advocate,” she informed him tersely. “If anything, I need an angel, because I am up against the devil in this. Elizabeth Dalton has a battalion of razor-sharp lawyers on her side.” She might as well be up-front with him. “I can’t afford a battalion of lawyers.”

“I’m guessing,” he said kindly, “that you don’t have the kind

of money it takes to hire one lawyer.”

She wanted to protest his assumption, but couldn't. He was right and there was no point in pretending otherwise. Squaring her shoulders, she avoided looking into his eyes. If she saw pity there, it would destroy her. “I was hoping that I could pay the bill in installments.”

Kullen took no delight in watching her squirm, physically or mentally. “The firm takes a few cases pro bono—”

Her head shot up. “I'm not asking for charity,” she informed him, offended by the suggestion.

He knew he had to tread lightly in order not to crush her self-esteem—or insult her. “Nobody says you were. It's up to our accountant to decide whether or not taking a certain case is the right thing to do. Doing a pro bono case helps with the tax forms,” he quickly interjected to keep her from protesting again. “It makes us look good. And from what I hear, the firm hasn't taken on a pro bono case this year. When you come right down to it, you might actually be doing us a favor,” he told her.

Lilli sincerely doubted that. But she was desperate and she did need someone with legal expertise in her corner. She had no time to waltz around semantics. She needed to engage a lawyer soon if she had any hope of keeping her son.

So for now, she played along and pretended that she believed this fabricated story of his. “All right, if you put it that way—”

He smiled. “I do.”

She had to remember not to look at him when he smiled like

that. Otherwise, she ran the risk of melting right in front of him. That mischievous, boyish smile of his always got to her, managed to get through her armor. He'd won her heart with that smile.

If only things could have been different....

But they weren't, she reminded herself firmly. She had to deal in reality, not fantasies. The reality was that Elizabeth Dalton wanted to take her son away from her—and would, unless Lilli could fight her off. She felt like David, facing Goliath, and she needed a lot more than a slingshot and some rocks. She needed Kullen.

“Okay.” Releasing her grip on the armrests, Lilli sank down into the chair again. But she was still far from relaxed. Until this ordeal was over, she doubted she would ever relax again. “What do you need from me?” she asked, ready to tell Kullen as much as she was able.

So many things I can't even begin to enumerate them. “To begin with, I'm going to need the boy's birth certificate,” he told her.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to guess why Kullen wanted to see it. He wanted to see the name in black-and-white. “I left the space blank.”

So, she hadn't lost the ability to read his mind. “You didn't list the boy's father?”

Lilli shook her head. “No.”

Was she ashamed to put the man's name down? Or had the pharmaceutical heir threatened her with something to make her leave the space blank?

“Why?”

Why did Kullen have to dig like this? Her reasons didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that Dalton's mother wanted to take Jonathan away.

But because Kullen was waiting and wanted an answer, she gave him one.

“I wanted nothing to do with Erik Dalton. Besides, Jonathan might have Dalton DNA, but he was—and is—*my* son. *I* loved him, *I* wanted him. And I was going to make a home for him. And that's what I have been doing for the last seven years.”

“Any idea why Mrs. Dalton is suddenly suing for custody after seven years? Did you get in contact with her?” He watched her expression to see her reaction as he asked the question.

“To tell her how sorry I was for her loss?” Lilli guessed. “No, I didn't.” She realized that Kullen might have thought she had done it for another reason. “To tell her that she had a grandson? Again, no.”

He wasn't ready to lay this line of questioning to rest yet. “Did you send photographs to her son while he was alive, showing your son's progress?”

“No. After I sent him the note telling him that he had a son I never wrote or had any contact with him again.”

He studied her carefully. Would he be able to tell if she was lying to him? He was no longer sure. “Then he never wrote back or tried to get in contact with you later on?”

“No,” she said with feeling. “He could have cared less about

being a father. If anything, I'm sure he was relieved that I didn't want him in Jonathan's life in any manner, shape or form."

But that left a very loose end. Leaning back in his chair, Kullen continued to study her as he asked, "Then how do you explain how Mrs. Dalton found out about Jonathan?" He gave her a way out. "Or don't you know?"

Lilli laughed shortly. "Oh, I know. She said she was going through Erik's things about a month after the funeral and she found my note telling him about the baby."

"So he kept the note."

He made it sound as if that proved there was some sentiment involved. Erik Dalton hadn't had a good bone in his body. If there had been one, it would have fled, horrified. "If he consciously kept the note, it was probably to use as a bargaining chip at some future date in case he needed it."

"Bargaining chip?" Kullen repeated. "Who would he be bargaining with?"

That was easy. "His mother. Seems she's very big on continuing the family line."

Now it was making sense. "And now that her only son is gone, she's set her sights on her grandson." It wasn't a guess.

Lilli sighed as she pressed her lips together. "That's about it."

Since he'd got her talking, he pressed his advantage. The more information he had, the better he could serve her. "What happened after she found the note?" he asked.

The events were indelibly etched on her brain. And she would

forever regret taking pity on the woman. Her mistake had been to put herself in the woman's place and feel sorry for her.

"Mrs. Dalton called and asked if she could see Jonathan. She wanted me to bring him to the house so that she could meet him."

He knew the answer before he asked, but he asked anyway. "And did you?"

Hindsight was completely useless—because there was no going back to rectify things. "In light of what she'd just been through, I thought turning her down would have been unnecessarily cruel."

Lilli McCall really was too good to be true, Kullen thought. Careful, she ran out on you once—and obviously straight into the arms of her rich lover. Being played for a fool once is more than enough.

"So you went to see her with Jonathan," he concluded for her.

Lilli suppressed the sigh that rose to her lips. Sighing wasn't going to help, either. She had to *do* something, get aggressive and fight this woman on her own terms. "So I went with Jonathan."

He'd started making notes to keep the events in their proper chronology. "And then what?"

"At first she seemed very nice. Her eyes literally lit up when she saw Jonathan. She said it was uncanny how much he looked like her own son at that age. That seeing Jonathan took her back, made her remember the past." Lilli's mouth hardened. "And then she talked about what she could do for Jonathan, how different his life would be if he lived with her. She started making plans as

if I wasn't even standing in the room. That's when I panicked," she confessed.

He didn't blame her. Elizabeth Dalton was a statuesque, imposing woman who, he'd heard, enjoyed intimidating people. "How did the visit end?"

"Not well. Elizabeth asked me to leave Jonathan with her. I said no." She lifted one shoulder in a semi-shrug. "She doesn't like hearing that word."

He just bet she didn't. It probably surprised the hell out of her when someone as soft-spoken as Lilli stood up to her.

"She's undoubtedly not used to hearing it," he said. "So what happened after that?"

