



*Catching  
Heat*

ALISON PACKARD

Catching Heat  
By Alison Packard

Life has taught Angie DeMarco that all baseball players are womanizers, and her incredible one-night stand with sexy San Francisco Blaze back-up catcher J.T. Sawyer seemed to prove it. Determined not to give in to their sizzling chemistry a second time, she's kept her distance ever since, focusing on her accounting job with the team. But now she's laid off...and pregnant.

J.T. was hurt by Angie's rejection, but with one more year with the Blaze, he has no time for love. He needs to spend the off season training hard so he can negotiate a better contract with a new team at the end of the year. But when Angie shows up on his doorstep, he's overwhelmed by wanting to not just do right by her but pursue a relationship with her. Hoping for a second chance, he proposes.

Angie agrees to marry J.T. on one condition: the marriage will be purely a business arrangement. But as Angie spends time with him and his family, and J.T. neglects his training to spend time with her, what begins as a union in name only slowly grows into something more—something that looks a whole lot like love and friendship.

For more stories about the San Francisco Blaze, check out [The Winning Season!](#)

87,000 words

Dear Reader,

My vow to you is to not mention the holiday that starts with a V in this letter for the February releases. If you're like me, you're probably on holiday overload after all of the winter festivities, and you wish you could just blank out all of those advertisements for diamonds and chocolates and fancy dinners. Of course, if someone wanted to buy us any of that, that would be okay...

Instead, let me tell you about the sometimes-romantic and sometimes-not lineup of books we have for you this month! Fans of Alison Packard's *The Winning Season* will be glad to know that JT and Angie's story releases this month. Look for sparks to fly in *Catching Heat*. Author Christi Barth finishes up her *Aisle Bound* series with *A Matchless Romance*. You won't want to miss this playful story about a sexy gamer who just needs a beautiful Chicago matchmaker to help him see how hot he really is.

Also in the contemporary romance category is *Party Girl* by Tamara Morgan, following up her well-reviewed romance *The Derby Girl*. When a good-time party girl meets a backwoods hermit, the only thing bigger than their differences is their attraction. Fan favorite Inez Kelley joins the contemporary romance offerings this month with smoking-hot lumberman Jonah Alcott, who wants to do more than fight with gorgeous mountain activist Zury Castellano in *The Place I Belong*.

Lynda Aicher brings her trademark sizzle to a new erotic romance story in her *Wicked Play* series. In her first male/male romance, *Bonds of Denial*, security nerd Rockford Fielding finally finds a man worth coming out of the closet for, but Carter Montgomery has to move past his own insecurities before they can claim a future they both thought was impossible.

Opium addict and Victorian bounty hunter Cherry St. Croix is back again in Karina Cooper's *Tempered*. Dragged to a neglected estate and forced to dry out, Cherry tries on the role of helpless Gothic heroine—and tumbles headlong into danger when she takes to meddling in her family's alchemical history instead.

Returning to Carina Press with a new series is Eleri Stone with the first book in her new paranormal romance series. In *Reaper's Touch*, Jake and Abby work together to find a cure for the infection that turns men into flesh-eating monsters. We're also welcoming back Jody Wallace with her newest paranormal romance, *Witch Interrupted*. Wolf shifters heal from tattoos as if they were never inked, so why is the same sexy wolf back in Katie's tattoo parlor for more? And last but not least in the paranormal romance category, we're also pleased to bring back Victoria Davies and her newest novella *Demon by My Side*. When a tempting demon prince crashes into her life, a demon hunter struggles to figure out who she can trust and one wrong move will cost her not only her heart but the safety of the human world as well.

Concluding her wonderful epic fantasy series, Shawna Thomas wraps up with *Journey of the Wanderer* in which to save Anatar once and for all, Ilythra must risk everything she loves.

But with every ending there's a new beginning, and we're happy to welcome male/male romance author A.M. Arthur to the Carina Press team. A reformed troublemaker meets his match in an inexperienced bookworm when what was supposed to be a casual relationship starts to look a lot like love in *No Such Thing*.

And we're happy to introduce debut author Holly West. Holly delivers a fascinating, well-plotted historical mystery, the first in a new series. In *Mistress of Fortune*, Isabel Wilde, a mistress to King Charles II who secretly makes her living as a fortune-teller, is threatened when one of her customers is murdered after revealing a conspiracy to kill the king and the diary of her illicit activities as a soothsayer goes missing, a page of which turns up in the dead man's pocket.

Coming in March: look for the newest installment in Marie Force's *Fatal* series!

Here's wishing you a wonderful month of books you love, remember and recommend.

Happy reading!

~Angela James  
Editorial Director, Carina Press

# Catching Heat

Alison Packard



# **Dedication**

For Johanna Packard. Thank you for always believing in me.

## Acknowledgments

This book wouldn't be possible without the wonderful and supportive people I'm lucky enough to call friends.

First, I must thank Jodi Henley for, not only her guidance on this book, but for always being willing to talk about plot, core events, the transformational arc and all things writing. Whoever said that romance writers are the most supportive and generous people in the writing community is right. Jodi is a shining example of that.

The following people, at one time or another, provided a sounding board for this book and I thank them from the bottom of my heart: Chrissie Humphrey, Jennifer Vincent, Angie Shiroff, Jessica Cline, Lulu Alvarez and Suzanne Balistreri. Thank you all for your thoughts and suggestions.

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## Chapter One

Angie DeMarco closed the folder her boss had given her just a few short hours ago and pressed her fingers to her temples. A futile gesture—the pressure did nothing to dull the persistent throbbing in her head. Lack of sleep, and the realization that in two weeks' time she would be unemployed had given her a monstrous headache. And what was worse, she wasn't sure if the churning in the pit of her stomach was due to the stress of being laid off, or because a certain monthly visitor was several weeks late.

Grandma Sophia—God rest her soul—always used to say that bad things came in threes. Like the time Angie chipped her front tooth on a frozen Snickers bar, developed a skin rash and then discovered that Livvie, her little sister, had spilled grape juice on her prom dress—all on the day of the prom. Angie had been crying her eyes out when her grandmother spouted that pearl of wisdom. But Grandma Sophia hadn't been trying to make her feel worse, just better, because the three bad things had already happened.

The thing about her grandmother, and one of the reasons why Angie missed her so much, was there were never any judgments. She could tell Grandma Sophia anything. Things she couldn't tell her mother. God, how she wished her beloved grandmother were still alive. Right now, corny clichés and a soft shoulder to cry on were exactly what she needed.

The doorbell rang, and for about three seconds she considered pretending she wasn't home. But Mrs. Tenney, who lived in the apartment above hers, sometimes came down for a cup of tea and a chat, and since the elderly woman lived alone and didn't have a lot of visitors, Angie didn't have the heart to ignore her. Rising from the kitchen table, she tucked the folder in a drawer, then headed for the living room.

Opening the door, she was surprised to find that instead of Mrs. Tenney, it was her best friend and soon to be ex-coworker, Kelly Maxwell, who stood on her doorstep. And judging by the concerned expression on Kelly's heart-shaped face, it was obvious she'd heard that, despite their recent World Series win, the San Francisco Blaze had laid off four front office employees. Grandma Sophia was right about one thing. Bad news really did travel fast.

"I talked to Katherine. She said she saw you leave early," Kelly said, referring to her boss. "Why didn't you call me?"

"Because you're getting ready to go on vacation and I didn't want to spoil it," Angie replied as Kelly moved forward to envelop her in a sympathetic hug.

"How are you doing?" Kelly asked, grimacing as she pulled back. "Stupid question. I'm sorry."

"No. It's okay." Angie closed the door and walked with Kelly into the living room where she'd tied back the gauzy white curtains to let the early afternoon sun fill the room with natural light. Not surprisingly, the sunny fall day hadn't been able to brighten her mood. "I'm still a bit numb, to tell you the truth," she said as she followed Kelly to the couch.

"They really kept a lid on this one. I was shocked when I heard the news." Kelly dropped her purse on the floor as they both sat down. "I usually hear all the rumors, but there was nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"I suspected something was up because the department heads were acting weird all week. I just didn't think it would be something like this." Angie reached for an elastic band on a small round table next to the couch and quickly gathered her thick hair into a ponytail. Her blasted mass of hair had been driving her crazy all morning. Why couldn't she have been born with straight, easy to manage

hair like Kelly? “This is the last thing I need, especially now.”

“What do you mean? Especially now.”

Angie hesitated and gnawed on her bottom lip. “I—I think I might be pregnant.”

Wow. Saying it aloud was easier than she’d thought, but only because it was Kelly. Angie didn’t even want to think about telling her mother her suspicions.

“Pregnant?” Kelly’s amber colored eyes widened with surprise. “Oh. Good God. Please do not tell me it’s Scott’s baby. That man should never be allowed to procreate. I don’t know why you agreed to marry him.”

The look of horror on her friend’s face almost made Angie chuckle. It was exactly the reaction she’d expected from Kelly, who’d loathed Scott from the moment she’d met him and had never made a secret of it.

“You’ll be delighted to know that we broke up. And it’s not his baby. Scott and I never slept together. He doesn’t believe in sex before marriage.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me,” Kelly said with a wry grimace. “Can I tell you how thrilled I am you came to your senses? I was afraid I was going to have to do something insanely drastic—like interrupt the ceremony.” Kelly kicked off her heels and stretched her long legs out in front of her. The nondescript dress black pants and blazer she wore were her standard workday attire and indicated she’d come straight from the ballpark. “So spill it, woman.” Kelly lifted one dark brow. “If you are pregnant, who’s the daddy?”

“Take a guess,” Angie said as she shifted sideways to tuck her feet under her legs. “It shouldn’t be too hard to figure out. If I am pregnant, I’d be about thirteen weeks along.”

“Hmmm.” Kelly looked up at the ceiling and squinted. “Let’s see, thirteen weeks ago would have been around the first of August.” Seconds later, she gasped, whipped her head around and pointed a finger at Angie. “I knew it. Something did happen between you and J.T. the night of our softball game.”

“Give the woman a prize.” She couldn’t help but smile at Kelly’s triumphant expression.

“You slept with him.”

Angie rolled her eyes. “Obviously.”

Kelly laughed. “It wasn’t a question. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Matt?” Angie shot back. “I didn’t know you two were dating until he pulled you up on top of the dugout and kissed you in front of a million people.”

“Because I wasn’t sure how Matt felt, or if what we had was more than just sex.”

“Well, I did know that it was just about sex between me and J.T. And I wasn’t proud that I’d slept with him while I was seeing Scott. After it happened I just wanted to forget about it.”

Kelly pinned her with a perceptive stare. “Have you?”

“No,” Angie whispered.

“Have you told J.T.?”

“I have to make sure first, so I called my OBGYN’s office first thing this morning. They said they had a cancellation so I was able to get an appointment for later this afternoon.” Angie sighed. “Maybe the home pregnancy test is wrong.”

Kelly gave her a doubtful look. “I’ve heard those things are pretty accurate.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

\* \* \*

“Congratulations.” Angie’s doctor looked up from the paperwork on her desk. “You’re pregnant.”  
As silence pervaded the consult room, bile inched its way up Angie’s throat. “How far along am I?”

The question was moot—she knew exactly how far along she was. Memories of that particular evening were imprinted on her brain like a tattoo. And now—there was no chance in hell she’d ever forget it.

“Thirteen weeks.” Dr. Manning smiled as if she actually believed she was delivering joyous news. Angie kept her hand on her stomach. Funny, it was still flat. That seemed odd. There was a baby in there. How could it still be flat?

Dr. Manning’s smile faded. “By your reaction, I assume this isn’t good news.”

That was an understatement. “It’s unexpected,” Angie said after clearing her throat. “Very unexpected.”

Dr. Manning rested her arms on her desk and leaned forward, composed and professional. Of course Dr. Manning was composed, she wasn’t pregnant. “Would you like to discuss your options?”

“Options?” Angie tilted her head and frowned. Several strands of her unruly hair fell forward. Annoyed, she brushed it back over her shoulder. “What options?”

“There’s adoption and—”

“You don’t need to go on.” Angie raised her hand. “I’m having this baby.”

“I understand.” Dr. Manning nodded. “Then why don’t we discuss your prenatal care?”

Now there was a question you didn’t hear every day.

\* \* \*

After leaving the doctor’s office, Angie shoved the pamphlets and other reading material she’d been given into her purse and headed for her car. Once inside and buckled in, she stared out the windshield to the busy street beyond and tried not to panic. Too late. She’d left panic in the dust and was headed straight for terrified out of her mind.

Damn it, I should have figured it out long before now. The signs were all there. Her periods had always been erratic so she hadn’t put too much stock in that, but the extreme tiredness she’d experienced for the past few weeks had been unusual and should have clued her in. But it wasn’t until the horrible nausea started and her breasts had become swollen and tender that she’d begun to suspect she was pregnant. The home pregnancy test had confirmed it, but she still couldn’t believe it—she didn’t want to believe it.

And now there was no doubt—she was having a baby.

The jarring sound of a car horn jerked her out of her stupor and, dazed, she stared at her hands, gripped much too tightly on the steering wheel.

Just three weeks ago, a small diamond ring had adorned her left ring finger. Now she could only breathe a sigh of relief that she’d come to her senses and broken off her engagement. Accepting Scott’s proposal had been a knee-jerk reaction, and one she’d regretted immediately. But in her own odd way she’d cared for Scott and couldn’t—in good conscience—marry him when all he could ever be was a safe choice. And now that there was a baby involved, she was even surer she’d done the right thing. With a shaky hand, she inserted the key into the ignition and started the car. There was nowhere to go but home.

Unmarried, unemployed and pregnant. Grandma Sophia was right, bad things really did come in threes.

J.T. Sawyer had just taped the bottom of a cardboard box when his doorbell rang. Moving from the kitchen in the condo he'd called home all season, he dodged a couple of boxes in the living room and opened the door.

"You're still here?" he asked with surprise when he saw Matt Scanlon standing in the hallway. "I thought you'd be in Santa Monica by now."

"We're leaving tomorrow morning," Matt said, entering after J.T. motioned him inside with a nod of his head. "Kelly's off next week."

J.T. closed the door. "You want a beer?" he asked as Matt followed him to the kitchen. J.T. opened the refrigerator, took out two beers and handed one to his friend. "So what's the deal?" He twisted off the bottle cap and dropped it on the countertop. "Are you coming back next season, or what?"

Matt cocked his head and shot him a sly grin. The question was one that had been asked repeatedly ever since Rick Taylor had announced—after the tragic death of his wife—that he was giving up baseball for good. "My agent's working on the particulars of the contract right now, but between you and me, yes, I'll be back."

J.T. wasn't proud of the frustration that threatened to consume him. He liked Matt. They'd become friends when Matt had joined the team in mid-July after Taylor had been injured. But with Matt returning to the Blaze next season, J.T. would be in the same damn position he'd been in since he got to San Francisco—back-up catcher with nominal playing time. It sucked.

J.T. tamped down his frustration, then took a long pull of his beer. "That's...great."

Matt opened his own bottle. "You going home?"

"Yep." J.T. moved past Matt, out of the kitchen to the living room and stood in front of the big picture window that afforded him a spectacular view of Blaze Field. "Unlike you, I don't have anything to keep me here during the off season." He stared at the ballpark and when the image of a woman with spirals of dark hair and sparkling blue eyes filled his head, he shook it off. He turned to find Matt watching him with a speculative gaze. "What are your plans for the next couple of months?"

"Lots of surfing." Matt eased back against the counter and took a swig of beer. "What about you?"

J.T. pointed his bottle at Matt. "I'm taking your advice."

"What advice was that?"

"You said to train like a maniac and that's exactly what I'm gonna to do."

"You gunning for my job?"

"My contract ends next year. Someone's gonna need a catcher. I want to be the guy they want. It's got nothing to do with you."

Matt regarded him thoughtfully and then nodded. "If you need help, let me know."

"I will," J.T. said, not expecting anything less from Matt. The guy had joined the team with a ton of baggage, but all that was history now. Everyone on the Blaze had seen what Matt was made of when he led the team to its first World Series. The former Dodger had become a god in San Francisco and as far as J.T. was concerned, Matt deserved it. That's why he couldn't be jealous. Matt Scanlon was one of the best players the league had ever seen.

"Kelly and I are having dinner at Kamu's tonight. Want to join us?" Matt asked.

J.T. polished off his beer and wondered if Kelly was inviting Angie DeMarco to dinner as well. The two women were best friends so it wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

He hated that a tiny part of him hoped she would be there, that he might see her one last time

before he left for Sacramento. How fucked up was that? He must have been insane to think their one night together meant a damn thing to her. They hadn't done much talking that night, and the next morning when he awoke she was long gone. And to further chap his hide, she'd avoided him like the plague ever since.

On second thought, he hoped she didn't join them for dinner tonight, or any other night. The best thing for all concerned was for him to never see her beautiful face ever again.

"Sure. I'm leaving on Sunday so I probably won't see either of you for a while." J.T. forced a smile. "Hey, did you know that footage of you and Kelly kissing on top of the dugout has gone viral?"

Matt finished his beer and set it on the counter. "Kelly mentioned it."

"There's like a million hits on it. And not one of us suspected you guys had a thing going on. Shit, we all thought you two couldn't stand each other."

"Things change." Matt pushed off the counter and flashed him a grin.

"The only thing changing for me is I'll be working my ass off." J.T. followed Matt to the door. "Nothing and no one is going to break my concentration. This winter is all about taking it to the next level."

Matt opened the door. "If it means anything," he said before moving into the hallway. "I think you've got what it takes to get there."

It meant a lot. "Thanks," J.T. said, and gave Matt a friendly slap on the shoulder. "I appreciate that."

"See you at six," Matt said, and then strode down the hall toward the elevator.

\* \* \*

Just after nine, J.T. left Matt and Kelly at Kamu's and headed back to his condo. Across the street, Blaze Field was dark, but the Blaze apparel and memorabilia shop outside the stadium was open and doing brisk business. He wasn't surprised at the turnout, the fans were still reveling in the team's World Series win—buying up anything that had World Series Champs emblazoned on it.

Although he'd reached the pinnacle of his sport, the victory was bittersweet. His playing time had been minimal and his only significant contribution had been a double in game six—the game that had clinched the Series. That double had scored the go-ahead run and for a few exhilarating hours he'd felt like he'd made a difference. Damn it. He wanted to feel that way all the time. More than anything he wanted to move beyond being a back-up to guys like Rick Taylor and Matt. The problem was, he'd mistakenly assumed his natural talent would be all he needed. Not true. Matt had opened his eyes to that.

After entering the lobby of his building, J.T. rode the elevator up to his floor. Although the condo was nice, he wouldn't miss it. His house in Sacramento was a lot more spacious and had a big backyard, complete with a pool and hot tub. His older brother, Jake, owned a gym and had agreed to train him during the off season. Jake assured him he would put him through his paces and knowing his brother, there would be torture involved. That tub would come in handy to soak his sore muscles.

The moment he stepped out of the elevator he saw her. A flood of hot, rough sensations slid down his spine as she turned and those mesmerizing eyes of hers locked with his. His breath caught in his throat and he silently cursed himself for still being affected by her. It had been that way since the first moment he'd laid eyes on her and from the telltale thundering of his heart, not much had changed.

Quickly gathering his scattered wits, he strode toward the woman who, for the past couple of months, had been extremely successful at avoiding him—the woman who had shared his bed for one

extraordinary night and was gone before sunrise.

Angie DeMarco.

J.T. wasn't sure why she was standing at his door and didn't speculate on the reasons as he approached her. Her arms were crossed over her chest, obstructing his view of the ring he still hadn't seen but knew she'd started wearing a few weeks after their night together. His gut tightened. He shouldn't care that she was engaged—they barely knew each other. It hit him then that he didn't know much about her, yet he was intimately acquainted with almost every inch of her slender yet curvy body.

Halting in front of her, he didn't say a word. Instead he let his gaze wander over her face. Her skin was porcelain smooth, her cheekbones high, and her mouth, with its slight upward tilt at the corners only hinted at the beautiful smile he'd coaxed out of her that night so many weeks ago. Her dark hair spilled around her shoulders in wavy corkscrew spirals that almost begged to be touched. It was soft. It ticked him off that he remembered not only that, but every single thing about the night they'd spent together.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, more harshly than he'd intended. A twinge of guilt hit him but he quickly got over it. They'd had a one night stand—end of story.

Angie loosened her arms from over her chest to push her hair back. Something she did quite frequently. “I—I need to talk to you.” She paused, bit her lower lip and continued, “It's important. May I come inside? I don't want to talk about it in the hall.”

“Why not?” He fished for his keys in the pocket of his jeans. “This should be interesting,” he muttered as he unlocked the door and hit the light switch by the door as he moved inside. “Sorry about the mess. I'm packing up to head home.” He waved a hand toward the boxes still strewn around the room. Some of them were packed and taped up, but a few were still waiting to be filled.

“When are you leaving?”

“Sunday morning.” He closed the door to find Angie standing with her back to him, surveying the disaster that was his living room. It was the perfect opportunity to check out her ass, showcased to perfection in the snug black pants she wore. When she turned, he forced his gaze upward to meet hers. She had the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen—a startling blue that reminded him of the aquamarine gemstones that glittered in the necklace his mother wore on special occasions.

“Sacramento, right?” Angie fidgeted with the strap of her purse on her shoulder, then clasped her hands together in front of her. She seemed nervous. Why?

“Yes.” J.T. set his keys on the table next to the entry. “So why are you here?”

“Now that I'm here, I'm not quite sure how to say it.” She paused and took a deep breath before exhaling. Her face had turned pale and there were dark shadows underneath her eyes. Whatever she had to say seemed to be weighing heavily on her. But what could it be? Was she sorry for avoiding him for weeks? Was she sorry she'd gotten engaged?

Angie let out another breath. “I'm pregnant.”

## Chapter Two

As the seconds ticked by at an alarmingly slow rate, Angie waited for J.T. to say something. Anything. But he didn't say a word—he just stared at her with eyes that were hard and inscrutable.

Maybe it was time to admit this was one heck of a bad idea. Ever since leaving Dr. Manning's office, she'd been struggling with whether or not she should tell J.T. he was going to be a father. Then, when she'd finally decided he had a right to know, she wasn't at all sure how to go about it. A letter seemed too impersonal. A phone call might have worked but she didn't have his phone number. The only avenue left to her was to tell him in person, and since she knew exactly where he lived she couldn't think of one valid excuse not to get it over with.

After sitting in a nearby cafe for a few hours she'd finally gotten the courage to face him. Unfortunately, that courage had quickly evaporated when she'd reached his door. Like a pansy-ass wimp, she'd been about to leave when he emerged from the elevator. At that point there was no place to hide. She had to talk to him.

Easier said than done. The entire time she'd been nursing her herbal tea she'd been rehearsing what she would say. But when it came right down to it, all of those carefully chosen words had flown right out of her head when he was standing in front of her looking every bit as hot and sexy as she remembered. Damn it all. She hated how just looking at him caused her heart to turn over and her pulse to flutter. His hair, the color of golden wheat, curled around his collar, slightly disheveled, and definitely sexy. His eyes were hazel and their shape reminded her of a jungle cat, slightly exotic. His face was angular, his nose aquiline and his lips were the sexiest she'd ever seen on a man. And to make matters worse, his body was just as impressive as his face.

Standing before such blasted perfection, she'd been so unnerved that she'd just blurted out the bad news, with no preamble or introductory remarks to soften the blow or lessen the shock. It was out there now and there was no taking it back.

"Congratulations." J.T.'s tone was terse and his eyes still hard.

Angie's jaw dropped. "Congratulations? Is that all you have to say?"

"What do you want me to say?" he snapped. "That I'm happy for you and your fiancé? That I hope you'll be one great big happy family? Why the hell are you even telling me this anyway? You made it crystal clear you didn't want a damn thing to do with me."

This was so not going the way she'd expected. But it did make sense that J.T. would think the baby was Scott's. Anyone would make that assumption. Just as they would assume she'd been having sex with the man she was supposed to marry. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"It's not Scott's baby." She gripped the strap of her purse and squared her shoulders. "It's yours."

J.T.'s eyes widened as he shook his head. "We spent one night together, Angie."

Once was all it took. That's what her grandmother used to say anyway. "We didn't use protection."

"And let me guess." He smirked. "You always use a rubber with your fiancé?"

"No."

"Then how can you be sure the baby is mine?"

"Because Scott and I have never slept together," Angie admitted, and at J.T.'s puzzled expression she added, "He doesn't believe in sex before marriage."

J.T. snorted. "Are you serious?"

"That's how he was raised. We were waiting until the honeymoon."

“Waiting until the...” He broke off, his expression incredulous. “And you were okay with that?”

She might not have been if she’d wanted to have sex with her fiancé. But she hadn’t been marrying Scott for sex, or even for love. Her reasons had been a lot more complicated. “I respected his religious beliefs.”

“Oh, now I get it. You fucked me because you weren’t getting any from him.”

“That’s not how it was.” Angie’s voice rose. “I didn’t plan on having sex with you that night. It... it just happened.”

“It didn’t just happen. You made a conscious choice to come back here with me.”

“I wish you and Matt had never come to the game that night.” She put her hand to her stomach as it roiled with queasiness. Her nausea wasn’t always confined to the a.m. And when she felt sick, she got a little testy. Make that a lot testy. “This is your fault.”

“My fault? How do you figure that?” J.T. asked her with a stony gaze. “I didn’t force you into anything. You wanted me just as much as I wanted you.”

Suddenly, a familiar feeling threatened to overtake her, and if the past few days were any indicator she only had seconds to spare. With a strangled sound, she clapped her hand to her mouth, brushed past a surprised J.T. and rushed to the bathroom. She careened inside—thankful she’d remembered where it was—and made it to the toilet bowl just in time. When the awful retching was finally over, she flushed the toilet and went to the sink to rinse her mouth out.

When she returned to the living room, J.T. had moved from the living room into the adjacent kitchen.

“Would you like some water?” He turned from the refrigerator and held up a bottle. His expression had softened, or perhaps it was relief that she hadn’t tossed her cookies on his hardwood floor.

“Yes. Thank you.” She moved into the small but well-appointed kitchen, set her purse on the counter and took the bottle from his outstretched hand. She tried not to notice his tanned forearm, or his long tapered fingers. Just like she’d tried not to notice the way his faded jeans hugged his powerful thighs or the subtle scent of soap and man. It wasn’t working. She was aware of everything about him.

“Are you all right?” He scanned her face with concern. “You don’t look good.”

“Morning sickness. Only it seems to strike at any time of the day and night.” She twisted the cap from the bottle and took a long drink as J.T. put some space between them and leaned on the opposite counter near the sink. Thank God—his masculine presence was playing havoc with her senses. Just being in the same room with him reminded her of the night they’d spent together, right here in this condo.

Why had she come back here with him that night? None of this would be happening if she hadn’t lowered her guard and allowed her damn attraction to him overcome all reasoning.

“How long have you known?” He braced his palms against the smooth granite, looking a bit shell-shocked.

Welcome to the club.

“I suspected last week but I got the official confirmation from my doctor this afternoon.”

“How did...” J.T. squinted. “What’s your fiancé’s name again? Steve?”

“Scott.” Angie took another sip of water, grateful the nausea had passed.

“Right. How’d he take the news?”

Angie flushed under his direct gaze. “We broke up a few weeks ago.”

A flicker of some indefinable emotion briefly lit J.T.’s eyes before he scrubbed a hand over his



jaw. “So what do we do next?”

“Nothing. I just thought you had a right to know you’re going to be a father.”

“Would you object to a paternity test?” he asked, after a slight hesitation.

Angie stiffened. “Are you suggesting I would lie about something like this?” Her blood began to boil as he remained silent. “How dare you. I don’t want a thing from you. I’m going to have this baby, and I’m going to raise it myself. If you want to be a part of its life then we’ll work something out later.” She slammed the bottle on the counter and glared at him. “And since you seem to think I’m a liar, we can do a paternity test just as soon as my doctor says it’s safe.”

“I wasn’t calling you a liar.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s just that a lot of professional athletes are preyed upon by women who are hot after their money.”

“Well, maybe if you jocks learned to keep it in your pants, or use a condom, you wouldn’t have that problem.”

“I don’t recall you being too concerned about a condom,” J.T. shot back. “Either time.” A wicked smile curved his lips. Angie’s cheeks burned. Damn him for reminding her they’d had sex more than once that night.

“Then both of us were stupid.” She reached for her purse. “I should go. It’s getting late.”

“How can I reach you?” J.T. asked, following her to the door. “There’s still a lot to discuss.”

“Like what?” Angie opened the door and turned to meet his gaze. “We barely know each other. Just because I’m having your baby doesn’t change that fact.”

“Still, I think I should get your phone number.” He pulled his cell phone from his back pocket. “You can’t just come in here, drop this bomb on me and then leave without a way for me to contact you.”

He was right. But in her defense, she hadn’t thought much about what would happen after she’d told him about the baby.

“Fine.” She rattled off her phone number and he entered it into his phone. After a glance around the room, which was strewn with boxes and athletic equipment, she asked, “You’re leaving on Sunday?”

“Yes.”

“Then I probably won’t see you for a while. I’m due in late April.

“You’ll see me before then,” J.T. said as she moved into the hallway.

Angie turned to find him leaning against the doorframe watching her with unreadable eyes. “Do you believe me then? About the baby being yours?”

“I don’t want to think you’re the type of woman who would try to trick me, but I have to be absolutely positive.” His eyes narrowed. “Surely, you can understand that.”

Despite her no-doubt hormonally fueled outburst, Angie did understand. J.T. wasn’t asking for anything she wouldn’t be asking for if she were in his shoes. For several seconds he held her gaze and to her mortification, she couldn’t control her racing pulse or stop the feminine awareness that pooled low in her belly. This was why she had avoided him—even long before they’d had sex. The way J.T. made her feel scared her to death. She couldn’t fall for a man like him—a ballplayer. She knew only too well the heartache awaiting her if she traveled down that particular road.

She’d vowed a long time ago she wouldn’t end up like her mother. And it was a vow she intended to keep.

\* \* \*

Early Sunday morning, J.T. packed up his Ford F-150 and cruised along I-80 toward Sacramento. On a normal trip home his music would be cranked up and there'd be nothing on his mind except catching the Forty-Niners game with his brothers at their favorite sports bar.

But nothing in his life was normal. Not anymore.

A long time ago, when J.T. was thirteen, his father had sat him down and talked to him about sex. He already knew about sex—not because he'd had it, but because it was pretty much all he and his friends talked about. Sports and girls were their favorite topics of discussion. But at no time during their horny adolescent musings did they ever discuss pregnancy, condoms or STDs. No, all they'd been concerned about was when and where they were going to get laid.

Because he worshipped his father, J.T. had listened intently, and by the end of the conversation he was deathly afraid of two things: becoming a teenage father and the possibility his dick might fall off from a sexually transmitted disease. Joe Sawyer had done his job well. After that father and son talk, J.T. vowed to never have unprotected sex, and until that night with Angie, he never had. Not even once.

As it turned out, his dad was right. All it took was one time to make a baby. Or in his and Angie's case, two times on the same night.

A baby.

He still couldn't wrap his head around it. He was going to be a father. The thought of it scared the shit out of him. Having a kid was a huge responsibility and he wasn't all that convinced he was up to the task. His mind was on baseball, not babies. How could he concentrate solely on his training regimen while Angie carried his child?

It wasn't that he didn't want kids. He did. Someday. Like when he was in his mid-thirties, or maybe even later when he wasn't playing ball anymore. But when he pictured himself having kids there was always a wife involved. He'd never wanted to be one of those professional athletes who left a trail of baby mamas in his wake. It went against everything he believed in. He and his brothers had been raised by two loving parents and had a large extended family with aunts, uncles and cousins. He wanted that same experience for his children.

Well, he'd fucked that up. The woman having his baby was someone he barely knew. But it wasn't from lack of trying. From the first moment he met Angie DeMarco, his body's most primal reaction kicked in with a vengeance.

It had happened in the Blaze's front office his first week with the team and when he was formally introduced to her he could have sworn she felt the same powerful attraction he did. But he'd been wrong. After that initial meeting she rebuffed every overture he'd made until the night of her softball game. That night he'd finally gotten a glimpse of the warm and sexy woman underneath the quiet reserve she wore around her like a heavy winter coat. He'd liked that woman. He liked her a lot.

Then she was gone, and it was almost as if that night had never happened. But now there was absolute proof that it had. That one reckless night had created a new life.

How would this affect his career aspirations? Damn it. He couldn't think about that right now. There was an innocent child to consider—that's what his priority needed to be.

By the time he pulled into his parents' driveway in East Sacramento J.T. was starving, and since there was no better cook than his mom, he'd wholeheartedly agreed to stop by for lunch before heading over to his place.

He trudged up the pathway toward the Tudor style house he'd grown up in and noticed right away that his father had repainted the trim. It was now a rich chocolate brown that contrasted nicely with the light mocha colored stucco. The leaves on the two trees in the yard had started to turn from green

to amber. Before long their branches would be bare as fall gave way to winter. J.T. had always loved this house and when he'd earned enough money playing ball to buy his own place, he'd chosen one much like it. Only his house was located in the Land Park section of town, not in the historic Fabulous Forties neighborhood where his parents lived.

Just as he stepped onto the porch, the dark wooden door swung open and his mother greeted him with a warm smile. "I saw you pull up," she said and gave him a hug. "Jake had to go out of town on business, but Josh is here. He and your dad went to the grocery store. I forgot ice cream, can you believe that?"

"What about Justin?" He followed his mom into the foyer and closed the door behind him.

"We haven't heard from him in a while." Sharon Sawyer frowned and tucked a loose strand of dark blonde hair behind her ear. "I think it has something to do with that undercover work he's been doing."

His eldest brother was a cop—a career choice his mother had never been comfortable with. Not that he blamed her, law enforcement was risky, whether you worked undercover, or were on patrol and had to pull over some jerk-off who happened to have a gun and a disdain for the law. Both scenarios could be deadly.

"What's for lunch?" J.T. asked as they crossed the large open living room to the kitchen his parents had renovated about two years ago. It was most definitely a gourmet kitchen now, with its antique white cabinets, tin-pressed ceiling, Wolf range and Sub Zero fridge. It also had what his mother called a butler's pantry, which to him was just a fancy name for a room to store all the stuff that didn't fit into the kitchen cabinets.

"Enchilada casserole," she said, naming one of his favorite dishes. "It's in the oven."

He grabbed a green apple from a large white bowl on the countertop and took a bite. He chewed and then grinned at the exasperated expression on his mother's face. "What? I'm hungry."

"You'll spoil your appetite."

"When has that ever happened?"

She gave him a wry smile. "That's true. We didn't nickname you the human garbage disposal for nothing."

J.T. chuckled, rounded the counter and slid onto one of four stools on the other side. "Anything going on I should know about?" he asked, then took another bite of the tart apple.

Sharon went to the refrigerator. "Josh and Cindy broke up," she said as she opened the door and pulled out a head of lettuce and a bag of tomatoes.

"What?" J.T. inhaled sharply and then started coughing as a small piece of apple got stuck in his throat. "When did that happen and why didn't I know about it?" he asked after he'd dislodged it.

"Because it happened last night."

"Who did the dumping, Cindy or Josh?"

"Cindy."

"Shit." J.T. shook his head. "Josh must be crushed. They've been together since their freshman year in high school."

His mother closed the fridge door with her hip and moved to the sink. She set the vegetables on the counter and turned to look at him. "Evidently, Cindy couldn't handle a long distance relationship. I was afraid this might happen when she chose to go to Boston College instead of staying here and going to UCD with Josh."

"How's he taking it?"

"Not well. That's why I sent him to the store with your father. It seems he has the knack for putting

things into perspective for you boys more than I do.”

He grinned at her. “Don’t sell yourself short, Mom.”

“I’m not. I married him, didn’t I?” His mother laughed. “I picked a good man to be the father of my sons.” And with that, she got busy washing the lettuce and the tomatoes.

As J.T. finished his apple, he wondered what his father would say when he told him about the baby. Under normal circumstances, his parents would be overjoyed at the news. But getting a woman he barely knew pregnant wasn’t normal circumstances. Both he and his parents had expected him to marry before having kids. Shit. Their disappointment would be tough to bear.

A short time later, as he passed through the living room to go to the bathroom, he glimpsed his father’s Jeep Cherokee parked behind his truck. Curious, he moved to the window and saw his father and his brother in deep discussion by the side of the SUV. By the devastated expression on Josh’s face, it was obvious he was hurting. He was only nineteen and Cindy had been his one and only girlfriend—this break-up would be tough for his brother to bounce back from. After a few moments, Joe Sawyer drew Josh into a hug. J.T. didn’t have enough fingers to count how many times his father had been there for him and his brothers. Funny how he’d taken that for granted all these years.

Just like he’d taken for granted that nothing would interfere with his career. Playing pro ball had been his dream from almost the first moment he’d picked up a baseball. From then until now he’d never allowed anything or anyone to distract him from his path. But how could he let Angie raise the baby on her own? A child deserved two loving parents, not just one who was there all the time, and another who sent checks to cover expenses. That wasn’t the kind of father he wanted to be.

He’d love the baby. There was no question about that. But what about the child’s mother? Angie had made it clear she wanted nothing to do with him. It bothered him more than he cared to admit that she probably never would have spoken to him again if he hadn’t gotten her pregnant. And now, here he was, considering an option that would affect them both forever.

Option. A hell of a word for a decision that would change his entire life.

\* \* \*

Late Sunday afternoon, after finally finding a parking spot three blocks from her building, Angie crossed Filbert Street and wondered if she’d have to move out of her apartment. Although her landlord hadn’t raised her rent in four years, with only two weeks left until her last day with the Blaze, she had to find another job soon or there was no way she could afford to stay.

As she sidestepped a trio of track-suited women power walking, her cell phone rang. Shifting the handle of her grocery bag from one hand to the other, she pulled the phone from her purse and glanced at the caller ID. Although she didn’t recognize the number, she answered it anyway; it could be her sister calling from one of her friends’ phones.

“I’ll be in the city on Thursday,” J.T. said after she’d said hello. Her pulse quickened at the sound of his voice. It irritated her that she wasn’t immune to him, and that a few measly words elicited a physical reaction she couldn’t control. “We need to talk. Where can we meet?”

He certainly got right to the point, didn’t he?

“How about Kamu’s?” she suggested. It seemed like a safe choice. And after all, safe choices were her specialty.

“Too public. We need to talk in private.” He paused. “I don’t have access to the condo now that the season’s over. How about your place?”

“My place?” she echoed and stopped walking. A car slowly passed; no doubt the driver was

trying to find a parking place. Good luck with that. Parking in her neighborhood was tighter than a pair of Spanx.

“Yes. Where do you live?”

“North Beach.”

“Okay. Text me your address and I’ll be there at six on Thursday night if that works for you.”

“That’s fine.”

“I’ll see you then,” he said and then there was silence. He’d hung up.

Angie’s mind swirled with turmoil as she shoved her phone back into her purse and resumed the trek toward her car. She didn’t think she’d hear from J.T. so soon. What did he want? And why did he seem so anxious to talk to her? Was he going to take her to court for custody of the baby?

Unfortunately, she’d have to wait four days to find out.

## Chapter Three

Just before noon on Thursday morning, Angie was so engrossed in paying invoices that she flinched and let out an involuntary gasp at the sound of someone clearing their throat behind her. Her heart pounded double-time as she swiveled her chair around and found her boss, Dina, standing at the entrance of her cubicle. Dina's easy smile was nowhere to be seen. Instead her expression was somber and her eyes serious.

"You don't have to do this, Angie," Dina said in the soft Tennessee drawl she'd never managed to lose despite moving to San Francisco twenty years ago.

Angie leaned back in her chair. "It's my job for a little while longer. I wouldn't feel right not coming in." It also gave her something to do other than obsess about the baby and her meeting with J.T. at six.

Dina's shook her head and lowered her voice. "Your work ethic is remarkable. I hate that we had to lay off four employees by seniority instead of by work performance."

"Me too."

"I meant what I said last week. The minute a position opens up, it's yours."

"I appreciate that."

"And if you have a lead on another job, or get an interview before your last day, don't worry about coming in. I don't want you to miss any opportunity that may come up." Dina pulled off her glasses and slipped them into the pocket of her cardigan. "Oh, and I'd be happy to write a letter of recommendation, or talk to any prospective employer. You've been a model employee and you'd be an asset to any organization."

"Thanks." She smiled at the woman she'd admired from the first moment they met. "That means a lot coming from you."

After Dina left, Angie turned back to her desk and stared at the drab cubicle wall. She didn't realize she was digging her fingernails into her palm until she felt a sharp pain shoot up her arm. Relaxing her fingers, she tried—for the umpteenth time—to make sense of what was happening. She'd never been fired or laid off from a job in her life. Just the opposite—she'd always received glowing performance evaluations, and when she'd left her previous job to work for the Blaze, they'd begged her to stay. People like her didn't get laid off.

To her surprise, she hadn't cried. Not once. Instead she was numb—probably from the shock of it all. Three other front office employees had received the same bad news she had. Now there were four more people out of work in a job market that was more competitive than ever. Finding another position was going to be difficult and to make it even harder, she was pregnant. Who would want to hire someone who would go out on maternity leave after six months? Oh, they weren't supposed to discriminate, but employers did it all the time, especially when there were hundreds of applicants for one open position. They could afford to be choosy and honestly, she didn't blame them.

The writing was on the proverbial wall. She was screwed.

Thirty minutes later, instead of eating in the Blaze's cafeteria, she finally gave into a craving for pizza and walked across the street to Kamu's. They made an excellent personal sized pizza, which she planned to have them load with extra pepperoni and a ton of olives. She'd been craving olives too. It had to be the pregnancy. Lately, she'd wanted to devour the oddest things.

Just as she'd finished the last of her pizza, her cell phone rang. After a quick wipe of her fingers on her napkin, she pulled it from her purse and—because she'd programmed his number into her cell

—her heart skipped a beat when she saw that it was J.T.

“Did you get my text?” she asked, forgoing a greeting.

“Yep. I got directions off the internet so I should be there on time,” J.T. said in a low, smooth voice that didn’t do a thing to stop her pulse from racing.

Whatever J.T. had to say must be important for him to make the ninety-minute trip from Sacramento to San Francisco. Too important for a phone conversation, it seemed. These days most people preferred to share their most important thoughts through mobile devices rather than in person. Yet she almost wished he wanted to have their discussion over the phone—having it in person meant she would have to keep her physical reaction to him in check, and being able to do that after having had sex with him was damn near impossible.

“The parking in my neighborhood is practically non-existent. You may have to drive around a bit.” She reached for a stray olive on her plate and popped it into her mouth. She didn’t remember olives tasting this good. Would she still like them after she had the baby?

“No worries. I’m sure I’ll find something.” He paused. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. Except I’m craving a few things I don’t normally eat.”

“Like what?”

“Pizza. Olives. Oh, and pie.”

“Cherry pie is my favorite,” J.T. said. “At the holidays my mom usually makes one just for me to take home.”

Great idea. Angie reached for the dessert menu. If they had pie maybe she’d order one and take it home with her. Within seconds though, reality set in as she mentally calculated the calories in an entire pie. She returned the menu to its place between the salt and pepper shakers. “I hope this craving thing goes away soon.”

“Why?”

She put her hand on her stomach. “Because if it doesn’t I’ll be as big as a house.”

“I doubt that.”

“You’re not the one eating like there’s no tomorrow.”

“Point taken,” J.T. said with amusement. “I’ll see you tonight, Angie.”

“See you.”

After she’d put away her phone, Angie tried not to think about J.T. but it was a losing battle. She’d been trying not to think about J.T. Sawyer for going on two years now, and yet he was still the star of every single one of her fantasies. Fantasies that had only gotten more explicit ever since she’d shared his bed.

At ten minutes before six, Angie sat primly on the royal blue couch she’d reupholstered a few months before. Across from her, in front of the white brick fireplace, were two blue and yellow striped chairs, also her handiwork. There was a lemon yellow area rug laid over the hardwood floor and the accessories she’d chosen were blue and white. Angie loved her cozy apartment, but this room was her favorite. She’d seen something similar in a decorating magazine and over the past year transformed it into her own vision. The final result was everything she’d imagined and more: a calm and peaceful retreat where she could relax after a long day of looking at invoices and spreadsheets.

At the moment she wasn’t feeling at all calm or peaceful. Her sweaty palms and shaky knees were reminiscent of the apprehension she’d experienced just before her first date in high school. Only now there was no awkward teenage boy about to knock on her door to escort her to the movies. J.T. probably never had an awkward day in his life. And why would he? With his devastating good looks and successful athletic career, awkward wasn’t even in his vocabulary.

The sharp rap on her door startled her even though she'd been expecting it. Putting a hand to her chest—as if that could stop its frantic beating—she rose from the sofa and moved to the small foyer between the living room and the hallway that led to the kitchen. After unlocking the deadbolt, she opened the door and all the air sucked out of her lungs.

Whoa. Talk about man-candy.

It wasn't even remotely fair for one man to be so gorgeous. But he was. He'd trimmed his golden brown hair but it still fell in reckless layers to just above his collar. He had a day or two's growth of stubble on his lean jaw, but on him it didn't look grungy—more like sexy as hell. His sport coat appeared to be bronze, but upon closer examination, was made of different strands of neutral threads that came together to give it that particular hue. His shirt was brown with thin white stripes and was open at the collar, affording her a glimpse of the tanned supple skin of his neck. He wore jeans, but not the faded ones he'd been wearing the last time she'd seen him. These were newer but fit him just as well.

If that teenage boy who had been her first date all those years ago had been as hot as J.T. she probably would have let him kiss her at the end of the evening. On second thought, she probably would have let him do a lot more than that. Second or third base for sure.

“Hey.” One word, yet the way he said it, all husky like, made her heart do somersaults.

Angie stared at him in stunned appreciation. It was as if a god from Mt. Olympus had left his lofty perch and ended up here, with her—an ordinary mortal in dire need of a facial, a haircut and a bikini wax. She took a breath to try to steady her heart. It didn't work.

After several seconds of silence he tilted his head and regarded her quizzically. “May I come in?”

“Oh. Yes.” Flustered, she opened the door wider. “Come on in.”

Once he was inside, she drew in another deep breath, closed the door and turned to face him. “Would you like something to drink? I have water or iced tea. I used to have beer but since I can't drink now I didn't buy any when I did my grocery shopping.” Great, just great. She was rambling like a damn fool. As Grandma Sophia used to say—she was as nervous as a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

“No, thanks.” J.T. followed her to the living room, then stopped and let his gaze rake the room. “Nice place.”