"The next afternoon, one of her lawyers got in contact with me. A very prim and proper little man who offered me money in exchange for giving up custody of my son. Offering me money," she repeated with disgust. "As if Jonathan was some kind of a toy or inanimate commodity that was for sale." Impassioned, her voice rose with each word. "Elizabeth Dalton ruined her son, I'm not going to let her ruin mine."

He made a few more notes on the page, then turned to a fresh one. "I guess they're right," he observed.

"About what?" she wanted to know.

"That no good deed goes unpunished."

"Do you think that if I hadn't taken Jonathan over to meet her —?"

He cut her short by shaking his head. He put her mind at rest.

This was not her fault. None of it. “Even if you hadn’t taken your son to meet his grandmother, I have a feeling the outcome would have been the same once she found out about Jonathan. And you’re right in your assessment. Elizabeth Dalton likes to pride herself on getting whatever she sets her mind to.”

Lilli could feel her stomach growing queasy. “Should I be worried?”

He gauged his answer slowly. “If you’re asking me if you should be getting your passports ready in order to flee the country, no. There’s no need to resort to drastic measures.” He took a guess at her next question and answered it before she could ask. “Do I think winning is going to be a piece of cake? No, I don’t. In general, a mother’s rights trump anything else that might be raised in a court of law.”

“In general,” she echoed. “But in this case?”

He wished he could tell her she had nothing to worry about. But he couldn’t, and she needed to be prepared. “In this case, Elizabeth Dalton has a lot of powerful friends. If she and her squadron of lawyers decide to win by fair means or foul, I want you to realize we’re going to have one hell of a fight on our hands.”

There was only one thing that she wanted to know. “Will we win?”

He didn’t deal in rainbows and fairy dust. He knew he should be prudent and cautiously tell her to be prepared for anything, because in this case they were up against a force of nature. A

force of nature who numbered more than one judge in her inner circle of influential friends.

But he knew Lilli didn't need cautious words. She needed hope. He couldn't take that from her, couldn't just dash any shred of hope she might have against the rocks of reality. No matter how much she'd hurt him, he couldn't bring himself to be cruel to her.

So he gave her the most confident smile he had in his arsenal and nodded.

"Yes, Virginia," he said, paraphrasing the famous line in the legendary Christmas story, "we're going to win. It's not going to be easy, or quick," he predicted, "but we *are* going to win."

Overwhelmed, Lilli hadn't realized until just this moment how close she was to a complete meltdown. She was only a hair's breadth away. The sense of relief, of hope, was huge. This time, she allowed the tears to flow. They slid fast and furiously down her cheeks, and registered in direct contrast to the smile that curved her lips.

"Thank you," she cried, looking at him through eyes that had all but completely welled up. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," he warned her. "You can save that for when the case is finally over and we walk out of the courthouse victorious."

She knew he was right. That this was far too early in the game to allow her emotions to get the better of her. Knew that they had a hard and very possibly long fight ahead of them.

But she couldn't help herself. She'd felt alone and isolated for far too long.

And she had missed him.

In one unguarded moment, Lilli let her feelings bubble up and get the better of her. She threw her arms around his neck.

“Thank you,” she cried again, burying her face against his shoulder.

He felt her breath along his neck.

His stomach tightened in anticipation.

Chapter Four

Old feelings came rushing back to Kullen with the speed and intensity of a runaway freight train barreling down a steep mountain path. The urge to close his arms around Lilli, to kiss her with all his bottled-up passion nearly overwhelmed him.

It would be so easy to give in, to let his guard down just for the smallest moment and permit desire to take over.

But he knew he couldn't let himself do that.

He'd been through this before and was well aware of just how the story had ended. There was absolutely no way he would allow himself to be ripped apart again. Once was more than enough.

Once was a case of being blindsided. Twice would have meant that he was either an idiot—or a masochist. And he was neither. Moreover, he intended to remain that way. So although his heart was racing now, calling him seven kinds of a fool for not taking advantage of this opportunity shimmering before him, Kullen kept his arms rigidly at his side.

Embarrassed, feeling both self-conscious and extremely awkward, Lilli withdrew her arms and took a step back. Kullen all but radiated coldness. She succeeded in maintaining a smile on her lips, although how she was doing so was a mystery to her.

“Sorry,” she murmured. “I guess I got a little overwhelmed for a second. It won't happen again.”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” he told her, doing his best to

sound natural. Doing his best not to demand why she'd left him the way she had and then run headlong into an intimate relationship with someone else.

Someone who he *knew* couldn't have loved her half as much as he had.

Kullen took a breath, then said, "Stop at Selma's desk and ask her to give you a list of documents I'm going to need to see for this case. It's a standard list," he explained before she could ask how the administrative assistant would know what to give her. "Just tell her it's a custody dispute."

Dispute. What a civilized word for what was about to take place, Lilli thought.

"Selma's the woman at the front desk?" she asked just to be certain.

Kullen nodded. "Can't miss her. She looks like the last living cast member from the set of *The Wizard of Oz*," he said tactfully.

It was an apt description of the woman, Lilli thought as she turned toward the door. The administrative assistant did look a great deal like an aged Munchkin. "When do you want to see me again?" she asked Kullen.

I never stopped wanting to see you, he told her silently. With effort, he forced himself to focus on more neutral terrain. He should only think of her in light of the actual business they had with one another. Nothing more.

Turning the calendar on his desk toward him, Kullen glanced at several consecutive pages. As near as he could tell, they were

filled. It didn't matter. He'd find a way to make time for her.

Pushing the calendar away, he turned to face her. "Whenever's convenient for you."

The word *convenient* didn't fit the situation. There was nothing convenient about it. "Mrs. Dalton got the court to accelerate the date, so as soon as possible would be very much appreciated." She eyed him hopefully. "I can come back with the papers later this afternoon if you like."

He would have liked to say yes, but he couldn't. "I'm leaving for court in half an hour." And more than likely would be there for the rest of the day, until the judge adjourned the proceedings.

Lilli didn't allow obstacles to deter her, not anymore. She'd learned that along the way as she carved out a living for herself and her son. The meek and mild were stepped on, the forceful were not.

"All right, then I can drop the documents off at your place tonight," she suggested. "I know it sounds like I'm being pushy, but I'll feel a lot better the sooner you have all the ammunition you need at your disposal." And then she realized that she'd overlooked an important, salient point. "Unless your wife doesn't like work from the office showing up on your doorstep at night."

"No wife."

The disclaimer was out of his mouth before he realized that he had just ruined his one opportunity to keep her permanently at arm's length. If Lilli thought he was married, she would keep her distance. She wasn't some *femme fatale*, given to whimsical

flirting. There wouldn't be any more impromptu incidents of her throwing her arms around his neck. Lilli was honorable that way.

How the hell did he really know *what* she was like, he silently demanded the next moment, growing irritable. He hadn't been right about her the first time around. Eight years ago he would have bet his last dime—and his life—that Lilli wasn't the type to vanish without a word, especially after someone had bared his soul to her.

He would have lost that bet.

For all he knew, the challenge of prying a man away from his wife would spur Lilli on.

I really didn't know you at all, did I? he thought, looking at her.

"You're not married?" Lilli asked, surprised. Someone like Kullen should have gotten snapped up years ago. He was one of the few true good guys left in the world. They didn't make men like him anymore. If she hadn't discovered that she was pregnant the same evening that he'd proposed, she would have gladly married him and spent the rest of her life trying to put that one awful episode in her life behind her.

Don't go there, she warned herself. What's done is done.

"No," he answered, "I'm not married."

"Oh."

Despite the fact that it was years too late for her, that what *could* have been between them was in the past, Lilli was suddenly aware of a small, intense flame of warmth igniting within her. A warmth that swiftly spread, as if to thaw her out. To make her

feel alive again.

This wouldn't accomplish anything, she upbraided herself. It was best to leave things just the way they were. There was no going back. Her future, her life, was all bound up around the boy. Jonathan was the important one here. Jonathan was the *only* reason she was here, temporarily interacting with Kullen.

She wanted to be clear that he didn't mind her doing this. Eager though she was, she didn't want to risk crowding him. "Then I can bring the papers by your house?"

He didn't want her getting the wrong idea, that her coming over would lead to anything but discussing her case.

"You could have brought them by even if I was married," he informed her. "When's the court date?" She told him and he whistled, shaking his head. No wonder she was antsy. "Two weeks. That really doesn't leave much time," he agreed.

"That's the whole idea behind such an early court date. Mrs. Dalton's trying to steamroll right over me."

Kullen liked a challenge, liked fighting the good fight. Cut-and-dried cases didn't allow him to stretch his muscles, and a lot of the time they bored him. His gut told him he wouldn't be bored with this case. Not by a long shot.

"Well, Mrs. Dalton's just going to have to rethink her strategy," he replied. He reached over a pile of papers to get one of his business cards from his desk. Flipping it over, he wrote down his home address on the back, then held the card out to Lilli. "Here's my address," he told her. "I should be home after

six.”

What sort of a home did he live in? Was it strictly utilitarian, the way his room had been in college? Or had his obvious success changed him, changed his tastes? Was his home big and splashy, filled with furniture and objects of art chosen by some interior decorator?

Lilli slipped the card into her purse. “I’ll be there,” she promised.

She started to open the door, but the sound of his voice stopped her.

“Just out of curiosity, who referred you to me?”

He wondered if she’d just looked him up, forgetting that he’d once had plans to work in the poorer section of Los Angeles, counseling those who couldn’t afford to pay a lawyer. Or if she did remember, did finding him here make her think that he’d sold out and joined his father’s firm just to please him?

Her answer caught him off guard. “Your mother.”

“My mother?” Damn it, Kate had been right. Now that she, Nikki and Jewel were all squared away with fiancés and weddings in the near future, Theresa Manetti had decided to turn her sights on him. “You looked up my mother?” he asked incredulously.

“No, actually, it’s all just a very fortunate coincidence.”

Yeah, I just bet, Kullen thought. He didn’t believe in coincidences, fate or luck. Not anymore. Especially not where his mother was concerned. She’d known about this at lunch today and she hadn’t said a word to him.

“My mother needed to have a party catered,” Lilli explained, “and *she* looked up your mother. Your mother comes very highly recommended,” she told him by way of a compliment. His expression remained oddly stoic. “They started talking and my mother told yours that I was badly in need of a lawyer. Your mother volunteered you.”

His mother probably heard the words “my single daughter” and her imagination galloped off, Kullen thought darkly. “Did my mother ask yours what kind of lawyer you needed?”

Lilli smiled. It was the same smile he used to think lit up a dark room. “My mother only said I needed a good one. Your mother proudly said that you were. But my nine months in law school were not wasted,” she said, tongue in cheek. “I looked you up,” she told him. “I wanted to be sure that you weren’t practicing criminal law or just doing estate planning.” A distant expression came into her eyes. “I won’t need a criminal lawyer except maybe as a last resort.”

He knew what she was saying. That if it came down to it, she’d kill to keep her son. He wondered if she actually meant that.

“As your lawyer, I have to advise you not to make those kind of *jokes* right now—” he underscored the word “—just in case Elizabeth Dalton does happen to turn up dead.”

Lilli studied him for a long moment. “I don’t remember you being this cautious before.”

He was the exact opposite of cautious and serious when it came to his social life, but professionally it was another matter.

The law didn't leave a lot of wiggle room for mistakes.

"I'm not," he replied. "But in this particular case, it wouldn't hurt to cover all bases."

He was right and she was grateful to him for that. For taking her case. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she was criticizing him or his methods.

"Thank you," she said again. "Just knowing that you're on the case makes me feel a great deal better already."

"That makes one of us," he said to the door after she had left and closed it.

Damn it, he had a feeling that once this case was over he would have to start from scratch again. He would have to work to drive her essence out of his head. Out of his soul.

"Of all the law firms in Bedford, she had to wander into mine," he murmured under his breath, riffing on Humphrey Bogart's famous line in *Casablanca*.

With a sigh Kullen glanced down at his watch. He gave Lilli five minutes to stop at Selma's desk, get the list he'd suggested she take with her and then make her way to the elevator.

Exactly five minutes later, he opened his door and strode over to Kate's office two doors down. Reaching it he knocked exactly once on the frosted glass. Too impatient to wait the mega-second for a response, he opened the door and walked in.

Books were spread out and open all over his sister's desk.

Engrossed in her research, Kate looked up sharply when she heard him walk in. "I didn't say come in."

“But you would have,” he pointed out glibly.

“I could have been with a client—or making out with Jackson,” she answered.

He shrugged, closing the door behind him. “Then you would have thrown me out and I would have waited in the hall.”

“Waited,” she repeated mockingly. “You don’t know how to wait. This sounds serious.” She pushed the book in front of her aside. “What’s up?”

“Did you know about this?” he demanded.

“Well,” she said carefully, “that all depends.”

“On what?” he asked her suspiciously, his eyes narrowing as he scrutinized her.

“On what ‘this’ means. If you’re asking about Selma’s birthday, yes, I know about it. Actually, I was the one who found out that it’s next week—”

Raising his voice, he cut in. “I’m not talking about Selma’s birthday.” He was exasperated. When she got all wound up, Kate could fire more words per second than any living human. He knew from experience that he only had a couple of seconds to get out in front of that before she picked up her pace. “I’m talking about my newest client.”

“You have a new client,” Kate deadpanned. “How nice for you.” She shook her head. “Right now, my plate is so full that if you’re trying to palm him—”

“It’s a her,” he corrected.

“Her,” she amended without losing a beat, “off on me, I just

might be tempted to kill you, and then Jackson is going to have to marry me quickly so I can get conjugal rights in prison.”