“Thank you.” She motioned with her hand. “Would you like to sit down?”

“Sure.” J.T. moved with athletic grace to the couch, the warm, clean scent of either his soap or cologne lingered in the air and teased her senses. As he sat down, Angie moved to one of the chairs opposite him and sank down on its plump cushion.

He leaned back and gave her a conspiratorial grin. “So were you able to resist buying that pie this afternoon?”

“No.” She smiled and smoothed her hands over the hem of her dress. She hadn't had time to change and was still wearing the outfit she'd worn to work. “I ordered a slice to go and ate it at my desk on my last break. It was delicious.”

J.T. let out a low laugh. “I thought pregnant women were supposed to crave pickles and ice cream.”

“So far I haven't wanted either. Maybe that's an old wives tale.” She clasped her hands together on her lap, unable to think of anything else to say. The somewhat uncomfortable silence stretched on for several seconds.

“You're probably wondering why I wanted to talk to you,” he finally said as the humor in his eyes all but vanished.



Alrighty then. The small talk was over. It was time for the main event. Nerves danced in Angie's stomach. "It can only be about the baby."

"It is." J.T. nodded. A lock of his hair fell carelessly to his forehead and he reached up to brush it back. She'd done that the night they'd spent together, brushed his hair away from his eyes, just before he'd kissed her for the first time. "It's all I've been thinking about since you told me."

"Me too," she said, trying to force the image of that kiss from her mind. The only problem—a kiss that amazing was hard to forget.

"First, I'd still like a paternity test." He held up his hand as she opened her mouth. "Hear me out. It's just a formality and one that my attorney will insist on."

"I don't want your money, J.T.," she said and clenched her hands together so tightly she winced. "I told you about the baby because it was the right thing to do."

"I understand." His tone was measured, as was his gaze. "This is an unexpected and difficult situation. I think we both want to do the right thing. And to that end, I want you to know that I'm not going to walk away from my responsibilities as a father."

J.T. leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees. The move emphasized his broad shoulders and strong arms. Another memory surfaced; her body grew warm as she remembered him picking her up in those strong arms and carrying her to his bedroom. She shook it off. Now was not the time to be thinking about sex. Sex was what had gotten her into this predicament in the first place.

"That's good to know. I'm sure we can work out some sort of visitation schedule."

His brows knitted. "I don't think you understand. I want to be a full-time father to my child."

"Full-time?" A ping of alarm erupted in her chest. She straightened in the chair and tensed. "What does that mean? Are you going to try to take my child from me?"

"No." J.T. hesitated for a moment, then seemed to choose his words carefully. "But I believe I have a solution to our problem." He cleared his throat, his eyes somber as he held her gaze.

"Marriage."

"Marriage?" Stunned, Angie's mouth gaped open. "As in you and me? Are you crazy?"

\* \* \*

Taken aback by Angie's incredulous response, J.T. scowled. "No. I'm not crazy."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "Because the idea of the two of us getting married is insane."

Ouch. That stung. Even though she was more right than not. "Why?"

"Shall I count the ways?" She held up her hand. "We're not in love." She ticked up a finger, then another. "We only slept together that one time, and—"

"Twice, and we weren't sleeping," he reminded her with a grin.

"Whatever." She rolled her eyes and held up another finger. "We're practically strangers, and..." she pointed at him, "...you're a...a ballplayer."

She'd said ballplayer with the same tone one would use to refer to a serial killer. This wasn't the response he'd been expecting. He thought she might be relieved she didn't have to raise the baby alone. Anger simmered inside him. His offer was damn chivalrous considering how marriage and impending fatherhood would cut into his training time. He rose from the couch and stared down at her. "Trust me, I understand your reservations, but I think the pros outweigh the cons."

She lifted her chin and gave him a look that clearly indicated he was out of his mind. "You've actually weighed the pros and the cons?"

"Of course," he said and began to pace back and forth. Just like he'd always done when faced

with a difficult situation. Finding a resolution to any problem always seemed easier when his blood was circulating.

“You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

“I’m very serious.” J.T. stopped pacing and swung around to meet her incredulous gaze. “I don’t want my child to be born out of wedlock.”

“What is this? 1950?” Angie pushed up from the chair, treating him an excellent view of her toned legs. “Who even says wedlock anymore?” she asked as she moved to the window and pulled back the curtain to peer out into the dark night.

J.T. scowled at her back. “I just said it, so I guess I do.”

Despite his irritation, he couldn’t take his eyes off her. It was obvious she liked the color blue. Her living room was predominantly blue, and she was wearing a short blue dress that matched her eyes and showed off her curves to perfection—especially her breasts, which were full and firm. Her long spiral curls were loose, almost begging to be touched. He swallowed hard and averted his gaze. This was not the time to be thinking about her hair, her body, or the soft sounds of pleasure she’d made the night they’d spent together.

“Considering the circumstances, it’s a good thing you broke off your engagement with Steve.”

“Scott.” Angie turned from the window. Jesus. She had beautiful eyes. Eyes a man could lose himself in. “His name is Scott and I don’t want to talk about him.”

“Fine by me,” he said, relieved there was no fiancé involved to complicate matters and make it more difficult for him to convince her to marry him. And after a long deliberation on the aforementioned pros and cons, that’s exactly what he intended to do. Still, a small part of him wondered if he was making the biggest mistake of his life. His dream of dedicating his entire off season to training was becoming less of a reality as each day passed. But each time he considered throwing some money at her and seeing his kid only once or twice a month, he thought of his father. Joe Sawyer would never do something so cowardly. “Maybe it was for the best. Now you’re free to marry me.”

“I’m not marrying you, J.T.,” she said firmly. “But I appreciate that you want to do the right thing.”

“The baby needs a father,” he insisted, not bothering to mask his exasperation.

“I’m not denying you the chance to be an involved father. We can work out visitation, I know we can.”

“I believe a child should have two parents raising him or her,” he said, not willing to give up, although it would be the easy way out. Once he made up his mind to do something, he usually did it. And he’d made up his mind to marry Angie DeMarco. There was no way he was going to let Angie bear the brunt of their careless mistake all by herself. His conscience and his upbringing wouldn’t allow it.

“That’s a nice sentiment. But in our case, it’s just not possible.”

“I can provide a nice life for you and the baby.”

“I’m sure you can but I don’t need anyone supporting me,” she said and then hesitated before brushing her hair back and continuing, “My mother raised me and my sister almost singlehandedly. I know it’s going to be tough, but I can do it.”

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?” He’d learned one thing about her tonight—she was stubborn. “I should go. But will you do me a favor and think about it? Together we can give this baby a good life.”

She put her hands on her hips, her impossibly blue eyes flashing with annoyance as she glared at

him. "Are you insinuating I can't do that on my own?"

Frustrated, he ran a hand through his hair. Damn. He was doing this all wrong. "No. Not at all. But will you at least consider it? I think we could make this work."

"How? You don't love me, and I don't love you." She blew out a heavy breath. "That's not a good atmosphere for any child to grow up in. Trust me, I know."

J.T. moved toward the door. If he stayed much longer he was afraid he'd start to badger her and that would only make things worse. All he could do was hope that she'd think about what was best for their child and agree to marry him. Two parents were better than one, he firmly believed that.

He opened the door and stepped onto her small porch. The pungent aroma of garlic wafted in the air; his mouth watered even though he wasn't hungry. North Beach was famous for its Italian restaurants. He'd sampled a few of them during his tenure with the Blaze and had never once been disappointed.

Turning, he reached for her and caught her hand. A simple gesture, yet the warmth of her skin against his palm filled him with yearning so intense it caught him off guard. He focused on her questioning gaze and forced himself to remember the reason why he was here. "I meant what I said, Angie. Think about the baby. What we could give her together is so much more than what we could give her apart."

"Her?" One delicate dark brow lifted. "You want a girl?"

He searched her beautiful face. "Yes. If she looks like you."

Now where the hell had that come from?

Angie's eyes softened. "Okay. I'll think about."

"That's all I ask," he said and relinquished her hand before he gave into the need to pull her against him and kiss her like he had the night of her softball game. "I'm staying at Matt's until Saturday when he and Kelly get back from Santa Monica. I'll be in touch."

## Chapter Four

Late Saturday morning, Angie sat across from Kelly at Angie's kitchen table and absently dunked an herbal teabag in and out of her cup. Angie hadn't been surprised that her friend had dropped by as soon as she and Matt returned from their vacation. Kelly had a well-deserved take-no-prisoners reputation, but underneath it all, she had a big heart and would do anything for her friends and family.

"Have you told J.T. about the baby?" Kelly asked as she pushed her cup aside and folded her arms on the table.

"Yes. He offered to marry me."

Kelly's brows shot up in surprise. "And your answer was?"

"My answer was no." Angie lifted her chin. "I told him I'm raising the baby on my own."

"Angie," Kelly began softly. "Is that feasible now that you've been laid off?"

"Probably not," Angie said, feeling just as hopeless as she had when Dina informed her of the layoffs. "My health insurance expires at the end of the month and the cost to buy it myself is much higher than I expected. Then there's my rent, and my car payment. I can file for unemployment, but I don't think it'll be enough to cover everything. I need to find a job, and soon."

"What about your mom?"

"I can't ask her for help. She's struggling as it is." Angie scowled as she thought of the reason why her mother lived from one meager paycheck to the next. "My sister is only able to go to college next fall because she got a scholarship."

"Does it pay for everything?"

"Everything except books, which are outrageous. Even used ones are expensive. I'd planned to help with that, but now I don't think I can."

"What about J.T.'s offer?" Kelly asked. "How do you feel about it now?"

All throughout an extremely long and sleepless night, Angie had done nothing but think of J.T.'s proposal and how it was a viable option despite the fact that that they didn't love each other. But then, she hadn't loved Scott and she'd been more than willing to marry him. So what was the difference? Stupid question. She knew exactly what the difference was. She'd never been in danger of losing her heart to Scott, but she was definitely in danger of losing it, and whole a lot more to J.T. Sawyer.

And that could never happen.

\* \* \*

When the front door opened, J.T. muted the college football game he'd tried to distract himself with. From his vantage point on the dark brown couch, he turned to find Matt standing in the doorway with a black duffel bag clutched in his hand.

"How was your trip?" J.T. asked, and tossed a half-eaten bag of corn chips on the coffee table.

"No complaints." Matt closed the door and dropped the duffel on the entryway floor. "Why are you sitting in the dark?" he asked as he hit a switch on the wall. The darkened room filled with light.

J.T. shrugged. "Too lazy to get up and open the blinds, I guess. Where's Kelly?"

Matt rounded the couch and sat down on the other end, his attention on the television. "She dropped me off out front, but she'll be back later. Who's winning?"

"Michigan."

J.T. turned his attention back to the screen and hit the remote to unmute. For a good five or ten

minutes he and Matt watched the game in companionable silence.

“How’s the training going?” Matt asked when the game broke for halftime.

“Not good,” J.T. admitted. “Something unexpected came up.”

A frown marred Matt’s face. No doubt Matt was thinking he’d blown off his training to sit around and do nothing. Which wasn’t the case at all. He wasn’t blowing it off. He’d just been too preoccupied with impending fatherhood and all its implications to do anything more than go on a few runs. He’d hoped the sound of his footsteps echoing in his ears would help him forget his problems, but no such luck. No matter how fast he ran, he couldn’t outrun his jumbled thoughts.

“Angie’s pregnant,” he blurted out with a sense of relief. Keeping it bottled up inside him had been a lot harder than he thought it would be. He’d almost spilled his guts to his father and to his brother, Jake. But as hard as it was, he’d kept quiet. He couldn’t bear to see their disappointment—not just yet. “It’s my kid,” he added in case Matt had any doubt.

If Matt was surprised, he didn’t look it. “I guess that would qualify as unexpected.”

“We slept together the night you and I went to her and Kelly’s softball game.”

“I figured as much.” Matt scratched his head. “What are you going to do about it?”

Hold the fuck up. Why did Matt figure he’d slept with Angie? It wasn’t like he went around bragging about it or anything. Unlike some of his teammates, he was discreet when it came to what went on in his bedroom. Another thing he’d learned from his father: a gentleman never bragged of his conquests.

“I offered to marry her but she turned me down.” J.T. hit the mute button again to silence the commercials. He hated to admit it, but a tiny part of him was relieved that things weren’t settled yet. It gave him more time to get used to the idea of being a husband and a father.

“Isn’t she engaged?”

“Not anymore.” He tapped the remote on his thigh. “I can’t just walk away. I need to be there for my kid.”

“That’s commendable.”

“I asked her to think about it, but I don’t think she’s going to change her mind. She wants to raise the baby on her own.”

“That might be kind of hard.” Matt leaned back and put his feet on the coffee table.

“Why?”

“Because she’s out of a job. Kelly found out last week that Angie and three other front office employees were laid off.”

“Laid off?” J.T. frowned. This was the first he’d heard of any layoffs. “Why? We just won the World Series.”

“According to Kelly’s boss, the edict came down from the top brass and was in the works long before the post season.”

“That sucks,” J.T. said, and wondered why Angie had been so quick to turn down his proposal when she was about to be unemployed. Maybe she had a trust fund, or another job lined up. Whatever the reason, he couldn’t decide if her refusal was a good, or a bad thing. The fog still hadn’t lifted from his brain. Nothing seemed clear right now. Except the morals his father had instilled in him.

Matt gave him a measured look that, for some reason, reminded J.T. of his father. “Why do you want to marry her?”

“Because she’s having my baby. It’s the right thing to do.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“What other reason could there be?”

Matt shrugged. "Beats me."

J.T. unmuted the television as the half-time reporters came back on. For a few minutes he and Matt watched, then J.T. hit the mute button again. "I'm not in love with her if that's what you're thinking."

"Why would you marry a woman you don't love?"

"She's having my kid." Jesus. How many times did he have to say it?

"So? You can still be a father to your child. You don't have to get married."

"Are you saying I shouldn't marry her?"

"No. But it's a big step. You need to think about all of the ramifications."

"Like what?" J.T. shifted on the sofa to ease the crick in his neck.

"Like what if you marry her and fall in love with someone else?"

"That won't happen."

"How can you be sure?"

"I just am." J.T. scowled. What is this? The Spanish Inquisition?

"I don't know, J.T. It sounds like you might have feelings for her."

"Well, I don't. I just want to do right by her, and my baby."

Matt shrugged and turned his attention back to the football game. "If you say so."

"I do say so." J.T. pressed his lips together, pointed the remote at the television and turned the sound back on. Matt was totally off base. The only reason he'd offered to marry Angie was because of the baby. There was no other reason. Especially not one that involved love. Yeah, so maybe he'd felt like he'd been struck by a bolt of lightning the first moment he'd laid eyes on her, but that was physical attraction. He couldn't love someone he barely knew. Love at first sight was impossible.

No matter what his mother believed.

\* \* \*

From her prone position on the couch—where she'd spent the majority of her Saturday after Kelly's departure—Angie stared at the flames dancing in the fireplace. Although the day had been on the warm side, as soon as the sun had set and the fog had rolled in, the evening air turned chilly and she had to close the windows. The crackling fire heated the room just enough to forgo turning on the furnace. That alone would save money on her heating bill—something she now had to consider in light of her circumstances.

Although it was the beginning of November, time had an annoying tendency to pass quickly when something ominous approached. She had enough money in the bank to cover December's rent and her car payment, but that was it. Her landlord was a nice guy, but she doubted he would let her stay on out of the goodness of his heart. The apartment was darling and in a great neighborhood. He could rent it to someone else in less than a day.

The thought of leaving her home was depressing, as was the thought of trying to find another job. Her daily online search hadn't yielded many prospects but she'd dutifully followed the applicant instructions and applied. Maybe she'd get lucky and score an interview for one or both of the two positions she was qualified for.

The rumbling in her stomach reminded her that she hadn't eaten a thing all day. It was close to nine but she still wasn't hungry. Maybe some chamomile tea would soothe her stomach and tide her over until tomorrow. Surely her appetite would return soon. She was eating for two—not eating wasn't an option.

She rose from the couch and then swayed as an odd feeling of lightheadedness swept over her. She reached for the arm of the couch and didn't move until the dizziness passed. On second thought, perhaps a few saltine crackers with her tea were in order. Just to get something in her stomach.

On her way to the kitchen the doorbell rang, shattering the silence and causing her heart to jump and then pound like a snare drum. Damn it. It was probably Mrs. Tenney. As much as she liked her upstairs neighbor, she wasn't in the mood to talk. To ease her guilt, she made a silent promise to make it up to the woman tomorrow.

Just as she made it into the kitchen, the doorbell rang again and a male voice called out, "Angie, it's me."

Angie's pulse kicked as she stopped in her tracks. J.T.? What in the world? Turning, she backtracked to the living room to unlock and open the door. The soft glow of the porch light illuminated J.T.'s face. He'd shaved—the sexy stubble was gone. But it didn't matter. He was still a work of exquisite masculine beauty. With his looks and body, he could be on a billboard in Times Square modeling underwear.

His gaze lowered and it was then she remembered she was a hot freaking mess. Her oldest pair of jeans and a faded lime green T-shirt were hardly her best look. And to add to her unsightly appearance, she wasn't wearing a drop of make-up and her hair hadn't seen a comb all day. On the plus side though, she'd showered. She had that going for her, at least.

"What are you doing here?" Angie pushed her hair from her shoulders and tried not to be affected by the magnetic force of his presence. As usual, she failed abysmally. Just looking at him caused heat to sweep across her body and reminded her of one blazing hot August night. And by hot, she wasn't referring to the weather.

"I was heading back to Sac and decided to stop by before I left. I know I should have called, but I wanted to see you." His eyes flickered with sympathy. "I heard about the layoffs. I'm sorry."

"Thank you," she said, and it became crystal clear why he'd shown up at her door. After next week she wouldn't have a source of income. He knew that now and had to assume she'd been giving his offer serious consideration. He wouldn't be wrong.

"May I come in?" he asked politely.

"Sure." She closed the door after he brushed past her. His clean male scent trailed after him, invading her senses and triggering more erotic memories. She quickly banished them and managed a smile. "I was about to make some tea. Would you like some?"

"No, thanks. I'm not a big tea fan," he said, following her to the kitchen.

"Have a seat." Angie waved her hand toward the small table in the corner of the kitchen. She'd found it at the San Jose flea market and painted it white. Her cabinets were also painted white and contrasted beautifully with the cheery yellow walls.

J.T. lowered himself onto one of the chairs. It creaked a bit under his weight. "Why didn't you mention the lay-offs when I was here the other night?"

"I think I was still in shock. Or maybe it was denial." Angie retrieved a cup from the cabinet and moved to the sink to fill it with water. Conscious of J.T. watching her, she moved from the sink to the microwave placed on a shelf above the stove. Her kitchen was small. J.T.'s virile presence filled the confined space, making her supremely aware of him. "I've always had a job and been able to support myself. This whole thing has thrown me for a loop."

"I'll bet," J.T. said as she grabbed a teabag from a box on the counter and then pulled a spoon out of the drawer.

"I just can't get over the fact that I'm out of a job through no fault of my own." The microwave

beeped. She opened it and carefully took the cup out, and after dropping the teabag into it she moved to the table and sat down across from him.

“Kelly said something about a seniority list?”

“Right,” she said, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice. “It wasn’t about work performance at all. I was at the bottom of the list in my work unit so I got the ax.”

“That’s rough.” J.T. folded his arms on the table. As she submerged her teabag into the hot water with her spoon, Angie’s gaze was drawn to his forearms. They were tanned from the sun and sprinkled with light brown hair. Her fingers itched to touch his skin and feel the power of those corded muscles beneath her fingertips. Just as she had the night they’d spent together. For weeks afterward, she’d relived every moment of that night. The feel of her soft body juxtaposed with the hardness of his, the urgency of his lips on hers and the masterful way he’d possessed her—as if branding her his forever.

“So you said you’ve thought about my proposal.”

Angie jerked her gaze to his and to her mortification, hot blood rushed to her cheeks. What would he think if he knew she’d been imagining them entwined together on his bed indulging in their mutual lust? Thank God he wasn’t a mind reader. She cleared her throat. “I have and you know what I think?”

J.T. cocked his head. “No. What?”

“I think it sounds like a plot right out of a romantic comedy.” When he frowned she continued, “You know. Guy gets girl pregnant, guy offers to marry her for the sake of the kid. It’s a standard plot.”

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t watch chick-flicks.” He gave her an exasperated look. “What I do know is there’s an innocent baby involved now. It’s not just you and me, Angie. We have to think about what’s best for our child.”

Our child. The words, unexpectedly, made her heart clench.

“And what’s best for the baby is for us to get married?” Angie pushed her cup to the side. The tea had lost its appeal. “Two people who don’t know a thing about each other? Who spent one night together? It’s insane, and you damn well know it.”

“Maybe it is.” J.T. leaned forward. “But I believe it’s worth the sacrifice. The baby comes first.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You think marrying me is a sacrifice?”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, his tone defensive.

“Well, that’s what it sounded like,” she shot back and the air in the room grew taut with tension as they glared at each other.

J.T. blew out a long breath, then pushed back in the chair. “All right then. Tell me what other options you have. You said you wanted to raise the baby on your own but you’ve lost your job. Do you have another one lined up?”

“No.”

“How long do you think it will take you to find one?”

“I have no clue.” She shrugged. “It could be weeks, maybe months. The job market is really bad right now.”

“Are there any relatives who can help you out?”

“No. My mother is on a fixed income and my sister is still living at home until next fall when she goes to college. I can’t burden my mother. Not after what she’s been through.”

When she didn’t elaborate, he continued, “How long can you stay here?”

“Another month at the most.” A pit of hopelessness opened in Angie’s stomach. Her nice orderly life was a thing of the past. This was not supposed to happen—not to her.



“Okay.” He paused, thankfully done with the third degree. “Then how about this. Why don’t you think about my proposal while you look for a job? I don’t want to pressure you. Just know that my offer stands.”

Overwhelmed, all she could do was nod. This—all of it—was too much. If she could drink right now, she’d have a few stiff ones.

“Why marriage?” she asked after regaining some semblance of composure. “There are several other ways we could parent this child and none of them involve marriage.”

“That’s true, but the thought of not being the kind of father I want to be to my child doesn’t sit well with me. And because of my father, and the example he’s set, I take raising children seriously.” J.T. rose from his chair. “I’ll go and let you get some rest.”

Angie got to her feet, then swayed as the lightheaded feeling she’d experienced earlier returned with a vengeance. “Are you all right?” J.T. asked, quickly moving to her side and putting his strong hands on her shoulders to steady her.

Even in her woozy state, his touch sent a current of electricity straight through her. Her breath caught in her throat and she had to force herself to breathe. “I’m fine,” she whispered in a thick voice, much too aware of the heat emanating from his body. “I haven’t eaten today.”

“Because of the morning sickness?”

“No.” She took another deep breath and felt her equilibrium returning. “I wasn’t hungry. I’ll be fine tomorrow.”

“Are you sure? I could make you something if you want. Some scrambled eggs?”

“I’m fine,” she assured him. And she would be as soon as he left. His presence was playing havoc with her emotions and her senses. “Thank you, though.” She took a step back and breathed a sigh of relief when he was forced to let her go.

Why this man, of all the men she’d ever met, elicited such a reaction in her was a mystery. Maybe it was because he was everything she’d been running from ever since she was twelve years old and had discovered what a man in his position was really like. What a cruel irony it would be to fall for someone like him.