He was trying to pin her down and she was making jokes, he thought darkly. “So then you don’t know about her.”

“I might,” Kate allowed. “Depending on what her name is. Is it somebody famous?” She looked at Kullen more closely. “Kullen, you’re scaring me. Why aren’t you talking?” Leaning forward, she gave him her full attention. “Just who is your new client, Kullen?”

For a second, because he didn’t want to go into explanations, he debated just turning around and walking out. But if he did that, his sister’s curiosity would go into overdrive and she would hound him until he *did* tell her.

So he watched Kate’s face as he said, “It’s Lilli McCall.”

The name didn’t seem to mean anything to her.

“Okay,” Kate said, drawing out the single word as if it was comprised of four syllables. She waited for something more substantial to follow.

“You’re not familiar with her name?” he pressed suspiciously.

“Should I be?”

Granted, he’d never talked about Lilli, preferring eight years ago to keep her to himself like some special treasure that he’d mined by accident. And then, when she had done her vanishing act, he’d never told anyone about her because then he would have had to admit that she’d devastated him.

So his secret love remained a secret.

Or so he'd thought at the time.

But even so, he figured that Kate with her insidious way of delving into everything, especially *his* business, would have sensed that something was up, which would have led her to find out about Lilli.

Maybe he'd given his sister too much credit.

Or maybe, just maybe, for once in her life she'd respected his privacy the way he really didn't respect hers. Everything was fair when it came to siblings, at least that had always been his rule of thumb. He'd invoked it because he did care about Kate, and acting as if he had the right to know everything that concerned her just made it easier to watch over her.

But now the tables had turned and it was *his* life that was caught in his mother's crosshairs.

And he didn't like it one damn bit.

Rather than label Lilli as a woman from his past, or more accurately, *the* woman from his past, he said only one salient thing.

"Mom referred her."

Kate's grin materialized on her lips at the speed of light. "Well, like you once said, everyone needs a hobby."

He scowled. "That was when she was bugging you, not me."

Kate seemed to take pity on him. She was too happy these days to be vindictive. "Well, I've got to admit that Mom's taste is pretty good. Why don't you give this woman a chance once you've handled her, um, case," she concluded with a wicked wink.

“I already did once.”

“You fooled around with a client at your initial meeting?” Kate asked him, stunned.

“No,” he bit off in disgust.

“Enlighten me. Exactly what do you mean, you already did once?”

He waved his hand dismissively. “Never mind,” he retorted. “Just tell Mom to stick to catering and not match making.”

“Sorry,” Kate called after him as he walked out. “She won’t listen to me if I say that. Under the circumstances, I don’t have a leg to stand on.”

That made two of them, because his own legs felt wobblier than hell right now. Eight years and she still had that kind of effect on him, despite everything that had happened.

He closed his eyes and sighed. He should have gone on vacation this week the way he had initially planned. Served him right. If he’d taken that holiday, then his mother, with her soft, chewy-on-the-inside, chewy-on-the-outside heart would have volunteered Kate to help Lilli with her case, and he could have gone on his way, mercifully in the dark, his world on an even keel.

Instead, he felt as if he were sitting on top of the San Andreas Fault, shaken up for all he was worth. And for what? Once this was over, once he won exclusive custody of her son for her, Lilli would be on her way again.

On her way and out of his life.

She'd done it once—there was no reason to believe she wouldn't do it again.

He told himself to remember that if he felt his “handsoff” resolve weakening anytime in the foreseeable future.

Chapter Five

Lilli saw that her mother's car was parked in the driveway when she pulled up to her house.

Given the hour, that meant that her mother had already picked Jonathan up from school and returned. It was amazing how easily all three of them had adjusted to this routine. Less than a month ago, she and Jonathan had been living near Santa Barbara, cocooned by the almost idyllic life there. Erik Dalton had been dead for four months and she was adjusting to the idea that she didn't have to worry about him suddenly turning up on her doorstep and for some twisted reason beyond comprehension, demanding access to his son.

Then Elizabeth Dalton had happened and everything she'd always feared came to fruition. Lilli had packed up, sold everything and come back to her hometown. She knew she couldn't hide, but she felt that she needed her mother's moral support in order to fend off the other woman.

She'd worried about Jonathan adjusting to being uprooted this way, but she realized now that she needn't have. Unlike his father, Jonathan was happy, easygoing and even-tempered, and she was immensely grateful for that.

The moment she put the key in the door, Jonathan came running.

"Hi, sweetheart." She greeted the light of her life with a fierce

hug. It was returned.

Someday, all too soon, that would change. Preteen boys didn't think it was cool to pal around with their mothers. But for now, she would enjoy his affection for all it was worth.

"Know where your grandmother is?" she asked him. He pointed toward the kitchen. "Thanks. As you were," she told him. This week, Jonathan was considering soldiering as a career choice, so she played along. Last week, he'd thought he might give ranching a try and she had gotten a book on the different breeds of horses for him. She was going to be a hands-on mother all the way, she thought, heading for the kitchen.

Maybe, if Erik's mother had been that way, he wouldn't have turned out to be so despicable. But then, she reminded herself, she wouldn't have Jonathan in her life.

Everything happens for a reason. Everything but losing Jonathan, she amended fiercely. *That* was never going to happen.

Her mother came out of the kitchen. "I thought I heard you."

"Hi, Mom. Do you think you can stay a little longer? I'm not in for the night yet," she told the older, petite woman as she headed for the room that she'd claimed as her office. It was still very much in a state of disarray, with boxes piled up in the corner.

She tried to remember which carton she'd packed the metal box in. It contained all their important documents. She'd done that so that if there was ever a natural disaster, all she had to do was grab one box—after she grabbed Jonathan.

Following her only child into the small room off the kitchen,

Anne McCall asked, “Did you see him?”

Lilli knew that the “him” her mother referred to was Kullen.

“Yes,” she answered, opening up the carton closest to her. “I saw him.” The metal box wasn’t in it. She shoved the carton aside.

“And?”

Lilli turned her attention to the next carton. She struck out again. “And he’s going to take the case.”

Anne shifted around so that she could see her daughter’s face. “And?”

Third time was the charm. With a triumphant sigh, Lilli removed the dark gray metal box from the last carton she’d opened. In the background, she heard the familiar, soothing theme song of one of Jonathan’s favorite afternoon programs, an imaginative show where a robot given to self-repairing took his viewers through the vivid pages of history.

As she opened the metal box, Lilli glanced at her mother.

“And?” she echoed, unclear as to what her mother was driving at. She took a guess. “And he told me he thinks we have a good chance to win even though the woman is—” she dropped her voice and came closer to her mother, not wanting to take a chance that Jonathan might overhear her “—the first known recorded case of a barracuda without fins.”

Despite the fact that the woman was making her life a living hell, Lilli was not about to bad-mouth Elizabeth—or the man who had, through no desire of his own, been his father. Jonathan deserved better than that. She wanted her son to grow up exposed

to as little hatred as was humanly possible. God knew there would be time enough for him to see what the world could be like when he became an adult.

Her mother continued to eye her. Lilli got the distinct impression that she was waiting for something more.

And then she asked, "Didn't you say that you once dated him?"

Caught completely off guard when her mother had produced Kullen's name out of the blue, saying that she had a referral from a reliable source that Kullen Manetti was an excellent lawyer, Lilli had been forced to explain why she'd appeared so stunned. She had fallen back on a half truth. She'd admitted that she'd known him in college and that they'd gone out a couple of times. She had deliberately avoided telling her mother that Kullen had proposed to her and that she'd left town right after that.

She had left not because she'd discovered that she was pregnant, but because she had been afraid that she would allow her fears to get the better of her and would say yes to Kullen. And then she would have had to tell him that the baby wasn't his. To have allowed him to think that he was the father would have been the very height of deception. She'd had no doubt that Kullen would have always wondered if she'd married him because she'd loved him, or as a matter of convenience. That would be no way to run a marriage.

So she'd left. Left without telling him anything because it was too hard to share the shame of what had happened. Or worse, for him to have insisted on going through with the wedding and

marrying her out of pity.

She knew logically that none of this had been her fault, but somehow, she still felt as if it was.

Until she held Jonathan in her arms.

The moment she looked down into his small, perfect little face, the love that welled up within her drove out everything—guilt, shame, anger. All that remained was love.

And that love was fiercely protective. No way in hell was she going to allow Elizabeth Dalton to get her grasping, perfectly manicured hands on Jonathan.

“Yes,” she admitted, “I did say that.” She was in no mood for a chorus of “Matchmaker, Matchmaker, Make Me A Match.” “Mother,” she said pointedly, “I’m up to my neck in the fight of my life. This is no time to play the dating game.”

Never one to push, Anne nodded. “I’m sorry, dear, you’re right. I was just looking for a way to divert you and alleviate your tension.”

Having retrieved Jonathan’s birth certificate, Lilli took out several other legal documents and began to feed them into the scanner. She wasn’t about to take a chance on losing anything.

“What would really alleviate my tension,” she told her mother, “is if that woman would disappear from the face of the earth.”

“You know,” Anne began thoughtfully, “my cousin Sal knows a few people who—”

Dear God, her mother wasn’t taking her seriously, was she? “Mother!” Lilli cried sharply.

“Just kidding,” Anne countered. “Sadly, the only people my cousin Sal knows are gambling addicts. They wouldn’t be any help in a situation like this.” She watched as Lilli scanned another document. In less than a minute, the printer spit out a perfect copy. “What is it you’re doing?” she asked.

“I told Kullen that I’d bring by these documents he wanted tonight.”

A note of concern entered Anne’s voice. “You’re going to his office at night?” While Bedford had been deemed one of the safest cities in the country with a population of over one hundred thousand for several years in a row now, Anne was never one to tempt fate.

Lilli briefly thought of just nodding and letting the matter go, allowing her mother to think that she was going back to meet with Kullen in his office. But that would be lying, if only by omission, and she didn’t believe in lying. The most she ever did was keep her own counsel, refraining from going into detail. Even her mother didn’t know the full story surrounding Jonathan’s conception. Mercifully, her mother respected her privacy. She couldn’t pay her back by letting her believe what wasn’t true.

“I’m bringing these over to his house.” Another sheet emerged from the printer and she added it to the others.

“Oh.”

Lilli’s head shot up. The two-letter word sounded far more pregnant than she had ever been. “Not *oh*, Mom. It’s just more convenient that way, that’s all.”

Anne nodded, a knowing smile curving her mouth. “Yes, I know.”

No, you don't. “Kullen needs to get up to speed as fast as possible.”

Anne seemed to struggle to keep the grin from taking over her entire face. “And can he? Get up to speed fast?”

All that was missing was a nudge-nudge, wink-wink comment. “Mother, if you're asking me if I ever slept with Kullen Manetti, no, I never slept with him.”

Anne held up her hands as if to innocently fend off another volley of words. “I didn't ask.”

“Not in so many words,” Lilli allowed, “but, yes, you did.”

Anne sighed, shaking her head. It was obvious her mother's heart literally *ached* to see her look so upset.

She sighed. “Too bad that you and Erik weren't able to work things out. Then, even though he died in that accident, maybe all this could have been avoided.”

She'd never told her mother the circumstances involved in her getting pregnant. The words rose up now, scratching her throat, trying to get free. But if her mother knew the truth, it would only cause her anguish. And although Lilli would feel better finally telling someone, finally getting it all out in the open, she couldn't do it at the price of wounding her mother.

So she kept her peace and nodded. “Yes, too bad. But all that's water under the bridge, as Grandma used to say. And who knows, Mrs. Dalton might have still wanted to fight me for Jonathan's

custody. She lost her only son and she seems to think that you can replace one person with another as long as the gene pool is basically the same.”

Slightly shorter than her daughter, Anne ran her hand over her daughter’s blond hair, an endless font of love evident in the simple gesture.

“Sure you don’t want me to go over there and have a talk with her?” she offered. “I’m more than willing to do it.”

Lilli laughed, shaking her head. “No thanks, Mom. One battle in court is about all I can handle at a time. There’s no telling what you might do. I saw you get angry once,” she recalled. “Not a pretty sight.”

“Offer’s on the table anytime you want to take me up on it, honey.”

Finished copying, Lilli filed the copies of the documents in a light blue folder. Leaving the folder on her desk, she rounded it and put her arms around her mother.

“Thanks, Mom, I’ll keep that in mind.” Lilli gave the older woman a quick, heartfelt hug. “You’re the best, Mom.”

“Glad you finally noticed that,” Anne said with just the right amount of dryness. “And don’t worry about hurrying back,” she said as Lilli turned toward the desk again and slipped the documents she’d just compiled into the recesses of her large black rectangular purse. The latter could have doubled as a briefcase and not a small one, either. “I was thinking about spending the night here anyway.” Her mother’s light blue eyes

seemed to dance as she told her, “I brought some of your old storybooks over to read to Jonathan.”

Lilli smiled warmly and predicted, “He’ll get a big kick out of that.”

“So will I,” Anne confessed. “When I’m not tearing up,” she added. She watched her daughter zip up the purse. “Got everything?” she pressed.

“Everything,” Lilli echoed, taking no offense at her mother double-checking her. She was only acting out of concern. Lilli hefted the purse and slid it onto her right shoulder.

“Then, good luck,” Anne said, following her to the front door.