“You almost passed out. You need something in your stomach.” J.T. moved past her to the refrigerator. “It won’t take long.”

Angie opened her mouth to protest but then thought the better of it. By the looks of things, J.T. wouldn’t be satisfied until he was sure she wasn’t going to faint from hunger. The best course of action would be to sit down and shut up.

“Where are your pots and pans?” J.T. asked after retrieving a carton of eggs and a quart of milk from the fridge.

“Bottom cabinet next to the stove. Right hand side.” Angie pointed as she lowered herself onto her chair. “There’s a non-stick skillet on top.”

“That’ll work.” He set the eggs and the milk on the counter and bent to open the cabinet. Presented with an unobstructed view of his backside, Angie’s insides fluttered as she remembered cupping that fine ass and urging him on as he teased her with maddeningly slow thrusts. J.T. hadn’t been the only one with an urgent need begging to be sated. “I need a bowl,” he said, not looking at her as pulled the small skillet from the cabinet and set it on the stove.

“Same cabinet. Left side. The utensils are in the drawer to the left of the sink.” She leaned back and began to relax. Although she loved to cook, it was kind of nice to have someone prepare a meal for her. She reached for her tea and discovered it was still warm. Lifting the cup to her lips, she watched J.T. efficiently whisk two eggs and a dollop of milk together in a small mixing bowl. Would

he cook for her if they got married? Stunned that she was even considering the idea, she swallowed her tea and set the cup on the table with unsteady hands.

J.T. looked over his shoulder. “Do you want some toast with your eggs?”

She shook her head. “I don’t have much of an appetite. The eggs are fine.”

“Okay.” He nodded and went back to work.

Thirty minutes later, Angie swallowed the last bite of her eggs and set her fork on her plate. “I guess I was hungrier than I thought,” she admitted to J.T., who sat across from her. “Thank you for insisting I eat something.”

He scanned her face with a satisfaction. “You’ve got some color back.”

Angie was sure that had more to do with J.T. than the eggs. Her whole body seemed to come alive in his presence. Another reason why marrying him wasn’t a good idea. “I’m sure you want to get on the road.” She pushed her chair back and stood. Without looking at him, she picked up her plate and moved to the sink. After a quick rinsing of the plate and fork, she turned to find J.T. on his feet, watching her with unreadable eyes. “Thank you again,” she said, moving toward the hallway.

“I’ll call you in a few weeks,” J.T. said as he followed her out of the kitchen. “But you have my number, so call me if you need anything.” He opened the door, stepped outside to the porch and turned to face her. He reached for her hand, just as he had the last time he was in her apartment. Like then, his touch was warm and reassuring, and for one brief moment she wanted him to enfold her in his strong arms and make her world right again. “I mean it, Angie. We’re in this together.”

For no apparent reason, tears threatened to overtake her. It had to be pregnancy hormones. Yes, that was it. It couldn’t be the smidgen of tenderness she’d glimpsed in J.T.’s eyes. “I’ll be in touch,” she said, wiping at the corners of her eyes before she embarrassed herself completely.

His mouth curved with a devilish smile as he gave her hand a gentle squeeze and let it go. “So what happens in those romantic comedies? You know, after the guy and the girl get married?”

Having seen more than her share of romantic comedies, Angie knew exactly what happened—the guy and the girl lived happily ever after. But that wouldn’t be happening for her and J.T. In her experience, happily ever after was the stuff of movies and books, not real life.

“Believe me. You don’t want to know.”

## Chapter Five

Five days later, Angie clicked the online submit button and sent the employment application she'd just completed off into what she liked to call the black hole. A fitting description since every application she'd submitted so far had been sucked into some obscure cyberspace depository where nary a word was heard afterward.

Staring at the screen, she chewed on her thumbnail and, not for the first time, wondered if anyone would bother to read the application or the attached resume. She was more than qualified for every single position she'd submitted to yet no one was beating down her door for an interview. For someone who'd never had a problem finding a job, the lack of response was disheartening. And a bit frightening.

On a slightly more positive note, she'd filed for unemployment benefits. The amount she was to receive, while not paltry, was only a fraction of what she used to earn—but it was better than nothing. Still, it wasn't going to pay all her bills, or enable her to buy health insurance—her biggest worry. If she only had herself to think about she wouldn't be as concerned, but now there were prenatal doctor visits to consider as well as hospital care when she delivered. She wasn't naïve; the cost, even for one or two nights, would be astronomical. She did have the option to either apply for Medi-Cal, which was California's Medicaid program, or utilize a low income health clinic. The thought of either option was depressing.

Closing her laptop, she rose to her feet and left the kitchen, eager to get out of the conservative business suit she'd donned earlier in the morning to make the rounds of a few firms she'd heard might be hiring. Although every one of them had accepted her resume, they weren't at all forthcoming about any potential openings.

Her last stop had been at an employment agency that specialized in placing candidates in temporary accounting positions. She'd met with a consultant who was impressed with her resume and promised to call if anything came up. Angie wasn't holding her breath. Although it was the week before Thanksgiving, the place had been packed with other out of work men and women who, despite their best efforts not to, looked as desperate as Angie felt.

After shedding her suit and hanging the skirt and jacket in the closet, she pulled the ivory tank top she'd worn under the jacket over her head and tossed it on the bed. Looking down at her slightly rounded stomach, it was clear she could no longer blame the snugness of her skirt on dryer shrinkage. The nausea may have partially subsided, but now the baby was making him or herself known in the most telling way of all. The almost imperceptible baby bump only added to her anxiety. If she did get an interview she wanted it to be before it was obvious she was pregnant.

Placing a hand to her abdomen, she sank to the bed and forced herself not to give into self-pity. But it was hard not to. Each day that went by without any hope of landing a job only escalated the panic she'd been in ever since she'd been laid off. More and more, J.T.'s proposal appeared to be her only way out. The thought of it petrified her—for several reasons—but she'd been considering an amendment to his proposal that just might make her only way out a whole lot easier to live with.

Before she could dwell on the specifics, the phone on her antique bedside table rang. When the word "mom" lit up the screen, Angie was sorely tempted to let it ring. Just like she'd been doing for the past three days.

It wasn't that she didn't want to talk to her mother. It was just that there were a couple of things Selena DeMarco didn't yet know. Things that might upset her. Like, for example, her daughter's

engagement was over and she'd gotten herself knocked up. Seriously, what mother would want to hear that? It was only a notch or two up from "guess what, Mom? I'm marrying my prison pen-pal."

The phone rang two more times before Angie's guilt kicked in. Damn it. She couldn't put it off forever. Her mother was probably concerned about her.

"Hi, Mom," she said with feigned cheerfulness. It was best not to let on how down she really was—her mother didn't need the added stress.

"How's the job hunting going?" Selena asked straight off in her usual no-nonsense voice.

"I'm still plugging away." Angie flopped back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "But I haven't gotten any interviews yet."

"What about Scott? Surely he has some connections at the city. Maybe he can get you a job there."

"Mom, the city gave out pink slips recently, remember? They're not hiring, and even if they were I don't think Scott has the kind of pull needed to get me hired."

"Have you asked him?" her mother asked impatiently. "I know how you are, Angela. You like to do things your own way, but this is a serious situation. Don't be so proud."

Great. Her mom was already busting out the "Angela." That didn't bode well for the rest of the conversation.

"I know it's serious." She covered her eyes with her forearm and sighed. "I'm doing everything I can to find a job. It's tough out there. So many people are out of work right now."

"You're lucky to have Scott. He makes good money at the city. I know you two were waiting for marriage before living together but with your current situation maybe you could move that up a bit."

Angie gnawed at her lip. It was time to bite the bullet and get it over with. It would be easier over the phone anyway. She pushed herself into a sitting position. "Actually, I don't have Scott anymore. We broke up a few weeks ago."

The ensuing silence was way worse than anything her mother could have said. Even over the phone the parental disapproval was palpable.

"Mom?" she whispered after about ten seconds. "Are you still there?"

"What did you do?" Selena's tone was accusatory. No surprise there. Her mother's dreams of her first born daughter marrying a safe and financially secure man had just gone up in smoke. And since her mother believed Scott could do no wrong, of course, it had to be Angie's fault the engagement was off. Which it totally was, but why was it so easy for her mom to point the finger at her? Scott wasn't without faults.

Maybe she should have mentioned the time Scott had taken her to the movies, refused to buy her popcorn and then chastised her for not popping a bag in the microwave to sneak into the theater. Or instead of taking her to Napa on her birthday like he'd promised, he'd taken her to dinner at the senior facility where his mother lived. The menu that night had consisted of meat loaf, creamed corn, and pudding for dessert—the cuisine of choice for denture wearers everywhere. But the dinner was free and that's what mattered to Scott. Never mind that she'd had her heart set on staying at a cozy B&B and touring a few wineries.

Angie pondered her mother's question for a few seconds then decided to skirt the issue. Nothing positive could come out of admitting she was pregnant—not today anyway.

"I didn't do anything. We mutually came to the conclusion that we weren't right for each other." She congratulated herself on her ambiguous wording. It made it seem so civilized, which, when she thought about it, it had been. There hadn't been enough emotion involved in her relationship with Scott for them to engage in a big blow-up.

Selena sighed heavily. "What are you going to do now?"

“I’m mulling over a couple of options.”

“What kind of options?”

Since her mother would definitely not approve of what she was contemplating, it was best to keep her mouth shut. Angie tamped down the guilt that niggled at her and remembered one of Grandma Sophia’s favorite clichés—desperate times called for desperate measures. If these weren’t desperate times, she didn’t know what was.

“I heard there’s a strip club in the East Bay hiring dancers,” she said with a wry smile as she rose from the bed. “If I don’t find a job soon I might have to start giving lap dances.”

Dead silence ensued. Obviously her mother had misplaced her sense of humor. “That was a joke, Mom.”

“I don’t see what’s so funny about becoming a stripper.”

“Okay, moving on. How’s Livvie? I haven’t talked to her in a while.” Angie moved to the dresser and opened the top drawer. She pulled out a pair of fleece sweatpants and a thermal top. Not using the furnace made the heavier clothing a necessity.

“Busy with her studies, and she’s been after me to take a drive to Davis so she can get the lay of the land.”

“But she doesn’t start until next fall.”

“You know your sister. She doesn’t like surprises.” Her mother paused. “She’s a lot like you, you know.”

Angie tossed the sweats and shirt on the bed and shoved the drawer closed with her hip. “Is that good or bad?”

“Good. It’s comforting to know I can count on both of my girls not to get into any trouble.”

Angie suppressed a snort. Her mother would soon get a rude awakening on that front. “How’s work?” she asked.

“Busy. I picked up the late shift last night and the place was packed. My feet are killing me.”

Selena DeMarco hadn’t planned on being a waitress, but it was the only job she’d been qualified for when Dante DeMarco—Angie’s father—had left her for one of the many women he’d cheated on her with. Fifteen years later, her mother still made a low hourly wage waiting tables and counted on tips to help her get by each month.

“Remember to soak your feet in Epsom salts. It’ll help.”

“They’re soaking as we speak.” Her mother paused before continuing in a somewhat softer voice, “Angie, if need be, you can always move back in here with us.”

“I know, Mom.” Swallowing the lump lodged in her throat, Angie sank to the bed. “But it won’t come to that,” she added, thinking of the already cramped house her mother and sister occupied. It was a nun selfish gesture, but definitely out of the question. Her mother had enough on her plate. The last thing she needed to worry about was putting a roof over her pregnant daughter’s head.

\* \* \*

The sound of J.T.’s guttural groan was all but drowned out by the loud rock music blasting from the state-of-the-art speakers in the weight room. Five hundred pounds. That’s what the bar he held over his head felt like it weighed. Sweat trickled from his forehead down to his ears as he held the bar in a locked position for several seconds before lowering it with the help of his brother, who was spotting him from just behind the weight bench.

Jake stared down at him with a smirk. “Should I take some weight off?”

“Leave it on.” J.T. wiped his brow with the back of his hand. His muscles were twitching, begging for mercy, but there was no way in hell any weight was coming off that bar. If he allowed that to happen he’d never hear the end of it.

“Here.” Jake handed him a water bottle. “You look like you can use it.”

After taking a long drink, J.T. tried to give the bottle back to his brother, but Jake’s attention was diverted elsewhere. Since he didn’t have the energy or the inclination to lift his head, J.T. rested the bottle on his stomach and stared at the ceiling, grateful for the short reprieve.

“Hey,” he said when it appeared whatever—or whomever—Jake was so interested in was more important than spotting him. “I don’t have all night.”

Jake looked down and grabbed the water bottle. “Sorry. I just saw someone I signed up last week. I wasn’t sure she’d come back.”

J.T. lifted his arms and wrapped his fingers around the bar. “Is she hot?” he asked with a grin.

His brother hesitated before answering. “She’s got a pretty face.”

“Aren’t you the diplomat,” he said and let out another loud groan as he lifted the bar. When his arms trembled from the effort, Jake put his hands, palms up, under the bar in case J.T. couldn’t hold it. He held the position for several long seconds before letting it drop to the rungs once again. “Are you training her?”

Jake shook his head. “I don’t think she’s ready for personal training. It took a lot of courage for her to even walk in here again.”

“Why?” J.T. wiped his brow again. He was sweaty as hell and damn glad this was his last set of the night. As threatened, his brother was putting him through his paces. And then some.

“She’s overweight.” Jake paused. “At least sixty pounds. Maybe more.”

J.T. couldn’t imagine carrying that much extra weight on his body. But Jake could, which was why he’d studied exercise physiology in college and worked as a personal trainer for several years before opening his gym, Jake’s Joint, two years ago.

“Before I signed her up I gave her a tour and, unfortunately, a few of my less classy members made some derogatory comments about her size.” Jake’s eyes, which were the same hazel color as J.T.’s, blazed with anger. “I took her back to my office and apologized for their remarks. I was sure she’d walk out, but she brushed it off and then signed up for a yearly membership. While she was filling out the paperwork, I found the assholes and told them if I ever heard them talking about a member like that again I’d toss them out. I don’t tolerate that bullshit in here. I want this to be a place where everyone, no matter their size or fitness level feels comfortable.”

J.T. admired his brother for many things, one of which was Jake’s compassion for people, and well, all living things. There wasn’t a week that went by when they were kids where Jake wasn’t bringing home a stray animal, or giving up his free time to help tutor his classmates. It wouldn’t surprise him one bit if Jake took this new member under his wing and helped her achieve her weight loss and fitness goals. That was the kind of man he was.

Reaching for the bar one last time, he let out his loudest grunt of the evening as he hoisted it into the air. Remembering to breathe, he sucked in some air, held the weight for several seconds, arms shaking, and then let it drop. It made a loud clanking noise as it settled onto the rungs.

“Good job,” Jake said as he moved to take the weights off of the bar one by one and hung them in the stand near the bench. “Tomorrow we’ll work your lower body. How’s the cardio going?”

“I ran five miles this morning.” J.T. sat up, grabbed his towel and mopped his face.

“Do six next time. And make sure you get in some sprints.” Jake turned toward him and put his hands on his hips. “You’ve been at five for a while. You seem to think that’s as far as you’re able to

run. It's not." He lifted his arm and tapped his temple with his index finger. "Change your mindset, bro. Think six."

J.T. pushed up from the bench and nodded at a couple of guys who, like him, were regulars in the weight room. Most of the members were aware he was Jake's brother and that he played pro ball, but they treated him like he was just another member. He liked that—being recognized and fawned over because of his profession made him uncomfortable. "Mind over matter, is that it?" he asked, looking back at his brother.

"Speaking of minds." Jake's brows knitted together. "Yours has been somewhere else lately. Care to tell me what's going on?"

As Jake's probing gaze fell upon him, J.T. shifted uneasily. "Nothing's going on."

"Tell that to someone who doesn't know you like I do."

Jake was right. Of his three brothers, Jake was the closest to him in age and knew him better than anyone. He'd been dying to tell Jake about the baby but until Angie made her decision he was keeping a lid on it, and training until he was dead tired in hopes of forgetting that his entire life might change in the next few weeks.

"You're imagining things." J.T. flashed a grin hoping to avoid any more questions. "I'm gonna hit the shower. Want to grab some grub after I'm done?"

"Can't. I'm here until closing on Thursdays," Jake replied as they walked across the weight room toward the men's locker room. "Besides, I want to check in with my new member."

"Catch you tomorrow night then," J.T. said as they parted ways near the men's locker room. He watched as Jake strode to the cardio area of the gym and approached a heavy-set woman with short blonde hair who was walking on one of the treadmills. J.T. smiled as his brother engaged her in conversation and started pointing out the electronic features of the treadmill. It looked like Jake was still taking care of people.

After he'd showered and changed into jeans, a T-shirt and his Blaze sweatshirt, J.T. left the gym and headed to his truck. His first stop was his favorite deli for a turkey sandwich. After wolfing it down, he made a second stop at the nutrition store to pick up a container of protein powder. By the time he got home it was almost nine. As he pulled into the driveway, he made a mental note to trim the trees in the front yard. The branches had grown so much that they were now hitting the house. The excitement of the season, and then getting to the World Series, had so consumed him he'd forgotten to hire a landscape company. Another thing he'd put off was furnishing his house. Oh, he had what he needed—a bed, a television and a couch. But other than that, the place was pretty bare.

He entered through the back door and dropped his gym bag on top of the washing machine in the mud room. He wasn't sure why it was called a mud room, but the real estate agent who showed him the house had called it that and since she was a professional, she ought to know. To him, it was the laundry room, and his route from the garage into the kitchen.

As he set his protein powder on the counter, his cell phone rang. He pulled it out of his sweatshirt pocket and checked the caller ID. His pulse quickened at the sight of Angie's name on the small screen.

"Hey, Angie," he answered the phone with what he hoped was a nonchalant tone. She didn't need to know that he'd been thinking about her pending decision constantly for the past week. It had been as hard as fuck not to call her but his gut told him it wasn't a good idea. Whatever her decision, the baby would always link them together—marriage or not.

"Is this a bad time?"

"No." He leaned against the counter and stared at his workout scheduled pinned to the refrigerator

with a Blaze magnet. “I just got home from the gym. How’s the job search going?”

“Not well,” she said, her tone subdued. “I’ve been thinking about your offer.”

J.T.’s heart started to thud. “You’ve made up your mind?”

“I...I think so. But I don’t want to talk about it over the phone.”

“I can make a trip into San Francisco tomorrow and we can talk.”

“How about I drive to Sacramento?” Angie offered. “I wouldn’t mind getting away from the city for a day.”

“Anything you want,” he said, and recalled saying words to that effect when he’d had her in his bed. On the night that had changed everything.

“Tomorrow around noon then?” Her question forced him to shake off the erotic memories of the night he couldn’t seem to forget.

“That’s fine. I’ll text you my address.”

“Okay.” She paused. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Before he could reply, she hung up and he was left without a clue as to what her decision might be.

\* \* \*

In front of the address J.T. had given her, Angie sat in her Jetta and admired his home. It wasn’t the type of house she’d pictured him living in. For some reason, she’d imagined him in something more modern, or in one of those ridiculous McMansions a lot of ballplayers purchased when they finally made it to the big leagues and itched to show off their new found wealth.

J.T. had definitely surprised her. His house was lovely, despite the fact that the landscape needed some attention—there were a few overgrown trees and shrubs near the front of the house that could benefit from some pruning. Still, it didn’t detract from the home’s curb appeal. The trim, painted the color of dark molasses, was the perfect contrast to the deep golden tones of the stucco. Two arched windows flanked the front door and that, along with the gingerbread shingles on the steep gable, reminded Angie of the Tudor homes she’d seen a few times on her favorite show, *House Hunters*.

Tearing her gaze from the lovely home, Angie opened the door and slid out of the car. As she walked toward the porch, the sweet smell of grass and the sound of soon to be bare tree branches rustling in the light breeze were almost soothing. For the first time in ages she thought about the home her family had lived in before they’d moved west. She’d loved that house, and to this day wanted so much to believe that if only her father hadn’t been traded to the Oakland A’s they might still be a loving family inside that modest two-story in Kansas City.

Of course, that was total crap. They’d never been a loving family, she just hadn’t realized it yet. Her father had been cheating on her mother even then. And now, that house, and the memories she had of it would always be tainted by the father she had adored, the father who turned out to be nothing but a liar and a cheat. A man who had left his family almost destitute, and who, even after his death, found a way to make sure the family he’d left behind wasn’t adequately provided for.

When she reached the porch, Angie was so nervous that she had to clasp her hands tightly together to keep them from shaking. To say her decision had been difficult was an understatement. But no matter how many times she went over it in her head, she always reached the same conclusion—the baby had to come first and if that meant marrying J.T., then so be it.

But it wouldn’t be the kind of marriage J.T. might be expecting. It would be one of convenience,



nothing more. And she planned to extricate herself from it as soon as humanly possible.

Taking a deep breath, she rang the doorbell.

## Chapter Six

When J.T. opened the door, butterflies fluttered madly in Angie's stomach. Why was it that each time she was in his presence sizzling awareness filled every single pore in her body? Unfortunately, she had no answer to that question; J.T. possessed a magnetism that couldn't be explained with mere words. Suffice it to say, no other man had ever affected her in such a primitive way.

"Hey," he said with a disarming grin and motioned her inside.

Brushing past him, she caught the clean, fresh scent of his soap, or maybe it was his cologne. She hadn't figured it out yet. Whatever it was, it drifted into her senses and reminded her of the night they'd spent together. Not that she could ever forget it. J.T. and his demanding lips traveling over every inch of her body had seen to that.

As she stepped inside the house, the first thing Angie noticed was that the large living room with its rich dark hardwood floors was sparsely furnished. The only items in the room were a large screen, flat-panel television, a dark green sofa and one end table with a brass lamp on it. There was nothing on the stark white walls—not a picture, not a mirror, nothing.

Located in the center of the far wall was a gorgeous white brick fireplace with a custom built mantle, also painted white. There seemed to be some intricate carvings on the wood, but as it was the same color as the walls, it blended in and its uniqueness was easy to miss. White seemed to be the color of the day. The room was in dire need of a color make-over.

"I haven't done much decorating," J.T. said as he closed the door.

Angie turned to look at him. "The hardwood floor is gorgeous. There's so much you could do with this room."

"Decorating isn't my thing." He looked around the room with a sheepish grin. "Obviously."

"You could always hire someone." As she spoke, several design ideas came to mind. The room was a blank slate, the possibilities were endless.

"I've thought about it." J.T. shrugged. "But with all the excitement of the season, I never got around to contacting anyone."

"Is the rest of the house as bare?"

"Pretty much." Amusement quirked his mouth. "Your place is much nicer."

"Thanks." She smiled, pleased at the unexpected compliment. "I enjoyed transforming it."

"Why don't we go into the kitchen?" he suggested. "Would you like some tea?"

"I thought you didn't like tea," she said and followed him from the living room toward the back of the house. His gray T-shirt accentuated his powerfully built torso and the faded jeans, well, they showed off the firmest ass she'd ever laid eyes on. And yes, she had laid eyes on it. To divert her wayward thoughts, she forced herself to concentrate on the crown molding in the room they were passing through. Although completely devoid of furniture, she was fairly certain it was intended to be a formal dining room.

"I picked some up for you. If I recall correctly coffee and alcohol are off limits, right?"