Passing the family room, Lilli stopped for a moment, peering in. She wondered if it was normal to have her heart swell every time she looked at her son. “I’ve got to go out again, Jonathan. But I’ll be back soon.” She knew he liked her to touch base with him. “Don’t forget your homework.”

Jonathan pretended to hang his head, like a prisoner sentenced to twenty years hard labor. “I won’t forget, Mom.”

Lilli turned toward her mother. “And don’t you do it for him, either,” she warned.

Anne’s nearly unlined face was the picture of innocence. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

A small laugh escaped Lilli’s lips. “I don’t believe you.” Her mother was a pushover and they both knew it. Moreover, Jonathan knew it. But it was time to go. “I love you,” she called out to her son.

“Love you back,” Jonathan answered, his attention already back to the robot on the screen.

Who could ask for more than this? Lilli smiled as she went out the front door. Whatever it took, she would keep that boy in her life.

Rather than terminate early, court had taken longer than Kullen had counted on.

And then, leaving, he'd gotten tangled up in the traffic jam from hell. His temper, usually level, was definitely the worse for wear tonight.

He needed to unwind.

He didn't have the luxury.

Kullen had been in his house exactly three minutes when the doorbell rang. The kid from the pizzeria had to have made every single light, he thought.

He'd ordered takeout on his way home. The restaurant's number was one of the first on speed dial on both his cell phone and his landline at home. Convenience was a high priority for him, given his drive-by lifestyle.

Digging money out of his wallet, Kullen crossed back to the foyer. He threw open the front door, holding up two twenties.

“I thought I was supposed to pay you,” Lilli said drily. And then she made the only logical assumption from the look of surprise on his face. “You forgot I was coming by with the papers, didn't you?”

He hadn't forgotten. How could he? Lilli had been on his mind

all afternoon, creeping, entirely unbidden, into his thoughts. During the court case, images of Lilli, past and present, kept materializing in his mind's eye. Being on his game had been particularly difficult this afternoon.

"I ordered takeout," he told her. "I thought the delivery boy would be here before you."

"More restaurant food?" she asked as she entered. She made it personal before she could think not to. "Don't you ever have anything healthy to eat?"

"Pizza's healthy," he countered, arguing like a true lawyer. "It has all the major food groups," he said when she looked at him skeptically. "Cheese, tomatoes, meat, bread," he enumerated.

"And a ton of salt." And that negated anything good the pizza might have to bring to the table.

"That's what makes it edible."

For a moment, she was propelled back into the past. The past when she had finally succeeded in banking down her demons and had thought that maybe, just maybe, she would be able to find a little happiness with Kullen.

Before the roof caved in on her world and she discovered she was pregnant.

The next beat, the moment was gone.

"What do you have in your refrigerator?" she asked. Maybe she could come up with some kind of dinner for him. Almost anything was better than pizza, temptingly aromatic though it was.

“Shelves.”

It was hard not to laugh. “Anything on those shelves?”

He thought for a second, envisioning the inside of the refrigerator the last time he’d looked. “A couple of leftover takeout things that I’m debating donating to science.”

She grinned, oblivious to the fondness that had slipped into her voice. “You never learned how to cook, did you?”

There was nothing wrong with that. He knew lots of people who didn’t cook. That was why God had made restaurants.

“Never saw the purpose,” he told her. “Besides, most days I either order in or go out for lunch. Same applies to dinner.”

She shook her head. “It’s not healthy to live like that.” The doorbell rang and he went to answer it. “The people in Tibet don’t eat takeout and they live a very long life,” she said, refusing to let up, “subsisting on yogurt and vegetables.”

He laughed shortly. “It’s not a long life, it only *seems* like a long life because they can’t find a decent steak.”

This time, it was the delivery boy with his pizza. Kullen handed him the money, then took possession of the extra-large pizza. He turned around and closed the door with his back.

“I ordered pizza with everything,” he told her, carrying it back to the dining room on the other side of the family room. “You see something you don’t like, just take it off.”

She tried not to think what a loaded phrase that actually was. “What if I don’t like anything on it?” Lilli posed.

Kullen never missed a beat. “More for me.” He set the box

down on the dining room table. “But I seem to remember that pizza was your weakness.”

No, you were my weakness, she thought. But that Lilli had to disappear a long time ago.

Kullen opened the box and the aroma, already leaching out of the box by any means possible, now robustly filled the air, arousing her dormant taste buds.

“It does smell good,” she conceded.

“Help yourself,” he said, gesturing toward the oil-soaked box. “I’ll get the plates and napkins.”

“I’ll get them,” she offered. It was the least she could do. “Just tell me where the kitchen is.”

“You can’t miss it. It’s the only room with a refrigerator in it,” he deadpanned. And then, when she kept on looking at him, he pointed over to the area just beyond the living room.

“Wise guy.”

A sense of *déjà vu* washed over him as he watched Lilli disappear around the corner. It brought with it a host of warm, soft memories that in turn aroused feelings that had long since slipped into exile.

Don’t go there, don’t go there, he warned himself.

But he knew that was easier said than done. He’d already crossed the line once. And each time it would get easier.

And all the more difficult to come back.

Chapter Six

They were doing justice to the pizza. Kullen had a hunch that they would. It was almost like old times.

Almost.

It would be easy, so seductively easy, to let his guard drop. To allow that feeling to overtake him, the one that had whispered that this was like old times—the times when he had struggled so hard to create and win. And finally had.

He had fallen for her the very first moment he'd ever laid eyes on her. The first time he'd glimpsed her face with its regal, aristocratic lines and felt his stomach muscles tighten into a knot so hard, he could scarcely breathe. There was no question in his mind that Lilli McCall was easily the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen.

But back then, his “pre-shallow period” as Kate referred to it, it had taken more than just looks, no matter how incredible, to captivate him. What had drawn him in was the sadness in her eyes. It made him ache for her and want to erase her pain. He had launched a full-scale, albeit subtle campaign to get to know her, to get close to her, a feat his best friend at the time, Gil Davis, had warned him was doomed to failure. Gil had had his finger on the pulse of the campus social circles and he'd said that Lilli McCall was a loner, a serious, self-contained fortress. Word was that *no* one really got close to her.

It was a challenge Kullen couldn't refuse.

And the more he'd worked at getting closer, the more he'd found his own defenses going down. In the space of a few days Lilli had stopped being a challenge and had begun being someone he just wanted to help. Someone he was determined to get to trust him. They'd had several classes together and had been in the same study group. The latter had turned out to be his first triumph with her.

"C'mon," he'd urged her cheerfully and relentlessly. "Law school's tough. This is a communal effort to help us all survive. What one of us doesn't know, maybe someone else does. It's a give-and-take situation." It had been his eyes that had held her, he'd later discovered, not any physical touch of the hand, something that she'd avoided religiously then. "You can't deny us the benefit of your brain, can you?" he remembered coaxing.