"Yes," she said, surprised by his thoughtfulness. "But I miss the beer more than the coffee." Angie came to a halt as they entered the kitchen. "This is nice." She compared the spacious room to the cramped kitchen in her apartment. It was simple but elegant, with a backsplash of ivory subway tiles that contrasted beautifully with framed kitchen cabinets that were made of rich walnut. The appliances were stainless steel and over the rectangular island that also served as a breakfast bar, there hung a steel and glass ventilation hood. The entire room looked like something out of a home

and garden magazine.

Directly opposite the island was a cozy nook that housed a round table and chair set that matched wood of the cabinets. The shutters were open and from her vantage point she was able to see that the backyard was expansive, with a swimming pool and a beautiful array of trees and plants beyond. As with the front yard, the trees and other shrubbery needed pruning, but it didn't detract from the overall loveliness of the yard.

"How about that tea?"

She turned to find J.T. on the other side of the island and met his questioning gaze. "No. Thank you." Slipping the strap of her purse from her shoulder, she moved to the table in the nook and set her purse atop it. There was no use in drawing things out. She'd made her decision. The sooner they squared things away, the better. "Let's talk."

"Okay." J.T. skirted the island and approached her. "Why don't we sit down for this?"

When they were sitting across from each other at the table, Angie's nerves had returned full force. Not wanting J.T. to see how anxious she was, she clasped her trembling hands together in her lap.

J.T. leaned forward, folding his arms on the table. He seemed relaxed, but the sudden tension in the room told her otherwise and made her feel slightly better that he wasn't as calm and collected as he appeared.

"You said last night you've come to a decision."

"I've done nothing but think about your offer since the last time I saw you." Despite the calmness of her voice, Angie's knees began to shake. She unclasped her hands and pressed down on her thighs. "You probably don't know this about me, but I'm not one of those fly by the seat of your pants type of people. I like order and structure. I don't like surprises, and this baby, well, this baby is the biggest surprise I've ever had to deal with."

J.T. shot her a wry smile. "Tell me about it."

"So much has happened in such a short time. I...I feel helpless. I don't like feeling like that."

"You don't have to do this alone, Angie." His reassuring tone didn't do much to calm her nerves. In fact, his sincerity only heightened her concern that what she was about to suggest might turn out to be a huge mistake.

"I have to ask one more time. Why marriage?" She still didn't get it. Why would J.T. tie himself to someone he barely knew?

J.T. shrugged. "My father taught me that stepping up and taking responsibility for one's actions is what a man does, no matter the circumstances."

How nice for him. He had a father who possessed morals. What a novel concept.

Angie let out a soft sigh. This was going to be much harder than she thought. On the surface, J.T. seemed like a decent guy. But so had her father. Dante DeMarco had everyone believing he was a saint, but his good-guy image was a façade. A big fat lie. No one knew that better than she did.

"As you know, my first instinct was to turn down your offer." She didn't call it a proposal. A proposal seemed more intimate. This was more of a business transaction and somehow that made it more palatable.

Other than a slight flicker of something indefinable in his eyes, J.T.'s expression remained impassive. "But now you're considering it?"

"Yes."

"I see." J.T. held her gaze.

Angie cleared her throat and forged ahead. "As I see it we both want something. You want to be married to me when the baby is born and I need someone to pay for my medical insurance and living

expenses until I can get back on my feet. To that end, I suggest that we get married for a period of no more than two years and then go our separate ways. Of course, we'll work out a mutually beneficial custody arrangement beforehand, as well as a pre-nuptial agreement." She paused, unnerved by his unreadable gaze. "What do you think?"

She hoped he wouldn't insist on a "real" marriage. She wasn't about to admit to him that he threatened the safe world she'd created for herself—a world where her heart would never get broken because she never allowed anyone close enough to do the honors. She couldn't expose herself like that or risk ending up like her mother.

J.T. remained silent as if weighing what he wanted to say next carefully. When he finally spoke, the resoluteness in his tone surprised her. "First of all, I don't take marriage lightly and if you decide to accept my proposal, I'll do my absolute best to be a good husband and father. I noticed you didn't mention sex, so I will. It's your call. I'd never pressure you or force myself on you, but I'd be lying if I said that sex isn't important to me. I believe it's an integral part of marriage."

"But it wouldn't be a real marriage."

"It's real in the sense that we'll be legally wed. And in case you've forgotten, we've already slept together. And don't tell me you didn't enjoy it because we both know otherwise."

Warmth surged beneath her skin. "I'd prefer to keep our arrangement strictly business. Sex isn't on the table." As she said the words, an image of J.T. slipping her underwear from her hips after setting her on the edge of the kitchen table at his condo sent a pulse of heat between her legs. She shifted in her chair and banished the erotic interlude from her mind—at least temporarily. Like all memories of that night, it would eventually resurface to remind her of what had always been missing in the few relationships she'd allowed herself to have.

Relationships where the sex had been both mediocre and uninspired. But with J.T. it was different. For the first time in her life she'd finally understood the concept of making love. It was thrilling, and then frightening. That's why she'd run. No man had ever taken up residence in her heart or her soul. She couldn't let that happen. The price she'd have to pay when he eventually cheated on her—and he would—was much too steep.

"No sex? That's your condition?" J.T.'s expression remained neutral.

Angie nodded. "You had a condition regarding the paternity test. This is mine."

"Fine. No sex. I do have another condition though, and I don't think it's too much to ask considering a paternity test is pretty standard in these situations." J.T. paused. "I don't want my family to know our marriage is a sham."

"Why?"

"Because it'll be easier that way. For both of us."

"What about when we divorce?"

J.T. leaned back in his chair, averting his gaze to stare at the backyard behind her. "I'll deal with that if...when it happens."

Angie expelled a relieved breath. "Think of it this way, J.T. All marriages are doomed to fail. We're ahead of the game."

His solemn gaze returned to hers. She schooled her expression under his intense scrutiny. It wouldn't do for him to suspect how much he affected her.

"My parents have been married for almost thirty-eight years."

Angie shrugged a shoulder and tried not to be impressed. "Then they're the exception."

"If you believe all marriages are doomed to fail then why were you marrying Steve?"

"Scott," Angie corrected him crossly. "And it's none of your business why I was going to marry

him.”

J.T.’s mouth twisted wryly. “All you had to say was that you fell in love with the guy. But you didn’t.”

She waved her hand. “That goes without saying.”

J.T.’s eyes bored into hers and caused a tingle to dance up her spine. “If you love someone it should never go without saying.”

Flustered, Angie lifted a hand to brush her hair back. “Fine. I loved him. In fact, I still love him. Satisfied?”

\* \* \*

J.T. was most definitely not satisfied. Whenever he’d thought about getting married he never imagined his bride-to-be would be in love with another man. And while Angie might consider their marriage to be purely a business arrangement, he definitely didn’t. Oh, he’d agreed to her “counter-offer”—it was the only way to get what he wanted. Once they were married, he’d show her that raising their child together long-term could work. It was the best option for the both of them and for the baby.

Pushing up from the chair, he moved to the refrigerator. “Would you like some water?” he asked as he opened the door and reached for a bottle.

“Yes. Thank you.”

He grabbed another bottle and closed the door with his elbow. Returning to the table he handed Angie her bottle then moved back to the island and leaned against it as he twisted off the cap.

“I think we should get that paternity test out of the way and then get married as soon as possible.” He took a long drink to calm his suddenly thundering heart. It was real now. His entire life was about to do a one-eighty. Instead of just thinking about himself and his career, he was about to add a wife and a child to the mix. Would he be able to handle both? “You have to be out of your apartment by the end of the month, right?” he asked after swallowing.

Angie nodded, then averted her gaze as she opened her bottle. She’d been nervous ever since she arrived. He couldn’t blame her; he was nervous too. He was just better at hiding it.

“You’re welcome to move your furniture in here if you’d like. I can arrange for a moving company to pick it up.”

She looked at him, surprise evident in her eyes. “Are you sure? I was thinking of putting it in storage.”

“Why pay for storage?” he stated the obvious. “There’s plenty of room here.”

“That’s true.” She lifted the bottle to her lips. J.T. felt a tug of arousal low in his gut as he remembered her soft lips traveling down his stomach to his cock and—

“How about the week after Thanksgiving?” she asked, interrupting the potent flashback.

“Is that enough time to plan a wedding?” He set his water on the counter and shifted to ease the ache in his groin.

“Yes. All we really need is a marriage license.” She took another sip of water. “I think we can agree that we don’t want to make a big deal of this. A civil ceremony should suffice. It’s practical, and I don’t think a church wedding is appropriate.” She shifted to cross a leg over her knee. She wore a green dress with a denim jacket. The hemline was modest yet short enough to afford him a tantalizing view of her shapely legs. “What do you think?”

What he thought was she had an incredible body. How in the world was he supposed to live with her and not take her to bed? It was fucking insane, that’s what it was.

“A civil ceremony is fine. And I have no problem seeing your doctor and paying for the paternity test. I’m sure you’d be more comfortable with him or her until you can find someone here in town.” His parents would be disappointed about the civil ceremony, but there wasn’t much he could do about that. He hoped the news about the baby would make up for it.

“I called Dr. Manning. She recommended a non-invasive paternity test called an SNP microarray. She gave me the name of a DNA lab here in Sacramento that performs it and offered to call them to set up an appointment for us as soon as possible.”

“Just tell me when and where and I’ll be there.”

“I’ll call her before I leave. Maybe they can take us today.” She set her bottle on the table and recapped it with a quick twist of her fingers. “So when should I move in?”

“Whenever you want.”

“How about the Friday after Thanksgiving?”

“Works for me. What are you doing for Thanksgiving, by the way? Are you spending it with your family?” he asked, hoping to alleviate the underlying tension in the room.

“Yes.”

“Are you going to have enough time to pack your stuff?” he asked, surprised that she didn’t want to wait until the last possible moment to move in. “When I moved from the townhouse I rented into this house it took me almost a month.” He grinned. “As has been pointed out to me for most of my life, I didn’t inherit my mom’s knack for organization.”

Angie’s shoulders visibly relaxed as she cast him a smile—the first genuine one he’d seen since she’d arrived. “I’m very organized and efficient. You’ll find that out once I move in.”

“I did notice how neatly your kitchen cabinet was arranged.” J.T. said, remembering the precisely stacked pots, pans and bowls. “Your head may explode when you see mine.”

She glanced past him to the cabinets, still smiling. “Is that fair warning? When I open them, will stuff fall out and clobber me?”

“It might,” he said, enjoying their unexpected camaraderie. “You may need a hard hat.”

Angie’s lilting laugh ebbed as she returned her sparkling gaze to his and gave J.T. a glimpse of the warm, relaxed and sexy woman he’d made love to all those weeks ago. Would he see that woman again once they were married? He hoped so...or it was going to be a long two years.

A furrow appeared between her eyebrows. “Have you told your family yet?”

“No.”

“How do you think they’ll react?”

“They’ll be surprised, but supportive.” He inclined his head. “Yours?”

“My mother is already upset that Scott and I broke up. When she finds out I got pregnant by a ballplayer she’s going to freak.”

J.T. frowned. That wasn’t the first time he’d heard that disparaging tone in her voice. “Do you have a problem with what I do for a living?” he asked, folding his arms over his chest.

“Why do you ask that?”

“You worked for the Blaze, yet you don’t seem to think highly of professional athletes.”

“I don’t,” she said in a terse voice. “And I rarely interacted with the players. I mainly dealt with suppliers and vendors.”

“I’m curious. What do you have against ballplayers?”

Her eyes turned bleak. “I’d rather not say.”

Although curious about her negative attitude toward athletes, he changed the subject. It was obvious whatever her bias was she wasn’t inclined to discuss it. “If you’d like, I can be with you

when you tell your mother about us.”

Angie shook her head. “Thank you, but I need to break it to her alone. Trust me. It’ll be much better for both of us if you’re not there.”

\* \* \*

The day after her trip to Sacramento, Angie sat at the Formica table in her mother’s kitchen with a cup of chamomile tea in front of her. An hour had gone by but, as of yet, she’d been unable to summon the courage to tell her mother about the baby or her upcoming marriage.

Coward.

Yes. That’s exactly what she was and there was no denying it. If the baby she was carrying were Scott’s there would be no issue—her mother would be over the moon at the thought of her first grandchild. But it wasn’t Scott’s baby, and when Selena DeMarco realized that she would be—as Grandma Sophia used to say—madder than a wet hen.

“How’s your tea?” her mother asked as she returned to the kitchen from the adjoining laundry room where she’d disappeared to throw some clothes in the washing machine.

“It’s good. I like this new brand you bought.”

Angie observed her mother as she opened the dishwasher and began to unload it. Selena DeMarco had once been a beautiful woman, but time and heartache had taken its toll. Her dark hair was getting grayer by the day, and the lines on her face had deepened. Her mother was only forty-eight yet she looked at least a decade older. It killed Angie that she’d be reminding her mother of a past they’d both been trying to forget. But she couldn’t hide the pregnancy forever, nor could she pack up and move to Sacramento without a good explanation, so it had to be done. And it had to be done today.

“Mom, sit down. There’s something I need to tell you.”

Turning from an open cabinet, her mother studied her face with worried eyes and frowned. “You’re not sick, or anything, are you?”

“No.” Angie gave her a wan smile.

Her mother moved to the table and sat down opposite her. “Well, something’s wrong. You’re pale and you’ve been unnaturally quiet. You’ve barely spoken a sentence since you got here.” She leaned forward, her expression filled with concern. “Is it the job search? Are you feeling blue about the lack of responses to your applications?”

“It’s not that, Mom.” Angie took sip of tea to steady her nerves. She lowered the cup and met her mother’s anxious gaze. “I’m pregnant,” she said, and kept her fingers wrapped around the warm cup to keep them from trembling.

“Pregnant?” she echoed and then surprised Angie by smiling broadly. “Why, that’s wonderful news.” Her eyes lit with excitement. “Now you and Scott can get married. After all, you’re having his baby. I’m sure you two can work out whatever differences you have.”

“It’s not Scott’s baby,” Angie said softly and steeled herself for the inevitable.

“But...” As Selena’s smile faltered Angie squirmed in her chair. She knew exactly what was coming next. “You cheated on him?”

“It was before we got engaged.” Her stomach churned and her pulse began to race. Even now, her mother’s disapproval still had the power to affect her.

“You still cheated on him.” Her mother immobilized her with an accusing stare. “How could you, Angela? After what your father did to me? To this family? You know how I feel about infidelity and then you... you go and do this?”

“Mom, it was one time. I didn’t plan for it to happen. It...it just did.”

“Who is he?” Selena demanded harshly. “Who’s the father?”

“J.T. Sawyer. He plays for the Blaze,” she added, bracing for the mother of all blowbacks.

Her mother’s eyes widened with shock. “You got pregnant by a baseball player?”

Angie swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded. “Yes.”

Her mother visibly stiffened and crossed her arms over her chest. Her blue eyes had turned glacial and her mouth was pressed into a grim line. Angie took another sip of her tea. This was going exactly the way she’d expected—not well. And—wait for it—she hadn’t even gotten to the marriage part yet.

“Pregnant by a ballplayer.” Selena shook her head in disgust. “Angela Marie DeMarco, I’m very disappointed in you.”

Oh crap. Not only had her mother used “Angela,” she’d included the dreaded middle name as well. That was never a good thing.

Angie hesitated and then plunged ahead. In for a penny, in for a pound, as Grandma Sophia would say. “There’s more.”

Selena mouth twisted with an ugly grimace. “What could be worse than this?”

“J.T. and I are getting married.”

“Are you insane?” Her mother’s voice sharpened with brittle anger. “You’re marrying him? After everything we went through with your father, you’re marrying him?”

“Mom, I remember everything we went through and trust me when I say that I won’t be married to J.T. for long. If I still had my job I wouldn’t be doing this at all. But other than my unemployment check, I have no other income. My health insurance is about to lapse, and I can’t afford to stay in my apartment for much longer. I have to marry J.T., but it’s just for two years. After that, I’m gone.”

Selena regarded her with suspicion. “Do you have feelings for him?”

Angie looked down at her cup. “No,” she whispered, and hated that she was lying to her mother. She did feel something when she was with J.T. she just wasn’t sure what it was. But it wasn’t love, of that she was certain. “And I’ve told him it’s a marriage in name only. We’ll have separate bedrooms.”

“He’s agreed to that?” Selena asked incredulously.

“Yes.”

“I don’t get it. Why is he marrying you? Most men in his position would just pay you off.”

“He doesn’t want his child to be born out of wedlock.”

Her mother made a sound bordering on a snort.

“I’m not marrying J.T. because I love him, Mom. I’ll divorce him in two years and that will be the end of it.”

“That’s what you say now, but what if you fall for him?” Selena’s stony expression softened a fraction. “I never want you to go through the same misery your father put me through.”

“Don’t worry,” Angie said confidently. “That will never happen. I have no intention of falling in love with J.T. Sawyer. No intention at all.”



## Chapter Seven

The day before Thanksgiving, J.T. had just finished raking and bagging the leaves in the front yard of his parent's house when his father pulled his Jeep Cherokee into the driveway and eased into the open garage. J.T. scanned the now immaculate lawn and flower beds and, satisfied with his efforts, he crossed the yard to the garage and hung the rake on its designated peg as his parents got out of the Cherokee.

"Could you help with the groceries?" his mother asked as she moved toward the door that lead to the kitchen. "And be careful. I bought eggs."

He met his father at the back of the black SUV. "Thanks for taking care of those leaves," Joe said as he opened the tailgate. "That's one more thing I can cross off that honey-do list your mother gave me."

"How extensive is that list?" J.T. grabbed the handles of two of the cloth bags his mother insisted on using for shopping and waited while his father reached inside the cargo area for the two remaining bags. It was his ritual to come over to the house before Thanksgiving and help his parents get ready for the big feast. Usually, one or more of his brothers were also on hand but today it was just him.

His father's brows knitted together as he squinted. "Let's see. I've still got windows to wash, and I have to bring in the banquet table and folding chairs from the shed out back and set them up so we can seat everyone who's coming for Thanksgiving."

"I'll help you with that." J.T. grinned. "The tables and chairs, I mean. I don't do windows."

Joe laughed. "I'll get Josh to help with that."

"How's he doing?" J.T. asked as they walked to the door.

"Better. He's finally come out of his room, and he went to the movies last night with a few of his friends from high school. Before you got here he headed off to Jake's to work out."

"Has he talked to Cindy?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

J.T. followed his father into the kitchen, which was filled with the welcoming aroma of cinnamon and other spices. His mother had been baking for the past two days. Several pies sat on the counter closest to the oven, covered with cloth towels. "It'll be easier when he goes back to school."

"Probably. He told me yesterday that Cindy wanted to break up before she left for Boston but he talked her out of it."

"So it wasn't a complete surprise." J.T. set the bags on the counter.

"No." His father hefted his bags onto the counter next to his. "But it still hit him hard."

"That first break-up is rough. I couldn't eat for a week after Susie Carpenter dumped me in tenth grade."

His mother came up behind him and put her hand on his back. "I think that was the first and only time you've ever lost your appetite." She chuckled. "You wouldn't even eat your favorite dessert."

"Speaking of which." J.T. grinned. "Are you making it for Thanksgiving?"

"Of course." She patted his back. "Don't I always?"

An hour later, after he'd helped his dad set up the tables and chairs in the living room, J.T. wandered into the kitchen and found his mom sitting at the breakfast bar with a cookbook open in front of her. She looked up and flashed him a warm smile. She'd gotten her hair cut since he'd come home a few weeks ago. It was now much shorter—a bob she'd called it. Whatever that meant. Short hair was short hair.

“How’s your training going with Jake?”

“He’s kicking my ass, that’s how it’s going.” J.T. rounded the counter and slid onto a stool next to her. “Yesterday I was so sore I had to get in the hot tub.”

“I may need a good soak in that hot tub myself.” His father entered the kitchen and grinned. “Your mother’s honey-do list just might do me in.” He leaned on the counter across from them and let out an exaggerated sigh. “You’re going to be the death of me yet, woman.”

His mother let out an amused snort. “You don’t do half the stuff on that list. You always get the boys to do it, so don’t complain to me about sore muscles or the like.”

His father shot him a conspiratorial smile. “She’s on to me.”

“I’ve been on to you for years, Joe Sawyer.” Sharon gazed affectionately at her husband and closed the cookbook. “Have either of you heard from Justin? I’ve left him several messages but he hasn’t called me to let me know if he’s coming for Thanksgiving.”

“I texted him yesterday but he didn’t text me back,” J.T. said, noting the concern on her face. “He did say we might not hear from him in a while, remember?”

“I know, but I hate the thought of not having all my boys home for Thanksgiving.” A frown furrowed her brow. “I wish he’d chosen another line of work.”

“He loves being a cop.” J.T. put his arm around her slim shoulders. “I’m sure he’s being careful.” He wasn’t as confident as he sounded. Justin liked taking risks and had ever since they were kids. If his brother hadn’t become a cop, he’d more than likely have ended up in some other dangerous profession, like a firefighter, or—since he loved cars—a race car driver.

“We’ll hear from him.” Joe pushed up from the counter, moved to the refrigerator and opened it. “One way or another, he’ll get a message to us.”

“Dad’s right.” J.T. lowered his arm from his mother’s shoulders and cleared his throat. “I need to tell you both something.” He’d been trying to find the perfect opportunity to tell his parents about Angie and the baby and, with only a couple of days left before Angie moved into his house, this, apparently, was it.

Sharon shifted on her stool, her face a mask of concern. “Have you been traded?”

“No.”

His father closed the refrigerator door, popped the top of his cola and studied him with shrewd hazel eyes, much like his own. “I was wondering when you’d get around to it.”

“What do mean get around to it?”

“Son, do you think we don’t know you? Something’s been bothering you ever since you came home.” His parents exchanged a glance as Joe moved back to the counter. “We’ve been waiting for you to tell us what’s going on.”

“We thought the Blaze were about to trade you but you didn’t want to tell us.” His mother pinned him with a worried gaze. “But if that’s not it, then what is it?”

He blew out a breath. This was it—truth time. “I’m getting married.”

His mother’s surprised gasp filled the silence. “You’re what?”

“I’m getting married.”

“I didn’t realize you were dating anyone.” His father set the can on the counter and folded his arms across his chest.

“It’s complicated.”

“What does that mean?” his mother asked, then her expression changed and she gave him a smug smile. “You didn’t believe me, did you?”

J.T. frowned. “Believe you about what?”

“Love at first sight.” She sighed. “The first time I saw your father I knew he was the one. And now the same thing’s happened to you.” Her eyes sparkled as she leaned forward and put her hand on his forearm. “Was it like a bolt of lightning? That’s how it was for me. I almost couldn’t breathe.”

“Sort of,” he said before he could stop himself. He wasn’t in love with Angie, but the first time he’d seen her he’d had a reaction similar to his mother’s. That wasn’t love, more like unadulterated lust. He was pretty damn sure he knew the difference.

“When did you meet this girl?” his father asked. “What’s her name?”

“Her name is Angie DeMarco. I met her when I signed with the Blaze.”

“So you’ve known her a couple of years.”

J.T. shifted uncomfortably under his father’s penetrating perusal. As usual, his father was able to tell when he was shading the truth. But he wasn’t lying—he had met Angie two years ago. She just hadn’t given him the time of day until the night of her softball game.

“Yes,” he said and didn’t elaborate. There was no need for his parents to know it had been a one-night stand. Especially since he was about to drop an even bigger bomb. “She’s pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” His mother lifted a hand to her chest and stared at him in stunned surprise.

“Yes. You’re going to be grandparents,” he added, taking in their shocked expressions as silence enveloped the room.

Once the shock wore off, his father gave him a measured look. One similar to the one Matt had given him a few weeks ago. “That’s why you’re marrying her, isn’t it? Because you got her pregnant?”

Holding his father’s gaze, J.T. continued, “Angie and I made a mistake by not using protection, but we’ve decided that the baby comes first. And I want to be a full-time father to my child.”

“I have to ask.” His father’s face was suddenly shadowed with suspicion. “You’re a professional athlete, you make good money. Is this girl trying to trap you into marriage? And are you sure it’s your baby?”

“Yes, I’m sure, and she’s not after my money. In fact, Angie insisted on a pre-nup,” he said, not mentioning the other document he and Angie would be signing on Friday afternoon before getting their marriage license—the one spelling out their split after two years. “I hope you don’t mind that I consulted with another lawyer. It seemed like it might be a conflict of interest.” A prominent attorney, Joe Sawyer had an office in downtown Sacramento. It was a prestigious firm, staffed with several seasoned and well-respected attorneys.

“I don’t care who did it as long as you protected yourself.” His father braced his hands on the countertop. “Are you sure about this? Is marriage really the answer?”

“How can you ask me that?” J.T. looked from his father to his mother. “I won’t give my child anything less than what you two have given me. I know getting married like this isn’t the way any of us thought it would happen, but it’s the right thing to do. And I’m going to do it. For my child.”

After another short silence, his mother squeezed his arm. He let out a breath of relief as she gave him a reassuring smile. She’d always been a glass half full kind of person and was probably already thinking of holding—and spoiling—her first grandchild. “We want to meet Angie as soon as possible. I know it’s short notice, but can she come for Thanksgiving?”

J.T. shook his head. “She’s spending Thanksgiving with her family in San Francisco. Which is for the best considering every Sawyer in the county will be here tomorrow.” He wouldn’t put Angie through that just yet. The Sawyer clan could be a little intimidating—especially when they were all together in one place.

Sharon nodded sympathetically. “That would be a bit overwhelming.”

“She’ll be here early Friday afternoon and then we’re going over to the county clerk’s office to get the marriage license. Since there’s no waiting period or blood tests required we can get married right away.”

“Where do think you’ll have the ceremony?” Judging by the tightness of his jaw, it appeared his father wasn’t as on board with the whole marriage thing as his mother seemed to be.

J.T. shrugged. “Probably at the courthouse. Later next week.”

“That’s not romantic,” Sharon said with a hint of disappointment.

“Angie doesn’t want a church wedding. We want to do this with as little fanfare as possible.”

Joe relaxed his rigid posture. “It sounds like you’re adamant on this course of action, but there’s still time to change your mind,” he said. “Are you absolutely sure you want to go through with this?”

“Yes. I’m sure.” It only stood to reason that his father would be wary of Angie’s motives. Given his occupation, Joe Sawyer had met many untrustworthy people in his day. J.T. didn’t blame him for being suspicious. But it wasn’t like that. Angie hadn’t planned on getting pregnant and she’d requested a pre-nup. She wasn’t one of those greedy, status-seeking cleat-chasers who only went after ballplayers for money. She wanted what was best for their child, the same as he did.

\* \* \*

The morning after Thanksgiving, Angie dropped the keys to her apartment and her mailbox into Kelly’s outstretched palm. Although she hated leaving the place she’d called home for several years, she was grateful her landlord had allowed her to sublet the place to Kelly, who’d been looking for a new place to live since September, after a falling out with her roommate.

“I’m so glad I don’t have to do that commute from my parents’ house anymore.” Kelly slipped the keys into the pocket of her navy blue blazer.

“Why don’t you stay with Matt?”

“I do. Sometimes.” Kelly’s grin was mischievous. “But we’re not ready to move in together.” Her expression sobered. “Are you sure about this, Angie? Marriage is a big step.”

“So is having a baby. And marrying J.T. is the best thing for everyone involved.” She manufactured a smile to ease Kelly’s mind. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” Tears pricked her eyes as she let her gaze wander over the living room she’d worked so hard to decorate. She blinked and tried to be optimistic. Kelly had sublet the apartment for two years. Time enough for Angie to get back on her feet and return to her real life.

“I promise to take good care of this place,” Kelly said, then gave her in a warm hug. “Call me if you need anything, or if you just want to talk.” She pulled back and surveyed Angie with undisguised concern. “And if you need my support at the wedding—or anytime—just let me know. I’m only a phone call away.”

Angie blinked again, trying to keep the tears at bay. “I will. J.T. and I agreed on a small civil ceremony. I hope there aren’t a lot of people there.”

“What about your mom and your sister?”

Angie frowned. “I may call my mom when J.T. and I have finalized our plans. But she wasn’t too happy with my decision. I’m not sure she wants to be there. She wasn’t shy about telling me that I’m making the biggest mistake of my life.”

Kelly regarded her quizzically. “Are you?”

Marrying J.T. all the while knowing she would eventually leave him wasn’t her finest moment, yet she was going through with it all the same. She’d tried to ease her conscience by telling herself that

she'd been more than generous with visitation rights after the divorce, and that she'd arrange for him see their child anytime he wanted, but for some reason there was this odd sense of guilt hanging over her head like a cold, dark cloud.

"No," she said, and it wasn't a lie. The biggest mistake of her life was sleeping with J.T. This was just the fall-out.

Almost two hours later, Angie pulled her Jetta in front of J.T.'s house. As she got out of the car, she saw J.T. crossing the yard, heading straight for her. As usual, he looked gorgeous. He wore faded jeans and a pale blue vee-neck pullover sweater that emphasized the breadth of his shoulders. Her pulse kicked at the sight of him. How in the world was she supposed to live in the same house with him and not want to have sex with him again? She was either insane, stupid, or a combination of both.

"Hey." He halted at the back of the car next to her, then tilted his head and stared at her mouth with such intensity it sent a delicious thrill up her spine. "You've got something...right here." He lifted his hand and brushed his thumb over her bottom lip. Her stomach clenched and, like a serene pond as the first drops of rain fell upon its placid surface, ripples of awareness swept across her body and caused her to shiver. "Looks like chocolate." He lifted his gaze to hers. The scorching heat in his eyes stole her breath. "Did you have another craving?"

Yes, she had a craving. For him.

Angie tried to speak but it was impossible. J.T. had immobilized her vocal cords with one touch. He gently rubbed her lip, then trailed his fingers to her cheek and leaned forward. Mesmerized by his caress, the darkening of his eyes and the warmth of his breath against her lips, she curled her trembling fingers around her key remote and then let out a gasp of surprise when the lid of the trunk popped open, startling them both. J.T. immediately pulled back and ran a hand through his hair.

"Hot...hot chocolate," she said in a voice that wasn't at all steady. She lifted her hand to her lower lip and scrubbed, but it didn't erase the feel of J.T.'s caress, or the fact that she'd wanted him to kiss her.

It didn't take long for J.T. to bring her suitcases and boxes inside the house. There had been no need to pack her linens or her dishes, Kelly would be using them. But now, as she stood in the middle of the barely furnished living room, Angie wished she hadn't decided to leave her furniture in San Francisco. It would have gone a long way toward making her feel comfortable in her new environment.

On her last trip to Sacramento, J.T. said the rest of the house was just as bare. Where was she supposed to sleep? She eyed the couch warily. Was that her new bed?

"Angie?" She whirled around to find J.T. holding one of her suitcases and watching her intently. He stood near the staircase she'd somehow missed when she was here before. Probably because she'd been too busy ogling that perfect ass of his. "Do you want to see your room?"

"Sure." Well, that answered that question.

Angie followed J.T. up the stairs. When they reached the landing, he opened the first door they came to and allowed her to precede him inside. Like the living room, the space was sparsely furnished. It contained only a queen-sized bed covered with a blue and brown plaid comforter, a cherry wood dresser and a matching nightstand with a small brass lamp sitting atop it.

J.T. set her suitcase down near the door. "When you said you weren't bringing your furniture I went out and bought this stuff." He motioned toward the bed with his hand. "If you don't like it, we can replace it."

With what money? Her savings account balance had dropped to an all-time low.

"It's fine."

Doubt flickered in his eyes. “Are you sure?”

She gave him a reassuring nod. “I’m sure.”

“Okay, then. I’ll go down and get rest of your things.”

As soon as J.T. disappeared, Angie surveyed the room. The walls were white—no surprise there. And just like downstairs, the room boasted a hardwood floor and crown molding. Its best feature was a bay window with a built-in window seat just below it. There was no cushion on the seat, but it would be a breeze to make one. She’d brought her sewing machine and it looked like she’d be using it. Although the decor lacked style, the room could be salvaged with a little ingenuity and Angie’s trusty Martha Stewart decorating books. Martha knew how to make any room look good.

Moving to the window, she peered through the partially open blinds. Her bedroom overlooked the backyard and had a clear view of the swimming pool and adjoining hot tub. The trees, which had been overgrown when she was here last were now trimmed, as were the bushes. Beyond the pool there was a round brick fire pit with several Adirondack chairs surrounding it. It was the perfect yard for entertaining, or it would be if there were more seating options.

“My parents would like to meet you.” J.T.’s voice startled her. She turned to find him at the threshold holding her smaller suitcase and the antique wooden box that contained her most prized possession—her grandmother’s recipes. “They’ve invited us to dinner tonight—at their house.”

Angie’s stomach churned as she brushed her hair from her shoulder. Of course she’d expected to meet J.T.’s parents, she just didn’t think it would be this soon. All things considered, she’d rather have a root canal. Subterfuge had never been one of her talents. She’d have to be extra careful not to slip up and say something to make them suspicious. She’d agreed to pretend the marriage was real. Would they be able to tell by looking at her that it was all one great big lie?

“How’d they take the news?” She moved toward him and reached for the recipe box. Her fingers brushed against his as he handed it over. Goose bumps prickled her skin. Flustered, she stepped back and silently cursed her physical reaction to him. Day one and she was already reacting to his potent masculinity. Note to self: No touching. Accidental or otherwise.

“They were surprised.” J.T. set the smaller suitcase next to the larger one. “But overall, they took it pretty well. How about your mom? How did she react?”

Angie shrugged. “Like I expected. Not good.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” J.T. leaned casually against the doorframe. “What about your sister?”

“She didn’t say much,” Angie said, thinking of Livvie’s shocked expression when she heard the news. “But she never says much anyway. She’s wrapped up in her school work and extracurricular activities.”

“She sounds like my younger brother.” He paused. “I know it’ll probably take some time for you to feel comfortable here. If there’s anything you need, or want, all you have to do is ask.”

After J.T. left her to unpack her belongings, Angie couldn’t help but think of another of her grandmother’s favorite sayings—every cloud has a silver lining. She hoped Grandma Sophia was right. A silver lining would come in extremely handy right about now.

\* \* \*

Just before seven, Angie stood next to J.T. at the door of a Tudor style home very similar to his. To say she was nervous was an understatement. In the beginning everything had seemed so simple, but in reality carrying out this ruse was shaping up to be a lot tougher than she’d anticipated. His family would want to get to know her and that would entail spending time with them. That meant she’d have

to keep them at arm's length and be on guard at all times.

Earlier in the afternoon, after she'd unpacked her clothes and toiletries, she and J.T. had driven to the county clerk's office where they'd applied for their marriage license. The process had been fairly simple, and afterward they'd made an appointment for one of the judges to marry them. One week from today she'd be a married woman. A pregnant married woman. Talk about surreal.

Smoothing her hair with one hand, she gripped the strap of her purse tightly with the other and waited for J.T. to ring the doorbell. When he didn't, she turned and found him watching her with an amused glint in his eyes. "What?"

"You look like you're about to face a firing squad." J.T.'s gaze roamed over her face. "They won't bite. They're nice people."

"Easy for you to say," she said in a low voice. "How would you feel if you were meeting my mother for the first time?"

"About the same." An easy smile curved his lips. "Especially since you've alluded to the fact that, like you, she's not fond of ballplayers." He sobered and tilted his head, curiosity evident in his hazel eyes. "Why is that?"

Angie waved her hand. "It's not important."

J.T.'s intent gaze bored into hers. "Why do I think it is?"

"I have no clue." She lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. "Okay. Let's get this over with."

## Chapter Eight

The moment J.T.'s mother opened the door and greeted them with a warm smile, Angie's tension eased. She'd prepared herself for the worst, but Mrs. Sawyer's eyes were kind, and her expression welcoming. Perhaps the evening wouldn't be so bad after all.

"Mom, this is Angie," J.T. said before his mother had a chance to utter a word.

"Of course, who else would it be?" Still smiling, Mrs. Sawyer motioned them inside with a wave of her hand. "Angie, I'm so happy to meet you," she said, giving Angie an impromptu hug that surprised the heck out of her. As Mrs. Sawyer pulled back, Angie caught a comforting whiff of vanilla. Not only was J.T.'s mother an attractive woman, she smelled good too.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Sawyer." Angie preceded J.T. into the foyer, supremely aware of his hand on the small of her back, solicitously guiding her forward. "Thank you for inviting me...I mean us to dinner."

"Please, call me Sharon," she said as she closed the door. "I know the invitation was last minute, but I thought you might want a home cooked meal..." Sharon looked pointedly at her son, "...rather than take-out."

"I can cook." Despite his defensive tone, humor lit J.T.'s eyes. It wasn't hard to miss the obvious affection between mother and son.

"Badly." Sharon's melodic laugh was infectious and despite her nerves, Angie couldn't help but smile. Sharon moved forward, linked her arm with Angie's and gave her a conspiratorial grin. "Trust me, unless it's scrambled eggs and toast, you might want to avoid anything he cooks."

Just off the foyer was the living room and immediately Angie was impressed with the décor. The room was warm and inviting. A fire crackled in the fireplace, and the furniture, though on the traditional side, wasn't at all austere. Against the far wall was a vertical piano made of rich mahogany with open sheet music resting against the music rack—it appeared the piano was more than just a decorative item.

"This is lovely," Angie said, noting the lit sconces placed over the fireplace mantle. In between them was a family portrait. Angie let her gaze rest momentarily on a much younger J.T. Even back then he was beautiful. Teenage heartthrob material for sure. His brothers weren't too bad on the eyes either.

"You wouldn't say that if you'd seen it last night. We had to set up a table in here to accommodate the whole family. It was a madhouse." Sharon paused. "Do you have a big family, Angie?"

"No. It's just me, my mom and my sister."

"Where's Dad?" J.T. asked his mother, unknowingly but effectively changing the subject. Thank-you, J.T. The last thing Angie wanted was talk about her family. That usually led to questions about her father—a subject she tried to avoid at all costs.

"In the backyard." Sharon's light blue eyes gleamed with amusement. "He begged me not to serve leftovers and offered to barbeque tri-tip. Why don't you take Angie outside to meet him while I finish up in the kitchen?"

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Angie offered quickly, hoping to stick close to J.T.'s mother. For some odd reason she felt comfortable with Sharon. "I could set the table."

Sharon gently squeezed her arm. "Thank you, dear, but I've got everything under control."

With J.T. following, Angie let Sharon guide her toward the back of the house. They passed through a formal dining room and ended up in the most amazing kitchen Angie had ever seen.



Remodeled for sure, and loaded with the best appliances money could buy. The living room, as nice as it was, didn't hold a candle to this room—probably because Angie loved to cook. She eyed the Wolf range with envy. Although J.T. didn't have the same model in his kitchen, what he had was much better than the small efficiency stove in her apartment. If he didn't mind her taking over his kitchen, she might try to do justice to Grandma Sophia's recipes.

On the other side of the kitchen counter was a breakfast nook with French doors that opened out to the backyard. Dread pooled in Angie's stomach. J.T.'s father was out there. On the drive over, J.T. had mentioned his father was an attorney. Would he be as friendly as Sharon Sawyer? Or would his profession make him suspicious? It wasn't a stretch. Weren't all lawyers suspicious? It was like a requirement of the job, or something.

A mental image popped into her head of him sitting in a courtroom wearing a dark black robe with a gavel in his hand proclaiming her guilty of...something nefarious. No wait. That was a judge. Attorneys didn't have gavels or robes. They wore suits and ties, carried briefcases and prosecuted lying liars that lied. Was there jail time for lying to J.T.'s parents? If so, she could soon be wearing an orange jumpsuit and sharing a cell with someone named Big Bertha who—

“Angie?”

She blinked, focused, and found J.T.'s puzzled gaze on her. “I'm sorry, what did you say?”

“Are you all right?” Concern edged his voice. “You look a little pale.”

“Can you blame her?” Sharon asked, gently patting Angie's shoulder. “I'm sure this has been a tough day for you, Angie. Your emotions must be all over the place.”

“They are,” Angie admitted, meeting Sharon's empathetic gaze. Although small in stature, J.T.'s mother exuded a magnitude of maternal warmth. Angie hadn't expected such an immediate kinship with this woman. It worried her. Her earlier resolve to keep J.T.'s parents at arm's length was suffering its first test. And it was one she was afraid she might not pass. “Thank you for being so understanding.”

“I've had four children, I know all about pregnancy mood swings. Your hormones are all out of whack. Especially in the early stages. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.”

“I will.” Oh crap. Angie wanted to hug J.T.'s mother and never let her go. What was going on? This wasn't like her at all. Ever since Grandma Sophia died, hugs had been in short supply in her family. Not that Angie doubted her mother's love for her, but Selena DeMarco wasn't an affectionate person. It had to be her stupid hormones. Why else would she just—out of the blue—feel the need for human contact?

“What's going on in here?”

At the sound of the deep voice, Angie turned and met the penetrating gaze of the man who had to be J.T.'s father. The resemblance between father and son was uncanny. It was as if she were looking at J.T. thirty years in the future. Lucky J.T.—he was going to be one of those older men who were both distinguished and attractive.

“This must be Angie,” J.T.'s father said after a long, sizing up moment. He skirted the table in the nook and moved toward her. “Welcome to our home.” He held out his hand and Angie had no choice but to put take it. “And to our family,” he added as his strong fingers closed around hers and he shook her hand.

“Thank you, Mr. Sawyer.” Despite an encore of nerves, Angie managed a weak smile.

“Call me Joe.” His hazel eyes, so like J.T.'s were no longer assessing, but kind and friendly. “Mr. Sawyer makes me feel like I'm in the courtroom.” He released Angie's hand. “The tri-tip is grilled to perfection. Is everything else ready?”

“We were just waiting on you, Mr. Grill Master,” Sharon said with an affectionate smile.

Joe Sawyer rubbed his hands together and grinned. And when he did he looked even more like J.T. “Then let’s eat.” He swung his gaze back to Angie. “I’m looking forward to getting better acquainted with you over dinner.”

Angie swallowed. Great. Now, just like the tri-tip, she was in for a grilling.

\* \* \*

“What do you do for a living, Angie?”

J.T. looked up from his plate and frowned. He’d been expecting this but he’d assumed his father would at least wait until after dinner before starting the interrogation. But no, he’d started in as soon as they’d sat down at the table in the formal dining room. To anyone but J.T. it might seem like idle chit-chat, but Joe Sawyer was highly skilled at asking innocent questions and eliciting more information from people than they ever intended to reveal. It was one of the reasons he was so good at his job.

The first question he’d asked Angie had been about her family. She hadn’t said much—just that her mother and younger sister lived in San Francisco and that her sister would be attending UC Davis next fall. That had diverted his father’s questions briefly when his mother seized upon the information and suggested that Angie’s sister come for a visit so Josh—who was out with some friends this evening—could show her around the campus. Angie began to relax as his mother raved about Davis, and how Angie’s sister would love the school and the quaint college town. But now, Angie’s posture was rigid and her grip on her fork so tight her knuckles were white.

“I worked in the accounts payable unit for the Blaze.” Her voice was pleasant, but she still had a death grip on her fork. J.T. couldn’t blame her for being uncomfortable. He’d feel the same if their positions were reversed and he was the one being questioned like the star witness in a murder trial.

“So you’re currently unemployed.” The statement was innocuous, but to his father it was a crucial piece of information that could prove his theory that Angie was a conniving cleat-chaser only interested in marrying J.T. for his money.

“Yes. Unfortunately, I was laid off in earlier this month.”

“But the Blaze just won the World Series,” his mother commented with surprise.

“That was my reaction too.” Angie set her fork down on her plate. “But with the economy the way it’s been, I guess it didn’t matter. Four of us were let go.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” His father reached for his wine glass. “The job market is tough right now.”

“Tell me about it.” Angie sighed. “I’ve submitted on over thirty positions but I haven’t gotten a single interview.”

“Maybe you’ll have better luck here in Sacramento,” Joe said, then took a sip of his wine. “I assume you’ll still be searching for employment.”

“Dad.” J.T. shot him a warning glance. “Angie just got here. There’s plenty of time for her to look for a job.”

“I’ll be looking just as soon as J.T. and I are married,” Angie assured his father, her tone adamant. “I’m not one to sit home all day. I like to keep busy.”

“Good to know.” As his father nodded in approval, J.T. hoped Angie’s response would put to rest his father’s “gold-digger” worries.

“Speaking of marriage,” his mother said. “Joe and I have a surprise for the two of you.”

“What kind of surprise?” J.T. asked warily, and hoped to hell it wasn’t an engagement party. Angie was skittish enough as it was. There was no need to foist his entire family on her so quickly. That was one of the reasons why he’d been relieved to find out that neither Josh nor Jake would be at dinner tonight. He wanted to ease her into the family gently. Word traveled fast within the Sawyer clan and more than a few of his cousins had foot-in-mouth disease. He’d have to crack a few heads if any knocked-up jokes were directed toward Angie.

“A good surprise. I hope,” his mother said and leaned forward to rest her forearms on the edge of the table. “You mentioned the other day that you and Angie were planning on getting married at the courthouse. That just seems so...so sterile. We want to treat you to a wedding in Lake Tahoe.”

At a loss for words, J.T. laid his fork on his plate. The offer was a surprise all right but he wasn’t sure it qualified as a good one. The last thing Angie wanted was a romantic wedding and that’s exactly what a wedding in Lake Tahoe would be.

“That’s so nice of you,” Angie said, glancing at him briefly before turning her attention back to his mother. “But considering the reason why we’re getting married so quickly, I’m not sure it’s appropriate.”

“Of course it is.” His mother gave Angie a reassuring smile. “J.T. said you didn’t want a church wedding and that’s completely understandable. But it breaks my heart to think of you and my son getting married in a judge’s chambers. It seems like such a clinical way to start your marriage. We’d like to do this for you, Angie. Please, at least consider it.”

“I—I don’t know what to say. It’s extremely generous.” Across the table, Angie met his gaze. “What do you think?”

What J.T. thought was his mom’s gesture was genuine and, just like her, thoughtful. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her feelings by refusing, but he had to take Angie’s feelings into consideration as well. She’d left her family and friends to move to Sacramento. A small civil ceremony might be all she could handle.

“Maybe we should discuss this later,” he suggested, not wanting to agree to something Angie really didn’t want.

“I haven’t been to Lake Tahoe in ages.” Angie’s smile was wistful, and was that a flicker of sadness in her eyes? It disappeared so quickly it was hard to tell. “It’s so beautiful.”