When she'd finally, somewhat reluctantly agreed to study with him, he had wanted to shout his victory from the rooftops, but prudently refrained, pretending to take it all in stride.

That had been the real beginning. The beginning of what in time had turned out to be an all-too-short relationship that had, on the outside, held such promise.

He could still remember the first time he'd made her smile, the first time he'd heard the sound of her laughter.

And the first time she hadn't stiffened when he'd kissed her.

There was no way to measure the intensity of the feelings he'd had for her. Feelings he would have bet his life were returned. In

the short time they were together, he'd bared his soul to her and caught just the tiniest glimpses of hers. It had by no means been a balanced exchange, but that was okay. With Lilli things were different, all the rules were thrown out and new ones had taken their place. He was fine with taking the tiny, baby steps. As long as they eventually led to his goal.

He'd been so sure, so very sure that they would.

Which was why his entire world had fallen apart when she had disappeared from his life.

At first, he'd thought that Lilli had been kidnapped. He was incredibly, stupidly certain that the woman he loved above everything else on earth wouldn't have just taken off on him. Especially not after he'd proposed to her.

But she had.

Lilli had just disappeared, leaving a note on his desk. The note had fallen on the floor between the wastepaper basket and his desk. He hadn't found it until, lost in a frenzy of frustration and helpless anger, he'd kicked the wastepaper basket aside. Falling over, it had spilled its contents, but it was then that he'd seen the small white note card with two words in her handwriting. Two words that twisted a knife right into his chest.

"I'm sorry." That was all she'd written. Just, "I'm sorry." And that was supposed to explain her departure and compel him to go on living his life. A life that no longer contained her.

Sitting opposite Lilli now in his dining room, a room he rarely used except when he needed to spread out a massive collection of

legal papers, it all came back to him with the force of a detonating bomb. Everything he'd felt, everything he'd gone through with her and then, without her. The good, the bad and, finally, the anger. He'd been a fool because he'd loved her and would have done anything for her. She hadn't cared enough to explain things face-to-face.

But now, after all these years, he had his answer. He knew why she'd left.

Even so, he wanted to ask her why she'd tossed him aside like some kind of used tissue, without the courtesy of an explanation.

Without a chance to fight for her and prove he was the better man.

The words vibrated on his lips. But after all this time, he had his answer. It was cruelly obvious. Lilli had abandoned him for Erik Dalton, the only heir to an incredible fortune that he had done nothing to deserve. The rumor was that he had never been turned down, especially not by a woman. A morally bankrupt playboy who was the very poster child for the stereotypical rich kid with a heart of lead, Erik Dalton had gotten every woman he had ever set his sights on.

All he had to do was crook his finger and women fell from the sky, eager for his attention, eager to have some of his generosity touch their lives. He went through money as if it was of no consequence to him. There was always more.

Was that it? Kullen wondered now. Had Lilli been blinded and won over by the allure of materialistic goods? He'd always seen

her as pure and unfazed by material wealth. It was obvious now that he'd been blinded, too. Blinded by his feelings.

Had there been a price tag on her affections after all?

The Lilli McCall he'd loved so fiercely had been an honorable woman. But then, the Lilli he'd loved would have never abruptly left him with a marriage proposal still warm on his lips.

"Why are you fighting this?" he asked her quietly, without preamble.

Polishing off her third slice of pizza and finally feeling full, Lilli looked up at him sharply. The question had come out of the blue and she didn't know what he was referring to. The first thing that occurred to her by "this" was that the feelings were still there, carefully encased in Bubble Wrap and stored away. Feelings that belonged exclusively to him.

So Lilli waited for him to elaborate and prayed that she could answer him without raking over old scars.

"I could try to broker an arrangement between you and Elizabeth Dalton for joint custody. Lay down a few ground rules —"

Lilli continued staring at him, growing more stunned. Why was he saying this? Had that dreadful woman's lawyers gotten to him, bought him off? She hadn't thought that would be possible, but now she wasn't so sure.

Wasn't there anyplace left for her to turn to?

"No," Lilli said firmly before he could continue, then repeated the word in a louder voice. "No!"

“Heard you the first time,” Kullen assured her matter-of-factly. And he grew serious, leaning over the table. Leaning closer to her. His eyes pinned her down. “Now, tell me why.”

Her eyes darted along his face, as if trying to fathom the secret behind Kullen’s words. Finally, she asked, “Why what?”

“Why you’re so against this when obviously, at one point, you must have been all for it. To hitch your star to the Dalton fortune.” She opened her mouth to speak but he talked louder and faster. The cynicism was impossible to miss. “I mean, the lure of all that money, the comfort it could bring—hard to imagine turning your back on all that. It had to be a whole different world for you. For anyone. The kind of money the Daltons have is the stuff that fairy tales are made of.”

Oh, God.

She pressed her hand against her abdomen, certain she was going to be sick. “They got to you, didn’t they?”

Kullen’s dark blue eyes were cold. Flat. And accusing. “Not to me.”

There was an allegation in his voice, and it didn’t take much for her to get his drift. She began to protest. “But I don’t—”

He cut her short, not wanting her to lie. “Oh, come on, Lilli. I’m your lawyer. If I’m going to be of any use to you, you have to level with me,” he insisted sharply. Angrily. “Tell me everything.” His mouth curved cynically. “Why aren’t you still part of the Dalton’s happy little family?”

How could he say that to her? Did he think she was some kind

of gold digger? The one person, aside from her mother, who she thought knew her, accused her of being this awful person. It hurt more than she thought possible.

Lilli pushed her chair away from the table and stood up. She had to get out of here. “I’m sorry, coming to you was a mistake.” She picked up her manila envelope. He wouldn’t be needing them anymore. “This has been a waste of time for both of us—”

Kullen told himself that he should just let her walk out. It was in his best interest. Another man would have sat back and watched this little drama unfold, feeling a sense of vindication. Payback, as the old saying went, was a bitch. And she had earned her payback.

But he wasn’t another man. For better or for worse, he was who and what he was: The man who had once loved Lilli McCall with his entire heart and soul. Even now, he couldn’t avenge himself by leaving her to twist in the wind. She had come to him looking for help.

Kullen was on his feet, rounding the table and blocking her exit from the room. “I need the truth from you, Lilli. I need to know why someone like you would have gotten mixed up with someone like Erik Dalton in the first place. He had a reputation as the biggest womanizer around. I thought you were different—”

“I was,” she insisted. Which was why she was so haunted by what had happened. Why it had been so hard for her to get past it in the first place.

His eyes narrowed as he looked right into her. Aware that he

was still holding her in place, Kullen dropped his hands from her shoulders. “Convince me.”

For a long moment, she said nothing and he thought she would walk out after all. But then she sighed as she pressed her lips together. He wanted to shake her, to shout at her and demand to know why she’d slept with a man like Erik Dalton when he’d had to work so hard to get her to trust him. To get her *not* to freeze up when he touched her.