“They’ve already had their first big snow storm. Tahoe in the winter is breathtaking,” his mother said, going in for the kill. “I’ll take care of all the details. All you and J.T. have to do is show up.”

The expression on his mother’s face convinced J.T. she already had the wedding location booked and ready to go. Organization and planning were two of her many talents, which was one of the reasons why the coffee cafe she’d opened five years ago was such a success.

“After that sales pitch I’m not sure we can refuse,” Angie said with a smile.

“You only get married once,” his mother said. “It would be a shame not to do it right.”

Angie looked at him and shrugged. “Why not? Let’s do it.”

All J.T. could do was nod in agreement and keep his damn mouth shut. Angie had been adamant on having a courthouse ceremony but in the space of three minutes she’d completely changed her mind.

This was why he didn’t understand women.

After dinner, and banished from the kitchen by his mother and Angie, J.T. joined his father in the family room. The big screen television was tuned to the sports channel where the reporters were engaged in analyzing the NFL playoff situation.

“I think the Niners have a shot,” J.T. said as he settled on the couch. “All we need is a win

combined with a Seahawks loss.”

Staring at the TV, his father nodded. “I think they’ll clinch the division on Sunday. The Seahawks are up against the Packers. My money is on the Packers.”

“Any news from Justin?” J.T. still hadn’t heard from his eldest brother and although he didn’t want to worry his mother, he was concerned that no one in the family had received a call or a text. Usually Justin found a way to make some sort of contact when he was working undercover.

“No.” His father shifted in his leather recliner and shot a cursory glance toward the kitchen. “I talked to a friend of mine at the police department,” he said in a low voice. “He couldn’t tell me much except that the case Justin is assigned to is still active.”

“Any idea what it involves?” J.T. asked. Justin’s last case had ended with the bust of several major players in an auto-theft ring. The men were currently on trial and according to his brother, none of them had figured out he was a cop. And now it was unlikely they’d recognize him even if they saw him—Justin was unusually adept at changing his appearance.

“No. I didn’t ask and he didn’t offer up the information.” Joe took off the glasses he wore when watching television and rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. “He went out on a limb telling me that much. I’m just glad your mother has Angie and this wedding to distract her.”

“Speaking of Angie, what was with all the questions at dinner?” J.T. stretched his arm over the top of the couch cushions. “For a minute there I thought we were in a courtroom.”

“I’m merely curious about the woman who’s about to become my daughter-in-law. I don’t believe my questions were intrusive, and Angie didn’t seem offended. She acquitted herself quite well.”

“She’s not on trial, Dad.”

“No, she’s not.” He slipped his glasses on. “But you’ve known her for a while and your mother and I have just met her. It’s only natural that we’re curious about her.”

J.T. didn’t want to admit he didn’t know much more about Angie than his parents had discovered tonight. He hoped to rectify that soon. From the moment he’d met her, Angie had intrigued him. And now he was in a position to satisfy his curiosity. They couldn’t live in the same house and not talk, right?

“I can tell you this much. She’s hiding something.”

J.T. scowled. “And you know this how?”

“Nothing tangible.” His father dipped his chin and peered at J.T. over his glasses. “Just a hunch.”

“I think you’re off base. Angie was nervous about meeting you and Mom. It’s nothing more than that.”

Joe shrugged. “You could be right.”

“I am right,” J.T. shot back, annoyed. “Angie isn’t hiding anything. She’s a private person who’s out of her comfort zone. She’s lost her job, living in a new house and she’s pregnant. I think she has the right to be apprehensive.”

“I can’t disagree with that,” his father replied. “Maybe that’s what I picked up on. Nerves.” His father paused. “How is all of this going to affect your training? When we talked after the Series you said you were going to make it a top priority this winter.”

“I’ll find the time,” J.T. replied and averted his gaze. He stared at the television but didn’t see a damn thing.

\* \* \*

After what seemed like hours of tossing and turning, Angie shoved the sheet and blanket aside and

slipped out of bed. She supposed it was natural that she couldn't fall asleep. After all, this was her first night under J.T.'s roof. Her home for the next two years.

Turning on the bedside lamp, she grabbed her robe from the end of the bed, pulled it on and left the bedroom. Seconds later, she entered the kitchen, turned on the light and quickly found the cabinet where J.T. kept his glassware. After filling a glass with water from the tap, she moved to the refrigerator and studied the workout schedule J.T. had affixed to the door with a magnet. It looked grueling; she couldn't help but admire his dedication. She loved playing softball, but she rarely did anything more than practice her pitching with Kelly at the park. But then softball wasn't her livelihood, she could afford to go light on the training.

Turning from the fridge, she set her glass on the center island countertop and idly traced the rim with her finger. All things considered, the evening had gone much better than she'd expected. The Tahoe wedding offer had taken her by surprise, and although her first instinct had been to gracefully decline, she'd found herself unable to disappoint J.T.'s mother. Or maybe it was closer to the truth to say that she'd accepted the offer to assuage her guilty conscience. J.T.'s parents had been nothing but kind to her this evening. She didn't deserve it—she was lying to them. The least she could do was make J.T.'s mother happy by agreeing to have the wedding ceremony in Lake Tahoe.

“Couldn't sleep?”

Startled by J.T.'s husky voice, Angie almost knocked her glass over. She clutched at it before it tipped, but several drops splattered on the smooth granite surface. Her heart pounded an erratic rhythm as a shirtless J.T. entered the kitchen.

“Sorry.” He flashed an apologetic smile. “I didn't mean to scare you.”

“I hope I didn't wake you.” She wiped at the droplets with her fingers. “I tried to be quiet.”

“You didn't wake me,” J.T. said as he moved to stand next to her and pried the lid off a plastic container filled with oatmeal cookies his mother had insisted they take home with them. He selected a couple of cookies, set them on the counter and then turned to open the cabinet behind him.

Wow. Just wow. His shoulders and back were like a sculpted work of art, and the way his muscles moved as he reached for a glass made her fingers itch to touch him. Why did she feel like she couldn't catch her breath? Could it be the black sweats that rode low on his hips and offered her a tantalizing view of his buns of steel? Or maybe it was the way his hair looked all sleep-tousled and sexy, tempting her to run her fingers through it. Or perhaps, it was those powerful arms of his—arms that had carried her with ease when he'd—

Stop it, Angie. Don't go there.

Jerking her gaze from J.T.'s remarkable body, Angie lifted her glass and took a long gulp of the cold water. Maybe it would cool her off. Nope. No such luck. Even after emptying her glass, the blood in her veins still ran hot.

“We need to talk.”

Angie set her glass on the granite then pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. Maybe she had a temperature. Her skin felt normal. How could that be? “About what?” she asked, lowering her hand.

“About the wedding.” J.T. opened the refrigerator, pulled out a quart of milk and poured the last of it into a glass. He set the empty container on the counter. “We don't have to get married in Lake Tahoe. Did you agree to it because you didn't want to hurt my mother's feelings?”

“Partly,” Angie admitted. “But it also dawned on me that you're the first of their sons to get married. It seemed like the right thing to do. I'm okay with it, really.”

J.T. regarded her thoughtfully. “Thank you for considering their feelings,” he said as he reached

for a cookie and ate it in two bites.

Damn. It was hard not to stare at his chest. The man was seriously fit; there wasn't an ounce of fat anywhere. He was all sinew and muscle, a professional athlete in his prime.

Just like her father had been when he'd first cheated on her mother.

So far, J.T. didn't seem to possess the same character traits as her father but that didn't mean they weren't there, waiting to emerge.

Banishing thoughts of her father, Angie brushed her hair over her shoulder. J.T.'s gaze lowered briefly before he grabbed the other cookie, wolfed it down and then finished off the glass of milk.

"Would you mind if I start using the kitchen?" she asked. "I'd like to make some of my grandmother's recipes."

"Have at it. I'm not as bad of a cook as my mom may have led you to believe, but it's not something I enjoy doing."

"I enjoy it. It relaxes me." Angie couldn't tear her gaze from J.T. as he moved to the sink and, with quick efficient movements, rinsed his glass, then put it in the dishwasher. Good Lord. He even completed simple chores with athletic grace. "My grandmother was a marvelous cook. I have all her recipes. Some of them I haven't made in years because my stove was so small."

"If you want to test them out I'll be more than happy to be your guinea pig." He looked at her and grinned devilishly. "I love to eat. My family calls me the human garbage disposal."

Angie laughed. "I did notice you had three helpings of the tri-tip tonight."

"I'm in training. I need the protein." J.T. put his hand on his hips. The stance drew her eyes to his ripped abs. He had a stomach she could bounce a quarter off of. Was it her imagination or was he in even better shape than the night they'd slept together? Was that even possible?

"What about carbs?" she asked before her thoughts could venture into dangerous territory. "Do you eat bread and pasta?"

"I eat everything." J.T.'s mouth twisted with a grimace. "Except anchovies."

Angie wrinkled her nose. "That's one thing I haven't had a craving for. The smell of them makes me gag."

"Hey, how's the morning sickness?" he asked with evident concern.

"Much better. I haven't vomited in two days. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that the puking has ended for good."

J.T. threw his head back and laughed. Angie chuckled, amazed they were having such a normal conversation considering he was half naked and she had absolutely nothing on underneath her robe.

"I'm gonna hit the sack," J.T. said, glancing at the clock on the microwave. "Are you coming up?"

"Yes. I think I can sleep now." Yeah. Right. Who was she kidding? Sleep would be even harder to come by now.

She preceded him out of the kitchen, acutely aware of him following behind her. Her body seemed attuned to his and, with each step up the staircase, she couldn't help but imagine him following her into her room, slipping her robe from her body and then instructing her to sit on the edge of the bed. Her pulse pounded an erratic rhythm as she pictured watching him as he peeled off his sweats to stand before her in all his masculine glory.

A fiery ball of need gathered low in her belly as she took her fantasy even further. With raw sexual heat burning in his eyes, J.T. would kneel before her, glide his big strong hands over her thighs and then gently part them to reveal her hot, throbbing pussy to his gaze. Then with deliberate intent, he would lean forward and—

Angie gasped as her foot slipped on the edge of the top stair and she lost her balance. Falling

backward, she cried out in surprise as J.T.'s arms snaked around her waist and caught her.

"I've got you," J.T. said, his breath warm on her ear. That coupled with the heat of his skin as her body pressed against his sent a carnal yearning ricocheting through her body like one of those old-fashioned pinball machines. "You okay?" he asked as he guided her from the top step to the landing.

"I-I'm fine," she whispered, wholly aware that his arms were still around her and her body was pressed intimately against his.

"Be careful on those stairs," he said in a low husky voice and then relinquished his hold on her. Torn between relief and disappointment, she took a step forward to put some space between them.

"I will," she said and turned. "Thanks for saving me."

"No problem." He grinned. "I'll see you in the morning." He headed down the hall, then stopped and looked back at her, his eyes solemn. "Angie, I know this is an adjustment for both of us. If there's anything I can do to help make it easier, I hope you'll let me know."

"Thank you," she said softly.

Thirty minutes later, Angie was back in bed and still unable to sleep. How could she when she couldn't seem to get that darn fantasy out of her mind. The problem wasn't the fantasy, they were healthy and normal. The problem was, with J.T. just yards away, she wasn't at all sure she could settle for fantasies. Not when the real thing was just down the hall.

## Chapter Nine

Feeling like a fraud, and an uncomfortable one at that, Angie opened the dressing room door and stepped out into the bridal shop's private viewing area wearing the fourth wedding gown the salon's consultant had selected for her to try on. As she moved, the rustle of the floor length taffeta skirt reminded her of the crunching sound dry leaves made when they were stepped on. Not exactly the kind of entrance a bride wanted to make on her wedding day.

Even before she'd taken it off the hanger she'd known the dress wasn't for her. For one thing, it was way too formal and for another, the long lace sleeves made her arms itch like crazy. But since J.T.'s mother had insisted on helping her find a wedding dress, and Angie really liked Sharon, she felt obligated to try on every single dress the consultant had recommended.

"Well, that's hideous." Sharon peered at her intently from one of the pink satin brocade covered chairs opposite the dressing room.

Relieved, Angie heaved a sigh. "Thank God, you think so too."

With a tilt of her head, Sharon surveyed Angie from head to toe. "Honestly, I don't like anything you've tried on so far. Each dress has overwhelmed you." She put a finger to her chin and tapped. "With your height and slender frame, I'm thinking something simpler is in order."

"I agree. I'd prefer something shorter and sleeveless." Angie tugged the sleeves, dying to get out of the dress. "This lace is killing me."

With a sympathetic nod, Sharon stood. "I saw a dress in the showroom that just might work. Why don't you take off that monstrosity and I'll be back in a few minutes."

After Sharon left the room, Angie hurried back into the dressing room and removed the offending gown. While waiting for Sharon to return, she couldn't help but check out her reflection in the three-way mirror. Slender frame? Yeah, maybe from the front her body still looked the same, but the side view told a different story. Her baby bump was a bit more pronounced than it had been last week and her breasts were definitely fuller. Still, at this point, and with her clothes on, her condition wasn't blatantly obvious. But in another month, anyone looking at her would be able to tell she was pregnant.

Angie rested her hand on her rounded belly. Pregnant. It still seemed so surreal and so...so terrifying. From all accounts, childbirth was extremely painful and, with her luck, she'd probably be in hard labor for days. She wasn't afraid of pain; in fact, she had a high tolerance for it. Just a year ago she'd pitched six innings with a sprained wrist. It wasn't her pitching hand, but it was still painful each time she had to use her glove. But a sprained wrist and pushing something the size of a small watermelon out of her vagina were two totally different things.

Not being able to play softball was another casualty of being pregnant, and one she wasn't happy with. The game had been a part of her life since she'd been a kid and not only did she enjoy it, it was good exercise. What was she going to do to stay active now? Most exercise was boring. At least softball was fun.

A good five minutes passed before Sharon returned. After taking the newly selected dress from her and closing the door, Angie held it up and smiled. Now this was more like it. All the other dresses looked like just what they were—elaborate wedding gowns. This one, an ivory tea length halter dress with a beaded bodice and an empire waist, while informal, was absolutely exquisite.

Sharon has excellent taste, Angie thought after she'd pulled it on, zipped it and viewed her reflection in the mirror. It was perfect, just perfect, and for one brief moment she forgot why she was marrying J.T. and got caught up in the beauty of the dress.



“What’s the verdict?” Sharon called from the other side of the door. “Does it fit? Do you need a different size?”

Angie opened the door and faced her future mother-in-law. “It’s gorgeous,” she said, brushing back her hair back and turning around in a circle to show off the dress.

Sharon’s eyes welled with tears and she put a hand to her chest. “Oh my.”

“Are you okay?” Concerned, Angie reached out and put her hand on Sharon’s arm. “Do you want to sit down?”

“No.” Sharon blinked. “I’m fine. It’s just...you look so beautiful. Like an angel.”

Angie’s face flushed with warmth; no doubt, she was blushing. “Thank you.”

“You’ll need a halter bra.” Sharon’s gaze lowered to her chest, then lifted. “And maybe instead of a veil, we could pull your hair back with some jewel clips. And what about shoes? Do you have shoes?”

“No,” Angie said as she glimpsed the price tag and cold reality smacked her in the face. One of her goals before the end of her two years with J.T. was to add to her savings account not squander it on a dress she’d only wear once.

“They’ve got shoes here.” Sharon paused. “Oh, and the dress and the shoes are a gift from me to you.”

Angie lifted a hand in protest. “Sharon, that’s so generous of you, but I couldn’t possibly accept something so extravagant.”

“Yes, you can. And you will.” Sharon patted Angie’s arm. “Consider it a wedding gift.”

“But you’ve already arranged for the wedding in Tahoe,” Angie said, feeling guiltier by the second that Sharon was so caught up in a wedding that was nothing more than a business arrangement. “I don’t deserve all of this.”

Sharon’s eyes softened. “Yes, you do. Oh, honey, I know the circumstances are far from normal, but that doesn’t mean you deserve to get married in a musty old courtroom. We’re talking about your wedding day. A day you and J.T. will remember for the rest of your lives. Let me help make it special. Because you do deserve it. You really do.”

Angie’s eyes blurred with tears. As bizarre as the thought was, she wished her mother felt the same way. But she didn’t. She still believed Angie was making a mistake and had declined to attend the wedding. Lake Tahoe was too far to drive, she’d said. And Livvie would be back in school and Selena didn’t want her missing any days. They were excuses. Excuses her mother wouldn’t have made if Scott was the groom instead of J.T.

Damn it. Why was she getting all weepy? It wasn’t like she and J.T. were in love. And if her mother did attend the wedding, she might accidentally spill the beans about the sham marriage. For everyone’s sake, that couldn’t happen.

“Let me do this for you, Angie. Please.”

Angie nodded and blinked away her tears, unable to disappoint the woman with whom, in just two short days, she’d forged an unexpected connection. So far nothing was turning out like she’d planned. Somewhere, Grandma Sophia was saying—you know what they say about best laid plans.

A smile wreathed Sharon’s face. “Okay, now that you’ve found the perfect dress, let’s find the perfect pair of shoes.”

\* \* \*

The following Tuesday, after finishing his last set of biceps curls, J.T. replaced the bar bell on the

rack, picked up his towel and sports drink bottle and went in search of his brother. Although it was noon—a prime workout time on weekdays—the gym was fairly quiet. The reason for that, J.T. surmised, was due to Thanksgiving. The place would be dead until January when everyone woke from their holiday stupor and realized they'd gained weight. Then, in a mad frenzy, they'd hit the gym hard to try to undo the damage caused by the turkey, stuffing and pie.

As expected, he found Jake in his office just off the main entrance. The door was open but J.T. stopped short when he saw Jake wasn't alone. Sitting across from his brother at the round table next to Jake's cluttered desk was the new member J.T. had seen Jake talking to before Thanksgiving.

"Come on in." Jake gestured with his hand.

J.T. returned the blonde's friendly smile, then looked at Jake. "Are you sure? I can come back."

Jake leaned back in his chair which, judging by the creaking noise it made, could use a liberal dose of WD-40. "Melissa and I were just finishing up." He looked at the blonde. "Melissa, this is my brother..."

"J.T. Sawyer. I recognized you immediately," Melissa said as she shifted in the chair, tugging at her T-shirt the same self-conscious way Jake used to do before he'd lost weight. "Congrats on the World Series win."

"Thanks." J.T. grinned. Damn, but hearing that never got old. "You're new here, right?"

"Yes. I was just talking to your brother about his personal training package."

J.T. flung his towel over his shoulder and rested against the door frame. "Well, if you're into torture then Jake's your man."

"Don't listen to him, Melissa," Jake said with a smirk. "J.T.'s in the best shape of his life because of me."

"It's just like you to take all the credit," J.T. shot back. "I'm the one doing all the work."

"But I'm the one who identified the weaknesses in your old routine that were preventing you from making any progress."

"Who said I wasn't making progress?" J.T. demanded.

"You did. You're the one who asked me to train you during the off season, remember?"

J.T. clamped his mouth shut. Shit. There was no arguing that. His brother had not only changed up his weight training regimen, but had varied his cardio workouts as well. The results had been almost immediate.

"And I guess that settles that," Melissa said and stood up. Again, she tugged at her black T-shirt—this time pulling the hem down over her ample hips. Jake said she had a pretty face and he'd been right. Her light brown eyes sparkled with amusement as she looked between him and Jake. "You two remind me of me and my sister." She reached for the pink water bottle on Jake's desk. "I'm off to do my cardio."

"Give the elliptical a try," Jake advised as J.T. stepped aside to let her pass. "The best way to keep from getting bored is to switch it up. Once I start working with you, we'll talk about things you can do outside the gym to get your heart rate up and in your target zone."

"I can't wait for the torture to begin." Melissa winked at J.T. and left the office.

J.T. laughed and moved to the chair she'd vacated. "So Melissa signed up for personal training?"

Jake closed the file on the table in front of him and nodded. "Our first session is next week."

"She'll be a knockout once she loses some weight."

"What's more important is that she'll lower her risk for life threatening illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes," Jake said with a frown that J.T. found puzzling. It wasn't like his comment was an insult.

“That goes without saying.” J.T. relaxed in the chair. “So we’re set for Friday, right? I can’t get married without a best man.”

“Will I have the honor of meeting the bride before the wedding, or do I have to wait until she’s at the altar?” Jake’s frown had turned to a scowl and his tone was edged with sarcasm. “Or maybe you’d prefer me to wait until your kid is born.”

J.T. shifted uncomfortably. His brother was none too happy to have been kept out of the loop. “I wanted to tell you, but things were up in the air with Angie so I decided to wait until things were finalized.”

“Well, now I know why you’ve been so preoccupied.” Jake leaned forward and folded his arms on his desk. “You could have talked to me, you know. I would have kept it between us.”

“It’s not that I didn’t trust you. It all happened so fast. When Angie told me she was pregnant, I was blown away.” J.T. shook his head. “Man, Dad was right. It only takes one time.”

“One time?” Jake straightened in his chair. “You were with her only once?” he asked incredulously. “Mom said you’ve known Angie for two years.”

“I said I met her two years ago. I never said we’ve been dating the whole time.”

“That’s not what Mom and Dad think.”

J.T. shrugged and popped the top of his bottle. “I can’t help what they believe.”

“But you didn’t set them straight.”

“And I’m not going to. Dad was quick to suspect that Angie is using me for my money and that’s not the case. And for the record, she didn’t even want to marry me at first.”

“What changed her mind?”

“I’m sure the fact she got laid off from her job was a deciding factor. But she’s not out to fleece me, if that’s what you’re thinking.” J.T. chugged the flavored sports drink and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Seeing Jake’s skeptical gaze, he decided to come clean. “Angie and I have an arrangement.”

Jake’s brows knitted. “An arrangement? What does that mean?”

“It means that she and I have agreed to stay married for two years. We both get what we want.”

“And what’s that?”

“Angie doesn’t have to worry about a roof over her head or paying her medical bills.”

“And what do you get out of this arrangement?”

“I know a lot of guys don’t care about having a kid when they’re not married, but I do.”

Jake cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. “Are you sure this is just a business deal?”

“What else would it be?” J.T. paused. “I’d appreciate it if you kept this between us. I don’t want Angie worrying about what the rest of the family thinks about her. Neither of us thought about protection the night we were together.”

“I won’t say anything,” Jake said. “But are you absolutely sure you want to do this?”

“Yes, I’m sure. And so is Angie.” J.T. tamped down his irritation. He was tired of justifying their marriage. “We’re doing what’s right for the baby.”

“But is it the right thing for the two of you? From what you’ve said, you’re basically strangers. What do you really know about this woman?”

What did he know about her? Not much, except she was beautiful. And that he was almost positive she’d had nothing on under that wisp of a robe she’d been wearing when he’d found her in the kitchen the other night. Between those sexy corkscrew curls of hers and the imprint of her nipples against the silky fabric, it was all he could do to get out of the kitchen before his damn cock betrayed him with proof of his arousal. And then, when she’d slipped on the stairs and he caught her in his

arms, her soft floral scent and the feel of her body against his had almost sent him over the edge. Despite the primal instincts bombarding his senses, he'd relinquished his hold on her and walked away. After that, sleep had been hard to come by.

"I know enough." J.T. recapped his bottle and stood. "I'm gonna hit the showers. If you're off early tonight, why don't you stop by and meet Angie?" He grinned. "That way you'll recognize her at the altar."