That look in her eyes was back. That look that echoed an unfathomable sadness.

Kullen wanted to hold her more than anything in the world. But he didn’t.

His hands remained at his sides. He waited for the explanation he felt he had coming to him.

There was a slight tremor in her voice as she said, “I suppose I have this coming.”

“We’ll talk about that later. Answer my question, Lilli.”

Every word ached. “I didn’t leave because I wanted to, Kullen.”

“Leave who?” he demanded. Was she talking about the father of her baby? Had he pushed her away when she told him she was pregnant? And why did that thought hold not the slightest bit of satisfaction for him? She’d left him and Erik had left her. That was supposed to be poetic justice. So why wasn’t it? “Leave Erik?”

She stared at him. “No, leave you.”

“Then why did you?”

“Because I had to.” Her voice throbbed with anguish. “I didn’t want to see your anger or your pity.” She pressed her lips together again, trying not to cry. “I couldn’t deal with that.”

“You’re going to have to be a little clearer than that, Lilli.” She looked as if she wanted to flee, he thought. He knew he couldn’t hold her against her will, but nonetheless, the idea was tempting. More than anything, he wanted her to make him understand why things had turned out the way they had.

Every word cost her. She didn’t want to look back into the past, into the abyss of mistakes that had been made. “I didn’t leave you because I was going to Erik. I left you *because* of Erik.”

“Clearer,” he instructed again, stone-faced.

The breath Lilli let out was shaky. “I was pregnant.”

Kullen’s expression hardened. Every time he thought of Lilli with that worthless bastard ... when their own relationship hadn’t gone beyond heated kisses, at her request, a request he’d respected

“We’ve already established that,” he said.

She didn’t know how to tell him. She’d blocked all thoughts, all memory of events for so long. “The day you asked me to marry you was the best and the worst day of my life.”

The word *worst* jumped up at him, lit in glaring neon lights. “Nice to know I’ve still got it,” he said sarcastically.

She pushed on, knowing that she had to make him understand. She was afraid that he would stand by his word and not help her

if she didn't tell him everything. But, oh, it was so hard.

"It was the best day because I found someone good, someone who could make me forget. Someone I loved." He looked at her sharply. She pushed on. "And the worst day because I found out I was pregnant."

As her words pierced his heart, he came to the only conclusion he could. "You mean you were seeing Erik Dalton while we—"

"No," she retorted. "Erik *happened* before I met you and there was no 'seeing' involved, no dating, if that's what you mean."

Lilli stopped, momentarily too emotional to continue because she was reliving the horrible incident that had all but destroyed her life and turned her entire world upside down.

She looked as if she was going to bolt.

Not until you finish telling me. Kullen gently put his hands on her shoulders. He could literally *feel* her anguish, could sense her being torn between telling him and keeping silent.

"Tell me," he urged quietly.

The war within her was reflected in her eyes. And then, she squared her shoulders, as if she were about to go into battle.

When she finally spoke, her voice was firm, quiet. Almost oddly removed.

"My first year in law school, I forced myself to accept an invitation to a frat party. I was so terribly shy and I knew I had to make an effort to get out of my shell." A sad smile played along her lips. "I mean, who wants a painfully shy lawyer, right? There were a lot of people at the party...." Her voice trailed off.

“Including Erik?” he prodded.

She nodded. “Erik was there. He seemed nice, attentive.” Every word took effort to say. “Almost sweet.” A rueful sound accompanied the description. “Somewhere in the middle of the evening, he suggested that we go somewhere more private, get a ‘real’ drink.” She stopped.

“And you went with him?” He’d always pictured her being innocent, but never naive.

Lilli raised her chin defiantly. “No, I didn’t. I told him I had to get back home because I had a paper I needed to finish for Monday. He told me he could get a paper on any topic under the sun, and that shouldn’t interrupt the good time we were having.”

She shrugged helplessly, wishing she could change the rest of the narrative. Wishing that it had never happened. But that would mean she’d have to wish away Jonathan and she could never do that.

“I told him I wouldn’t feel right about that. That I needed to earn my grade. He laughed and said I was a rare person. I left the party and went home. None of the other girls I lived with were there.” She paused for a moment, taking a shaky breath. “He followed me. When the doorbell rang, I thought one of my roommates had forgotten her key. But it was Erik. He pushed his way in....” Her voice broke.

The horror of the situation suddenly hit Kullen with the force of an anvil dropping on his head. He called himself seven kinds of a jackass. Here he’d been feeling sorry for himself for loving

her, and all along she'd been a victim.

"He raped you?" Kullen asked, struggling to contain his outrage.

She drew her lips together in a thin line, then nodded.

He stared at her, stunned. "Why didn't you report him to the police?"

"Because I was ashamed." It was so hard not to cry. Talking had sharpened all the edges of the incident. She could feel them all pricking her flesh again. "It would have been just my word against his. People saw him at the party talking to me. Walking me out to my car. They'd think that the sex was consensual and that I cried rape after the fact because he wouldn't allow himself to be blackmailed."

It seemed too fantastic for words, but Kullen was acutely aware of the dead man's reputation. "Is that what he said?"

She nodded, avoiding his eyes. "He told me it was my fault. That I'd asked for it and that I couldn't expect a guy to shut down after I 'got his engine going.'" She drew in another shaky breath. "All I wanted to do was forget that it ever happened." She smiled at Kullen and it all but broke his heart. "You almost made me forget. And then I found out I was pregnant—"

"Why didn't you tell me?" He would have taken care of her—after he'd beaten that scum to a pulp.

"Because I didn't want you to look at me with disgust, or pity—"

"So letting me think that something was wrong, that you'd

rather run away and disappear than marry me, was better?" he demanded. She made no answer. "Didn't you know me any better than that?"

She wasn't going to cry. *Please, God, don't let me cry.* "At that point, I didn't know anything except that what I had once hoped for was now completely out of reach. I had a child on the way. A child I didn't want."

"There were options," he told her quietly. Not options that he would have chosen for her, but they were hers to reject, not his.

She shook her head. "Not for me."

"Then adoption," he suggested.

Lilli shook her head. "My mistake, my burden," she said firmly.

Her reasoning frustrated him. His anger against the dead man bubbled up within him and he had nowhere to vent it. His temper flared and it was a struggle to keep it under wraps. "He raped you, you didn't rape him. How the hell was any of this your mistake?" he asked.

She'd told him what he needed to know. She didn't want to talk about it anymore.

She waved away his question. "That's all in the past. And in one of those ironic twists of fate, Jonathan is the best thing that ever happened to me." Pausing, she looked at him, then softly amended, "Well, one of the best."

She could sense that he wanted to ask more questions. Lilli looked down at her hands. She'd just stripped herself naked and

felt utterly vulnerable.

“Satisfied?” she asked in a whisper.

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