\* \* \*

Angie had just pulled her car into her side of the garage when she saw J.T.'s truck in her rearview mirror. As he eased the truck into the garage beside her, she turned off the engine and got out of the car. One of the nice things about living in the suburbs of Sacramento was being able to park her car in a garage. Although she loved San Francisco, parking had been the bane of her existence. She didn't miss driving around North Beach looking for an open spot.

"How was your workout?" she asked as J.T. slid out of his truck and closed the door. Moving to the trunk, she pressed a button on her key remote and the lid popped open.

"Grueling. My brother is trying to kill me," J.T. grumbled as he moved between their vehicles and came to a halt beside her. "Before lifting, he made me do wind sprints on the treadmill. It was brutal."

Angie inhaled his clean scent, noting that his hair was still damp under the baseball cap he had turned backward on his head. He looked more like an overgrown kid rather than the highly paid athlete he was. "You don't look the worse for it," she said, letting her gaze roam over him freely.

"Tell that to my aching muscles." J.T. grimaced as he reached into her trunk and lifted the two grocery bags from inside. "Hey, I thought you were going dress shopping with my mom."

"I did." Angie closed the trunk. "She dropped me off about an hour ago." He stepped back to let her precede him toward the house. "The shopping trip was successful. We found a dress and a pair of shoes to match," she said as she unlocked the door to the large laundry room that led to the kitchen. "After I got home I decided to try one of Grandma Sophia's recipes but your fridge is pretty bare so I got in the car and went in search of a grocery store."

Angie passed through the laundry room, opened the door to the kitchen and with J.T. following, she set her purse and keys on the center island. J.T. deposited the bags on the smooth surface and turned to look at her. "We need to talk about money."

"What about it?" Angie tensed, his words reminded her of exactly why she was here.

"When we get back from Tahoe, I'll go to the bank and open a joint account. You can use that for whatever you need."

"Fine." Angie nodded and wondered why she wasn't jumping for joy. After all, money was the reason why she agreed to marry him. "I'll keep track of what I spend and give you all the receipts."

"You don't have to do that. Just let me know if you need to make a large purchase so I can transfer money into the account to cover it."

"What kind of large purchase would I make?"

"I don't know." J.T. shrugged. "Maybe some stuff for the nursery."

"Nursery?" Angie echoed. "You have a nursery?"

J.T. chuckled. "Not yet. But there are two bedrooms between yours and mine. One of them I've been using as an office but the other one could be the baby's room."

Angie lowered her hands and rested one on her stomach. A nursery. Just one more thing that made

the baby real. “We have time,” she said, not wanting to face that reality just yet. “Maybe we could start with doing something with the living room.”

“It’s sad, isn’t it?”

Angie couldn’t help but smile at his woeful expression. “Let’s just say it’s got potential.”

“You don’t have to spare my feelings. I know it’s as impersonal as a hotel room. Feel free to do whatever you want. Anything would be an improvement.” A wry grin quirked his lips. “My only request is that we don’t get rid of the flat screen.” Before she could reply he looked at the grocery bags. “What recipe are you trying out?”

“Beef stroganoff.”

“Will there be enough for three?” He returned his gaze to hers. “My brother Jake is dropping by after work. He wants to meet you.”

“There’ll be plenty,” she assured him even as her stomach churned. Great. Another Sawyer to contend with. Would Jake be as accepting of her as J.T.’s parents had been? “Does he know about our...our situation?”

“Yes,” J.T. said. “And he’s not going to say anything. To anyone.”

## Chapter Ten

If J.T. had a superstitious bone in his body, he might be tempted to believe that the first drops of rain that dotted the windshield of his truck were an omen of things to come. Unlike many of his teammates though, he didn't believe that eating the same food before each game secured a win, or taking the exact number of swings each time he was at the plate guaranteed a hit. So instead of worrying that the threat of rain on his wedding day was bad luck, he turned the wipers on low and eased up on the gas. He might not be superstitious, but he was smart enough not to push it by speeding on wet asphalt.

Next to him, Angie was silent. And had been for the past ten miles. He'd hoped that after five days of living together they'd be more at ease with each other, but it just wasn't happening. Angie wasn't talkative. At least not with him. But with Jake it was another story. The night Jake had dropped by for dinner, he and Angie hit it off immediately, and when Angie expressed an interest in finding some sort of exercise she could do as her pregnancy advanced, Jake offered to sign her up at the gym and get her started on the fitness program he'd specifically designed for expectant mothers.

Seeing Angie's animated face and ready smile for his brother annoyed the shit out of him. It seemed that she'd warmed up to every Sawyer except him. Even Josh, who'd stopped by the house before heading back to school, had managed to break through Angie's quiet reserve when he promised to attend the wedding even if he had to cut class and incur the wrath of his professor.

J.T. supposed Angie's reticence was to be expected considering the circumstances. They were strangers living in the same house, tiptoeing around each other as they got ready to make the biggest commitment two people could make. One day soon that wall of politeness between them would crack, or at least he hoped it would. Maybe then they could get to the business of building a real relationship. And by real relationship, he meant one that included sex.

Living with a woman as beautiful and sexy as Angie and not being able to make love to her was even more difficult than he'd imagined. Every room in the house—except his bedroom—was filled with her soft feminine scent and did things to him that made it hard to get to sleep at night. Despite his best efforts to forget, J.T. hadn't been able to erase the memory of that one hot night when Angie had lowered her guard and then proceeded to rock his world. Most men might have been relieved to find her gone the next day. But not him. Ever since he could remember he'd had women throwing themselves at him left and right, yet the only woman he wanted was the one who barely noticed he was alive.

"Do you need a pit stop?" he asked, noting the green mileage sign that indicated they were approaching the town of Placerville.

"No." Angie brushed back a mass of dark curls and met his sidelong glance. "I'm good. Thanks."

"I'm sorry your mom and sister aren't coming to the wedding," he said, still irritated that no one from Angie's family planned to attend. Despite her denial that it didn't matter, J.T. wasn't buying it. Granted, it was short notice, but would it kill Angie's mother to support her daughter? It wasn't like she was marrying an ax murderer, or worse, a member of the Los Angeles Dodgers.

"It's for the best. My mother still hasn't gotten over the fact that I'm not marrying Scott."

J.T. tightened his grip on the steering wheel. This was Angie's first mention of her former fiancé since she'd accepted his marriage proposal. But that didn't mean she hadn't been thinking about the guy. "Have you talked to him?"

"No." He felt her eyes on him. "Would it bother you if I had?"

Hell yes, it would bother me. "No," he said, keeping his attention on the road. The thought of any

other man touching Angie made him see red and—as illogical as it was—had from the moment he'd met her. When she'd told him that she and Scott had never slept together it was all he could do not to pump his fist in the air and cheer.

“Will I be meeting Justin at the wedding?”

Her question made him forget the former fiancé and think about someone much more important.

“No. We still haven't heard from him.”

“You're worried, aren't you?”

“Yes. He's never gone this long without contacting us in some way.”

“My grandmother always used to say that no news is good news.” She shifted in her seat and cast him a reassuring smile. “If something bad had happened your parents would have received a call.”

“You're probably right.” J.T. signaled and eased the truck into the slower lane to let the car behind him pass. The drizzle had turned into steady rain that made a forceful drumming sound as it pelted the truck. “So I know about your mom, your sister and your grandmother. How come you never mention your father?”

“He died several years ago,” she said after several long seconds.

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't be.” Her voice turned hard. “I'm not.”

Never let it be said he didn't know when to change the subject. “Did you make an appointment with the ob-gyn your doctor in San Francisco referred you to?”

“Not yet,” she replied in a much softer tone. “I thought I'd do that on Monday. Why?”

“I just want to make sure I don't schedule anything so I can go with you.”

“You want to go to my pre-natal appointments with me?”

“Yes.” J.T. turned his head and met her gaze. Why did she look so surprised? “I want to be a part of the whole process,” he said and saw her blink away the sudden moisture that glistened in her eyes. Without a word, she averted her head to stare out the side window. It had to be hormones, right? Or could it be something else? Maybe she was wishing it was Scott she was marrying instead of him.

He looked back to the road and hoped the surprise he had planned for her this afternoon would cheer her up. Angie thought she could get married without her friends or family, but he thought differently. In a few hours she would find out she wasn't as alone as she might think.

\* \* \*

The view from the bridal retreat at the Montblanc Resort was breathtaking. Despite her nerves, Angie couldn't tear her gaze from the white-capped Sierra Nevada peaks in the distance or the majestic pines close to the resort whose branches hung heavy from the weight of freshly fallen snow. The phrase winter wonderland was one used often this time of year and as corny as it was, it was the only thing she could think of to describe the grandeur before her.

Due to the snowfall that had begun about ten miles outside of Placerville, they'd been slowed by heavy traffic on Highway 50 and had arrived at the resort with only thirty minutes before the ceremony was scheduled to begin. In lieu of checking in, both she and J.T. had been directed to separate bride and groom retreats adjacent to the chapel where they could change into their wedding attire.

With Sharon's help, her make-up had been retouched and her mass of hair was now held back with two stunning diamond clips and fell in soft waves down her back. The dress was still as gorgeous as Angie remembered and with its empire waist, it was impossible to tell she was pregnant.

In less than thirty minutes she'd been transformed into a bride.

Turning from the large picture window, Angie put a hand to her churning stomach. It wasn't morning sickness—thankfully, that had tapered off, and when she did have a bout of it, it wasn't as severe as in the beginning. No, the queasiness that threatened to overtake her was a by-product of the deception she and J.T. were perpetrating on his family. If the Sawyers were a cold, loathsome family it would be so much easier to pretend the marriage was real. But no, the Sawyers were the most genuine people she'd ever met.

Then there was J.T. He was so not like she'd imagined him to be. Instead of an egotistical jock who only thought of his own wants and needs, he was the exact opposite. Any time he left the house, he offered to pick up anything she needed on the way back, and on the night his brother Jake had stopped by for dinner and she'd mentioned she'd been craving maraschino cherries (of all things) he'd driven to the grocery store and bought her a jar. And now he wanted to go her pre-natal appointments with her.

Lifting a hand to her neck, Angie fingered the aquamarine necklace Sharon had insisted she borrow. She'd said it took care of something old, because it was given to her on her own wedding day almost forty years ago, something new because it was new to Angie, something borrowed, and something blue. It was a generous gesture from a woman she'd barely known a week—a woman who had welcomed Angie into her family with no reservations whatsoever.

There's still time to stop the wedding. She glanced at the clock hanging on the wall opposite the window. Calm down, woman. It's only two years. Two years of being married to the sexiest man alive. Damn it. Why couldn't J.T. be like her father? Marrying him would be so much easier if he was a cruel and self-absorbed womanizing lout.

The double knock on the door startled her and her heart began to thud so loudly it reverberated in her eardrums. It could only be Sharon, who'd promised to return after a quick check on J.T.

"Come in," she called out, trying to stop the trembling of her legs. Jeez. One would think she was headed for the guillotine instead of the altar. Taking a deep breath, she moved toward the vanity table in the corner of the room to retrieve the small bouquet of pink roses that Sharon had picked out for her.

"Surprise."

With a gasp of recognition, Angie whirled around. "Oh my God. What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't let my best friend get married without me," Kelly Maxwell said as she closed the door behind her and flashed a wide grin. Kelly put her hands on her hips and gave Angie a quick once-over. "You absolutely look stunning. But then, you always do."

Angie lifted her hand to her mouth, relief washing over her like a gentle summer breeze. As much as she liked J.T.'s family, they couldn't replace her own, and Kelly was as much of a sister to her as Livvie was. Until this moment she hadn't been able to admit how much she needed someone she loved here with her on her wedding day.

Angie lowered her hand as Kelly moved toward her and wrapped her in a quick hug. When she pulled back, her amber eyes were filled with concern. "Why didn't you call me?"

"The last time we talked you were busy getting ready for your sister's wedding. I didn't want to distract you from that."

"Distract me?" Kelly stepped back, a frown knitting her dark brows. "Kayla's wedding isn't until New Year's Eve. That's a month away and everything is going like clockwork. I have time to be here, Angie. And what's more important is I want to be here. Especially when I found out your mom and sister are pulling a no-show."



“My mom is...” Angie began and then held her hand up. “Wait. Never mind that, how did you know the wedding was today and here in Lake Tahoe?”

“J.T. called me.” Kelly adjusted the collar of the garnet wrap dress that hugged her statuesque body. “And it’s a good thing he did.” Kelly pinned her with an accusatory gaze. “Or else I wouldn’t have known a damn thing about it.”

A pang of remorse shot through Angie. She’d been so wrapped up in her problems she’d forgotten about her best friend. “I’m sorry. It’s just that this has all happened so fast. J.T. and I originally planned to get married at the courthouse in Sacramento and then his parents offered us a wedding here and...and I didn’t have the heart to disappoint them.”

Kelly wasn’t so easily mollified. “You still could have called me. I can only imagine how hard this is for you.”

Angie grimaced. “If only you knew.”

“What does that mean? Are you getting cold feet?”

“Nothing is like I thought it would be. Nothing.” Angie sighed and smoothed a palm over the silky fabric of her dress. “J.T.’s family is wonderful, and J.T. has been nothing but kind.” So kind he’d called Kelly so she’d have someone she cared about by her side today. Everything she’d assumed about him was proving to be just that...an assumption.

“And that’s a problem?”

It was a big problem, but she couldn’t admit that to Kelly. Aside from J.T. and Jake, the only person privy to the exact nature of their marriage arrangement was her mother. As far as the rest of the world was concerned she was doing the right thing for the baby. Which she was, but in the end she doubted anyone else would see it that way.

A knock on the door spared Angie from answering. Sharon opened the door and peeked inside. “It’s time,” she said with her usual warm smile. “And it looks like you’ve got a maid of honor.”

“Damn straight she does.” Kelly looked from Sharon to Angie and grinned. “Let’s get this party started.”

\* \* \*

The wedding chapel wasn’t exactly what J.T. had been expecting. The word chapel had slightly religious overtones so he’d imagined rows of wooden pews, stained glass windows and an elaborate altar. Instead, the room looked like any other hotel banquet room except for the spectacular view of the Sierra Nevada Mountains that surrounded the Lake Tahoe basin.

The altar consisted of two Roman style pillars that flanked the large picture window. Atop each pillar was a large bouquet of red roses arranged with some sort of unidentified greenery. His brother Josh was into photography so he’d brought his camera and, after taking several shots of the altar, was now positioned opposite the window at the back of the room so he could take pictures of Angie as she walked down the aisle. Despite his recent heartbreak, Josh seemed in good spirits and in honor of the occasion, had pulled his shoulder length hair into a ponytail and managed to finagle himself into a suit and tie.

Between the altar and the doors at the back of the room were several rows of chairs covered with crisp white slipcovers. Beside each aisle chair was a lighted candle set in a deep clear glass container. It was a nice touch, as was the instrumental piano music that played softly in the background.

The double doors were closed now, but in less than ten minutes the ceremony would begin. Very

shortly, he and Angie would be husband and wife. And in about five months they'd be parents. One night had changed both of their lives forever. He only hoped to be the kind of husband and father his father was. If he could do that, he'd be ahead of the game.

"Are you nervous?" Jake, who was standing beside him, asked.

J.T. ran a finger under his collar. "No. Do I look nervous?" he asked looking from Jake to Matt, who'd arrived with Kelly well before he and Angie had made it to the resort. Evidently everyone had listened to the weather reports and hit the road early. Everyone except him and Angie. They'd been discussing the room situation for tonight and had lost track of time. They'd finally decided on one room with two beds, for appearances sake. On his wedding night he'd be sleeping in the same room with his wife, but not in the same bed. Something was seriously wrong with that picture.

Matt squinted. "Is that flop sweat on your forehead?"

J.T. wiped his brow and found it dry. He scowled as Jake laughed and Matt shot him an amused grin. "Do you have the rings?" he asked Jake.

Jake's eyes widened. "Rings?"

"I gave them to you the night you came over for dinner," he said as Jake furiously patted his jacket pockets. "Please do not tell me you forgot them."

"I don't think he has them," Matt chimed in as Jake looked up with a stricken expression on his face.

"Son of a bitch." J.T. kept his voice low and ran a hand through his hair. This was not the way to start off his marriage. "You're the best man. That means you're in charge of the rings."

"See. This is why I should have been the best man." Matt smirked. "I'd never forget the rings."

"I had them this morning." Jake stuck a hand in his pants pocket, then grinned. "Here they are," he said and triumphantly held up the dark blue felt bag that held the simple white gold bands J.T. and Angie had picked out the day they'd applied for their marriage license.

Over Matt's shoulder, J.T. saw his mother enter the room with the minister following close behind her. "It's time," he said as his heart began to pound.

"Are you sure about this?" Matt asked in a low voice.

No. I'm not sure of anything right now, J.T. wanted to say. But instead he looked at Matt, swallowed hard and nodded.

Matt clapped J.T.'s back with a firm hand. "Then relax, man. After winning the World Series, getting married is a breeze."

Easy for him to say.

\* \* \*

Seated beside J.T. at the round table in the private banquet room J.T.'s parents had reserved for their reception dinner, Angie was aware of two things. The slim wedding band on her left ring finger and J.T.'s hard thigh pressed against hers. The ring signified that she was now J.T.'s wife, and the way her body hummed from the innocent touch of his leg against hers signified that fighting her attraction to him would be pretty damn difficult.

Across from her, Kelly and Matt had their heads close together and were speaking in low tones. Anyone looking at them could see they were in love. The meaningful glances they exchanged and Matt's proprietary arm around Kelly's shoulders were dead giveaways. If the wait staff didn't know any better, they'd probably assume that Matt and Kelly had been the ones who had been married today, not her and J.T.

Married. It still didn't seem real. But the ring on her finger was proof that it was.

The ceremony had been a blur. Her nerves, which were already shot, had been stretched as tight as a drum when Joe Sawyer walked her down the aisle. With each step closer to J.T., who looked incredibly handsome in his dark gray suit, crisp white shirt and blue silk tie, she'd almost bolted. It was only because of the baby that she didn't turn tail and run.

Before she knew it the minister had pronounced them man and wife and instructed J.T. to kiss his bride. After a slight hesitation, he pressed his firm mouth against hers, but instead of a brief peck, J.T.'s lips lingered just long enough on hers to cause them to tingle, and deep in the center of her being was a hungry throb that didn't want to be denied. Obviously her traitorous body remembered exactly what else J.T. could do with those lips of his.

"Mom, aren't you going to tell Angie and J.T. about your surprise?" Josh, who was sitting on Angie's left asked as he reached for his glass of sparkling cider. Cider was also in her glass. Whoever came up with the rule that pregnant women couldn't drink was number one on her hit list right now.

"Surprise?" Angie looked at Sharon and then J.T., who just shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"I do love a surprise," Kelly said with a devilish grin. "Don't you, Angie?"

Considering the last surprise she'd been on the receiving end of was a positive sign on a pee-stick Angie was tempted to say no, but instead she just nodded.

"Don't keep us in suspense, Mom," Jake said.

"It's nothing elaborate," Sharon said, and beamed at them. "I took the liberty of changing your room reservation to the honeymoon suite."

"You did what?" J.T. went rigid in his chair as Angie's mouth gaped open.

"Your father and I upgraded you to the honeymoon suite."

Oh dear Lord, I did hear that correctly. Angie reached for her glass. It wasn't champagne, but it would have to do. There was only one bed in the honeymoon suite. She knew this because when she'd made the reservation she'd checked the different suites available on the resort's website.

Angie gulped down her cider but it wasn't strong enough to ease the tension that curled tight in her stomach. It sucked that she couldn't drink—getting drunk seemed like an excellent way to get through the night.

Calm the heck down, Angie. It's only one night. You were going to spend the night with him anyway, remember? Yes, but that was in a room with two beds. That was different and somehow, much safer. Ever since that night in the kitchen she'd tried so hard to erase the image of J.T.'s amazing body out of her mind, but nothing worked. And J.T. didn't make it easy on her. Every night after dinner, he strolled out to the hot tub in nothing but a pair of swim trunks. Not that it mattered—she'd already seen him naked and that glorious image was seared on her brain forever.

Feeling the weight of J.T.'s gaze on her, she turned her head, met his enigmatic eyes and felt her pulse quicken. The last time they'd shared a bed they hadn't done much sleeping. Or talking. Heat surged through her body at the memory of how uninhibited and wanton she'd been that night. How could she sleep in the same bed with J.T. with those erotic memories still so fresh in her mind? Or maybe the more important question was how in the world was she going to be able to pretend she didn't still want him? Because she did. She wanted him badly.

## Chapter Eleven

“So what do we do now?” Angie asked J.T. as she stood in the middle of the Montblanc’s beautiful honeymoon suite. As advertised, there was only one bed—a lovely four-poster canopy draped with ivory silk brocade that was both elegant and romantic. It was the perfect bed for amorous newlyweds to celebrate their connubial bliss. And nothing said connubial bliss like hot sweaty sex. She’d hoped the suite would contain a full size sofa, but no such luck. The only other sleeping options were two green velvet wingback chairs and a matching love seat situated in front of the window that provided an even more impressive view of the mountains than the chapel had. That meant she and J.T. would be sharing the bed. Thank God it was a king-size.

J.T. glanced at his watch. “It’s only nine o’clock. We could hit the casino for a while.”

“I’m not a big gambler,” she said, painfully aware that any normal newly married couple wouldn’t be discussing what they were going to do for the rest of the evening. They’d already be doing it. And by it, she didn’t mean gambling.

“It’s not my thing either.” J.T. unbuttoned his suit jacket and loosened his tie. “What I’d really like is to get out of this suit and take a shower.”

“Then why don’t you?” Angie gestured toward the open door of the spacious bathroom behind her. “While you’re showering I’ll check out the room service menu.” She moved to the low round table in between the chairs and the love seat and picked up a leather portfolio embossed with the Montblanc logo. “I’ve been craving chocolate all day.”

“What about the maraschino cherries?” J.T. asked with amusement as he grabbed his duffel bag from near the door and hoisted it on the bed.

“I’d love some of those, too, but I doubt they’re on the menu.” Instead of opening the portfolio, Angie watched J.T. unzip the duffel. She tried to ignore the breadth of his shoulders beneath his fitted suit jacket but it was impossible. In clothes or out of them, he was an amazing specimen. Just looking at him made her breath come a little too fast. All of a sudden that king-size bed didn’t seem big enough.

“No worries. I brought a jar with me.”

“You what?” Angie’s jaw dropped as he pulled a small jar from his bag and held it up.

“Think fast,” he said and lobbed the jar toward her. She caught it easily with one hand. “Nice catch.” A smile of admiration curved his lips. “Must be all that softball.” His gaze was riveted on her face. “I never told you this, but you pitched a helluva game that night.”

Angie didn’t have to ask which night he was referring to. Not only did the Panthers win the championship that evening, it was also the night the baby she carried inside of her had been conceived. Heat flooded her body as she remembered how J.T. made her forget everything, and everyone, with the first touch of his lips.

“Where’d you learn to pitch like that?”

“My dad. He was a ballplayer.” Damn it. Why had she said that? Sharing information about her father wasn’t something she did. She’d learned a long time ago to leave the past in the past. So why did she blurt it out like that? This was a marriage of convenience, not some lifetime partnership where she bared her soul to her husband.

J.T. cocked his head, a frown knitting his brow. “Pro ball?”

She nodded. “He was a utility player, never one of the big guns. He played for several teams during his career.”

“Did he play for the Blaze?”

“No. The A’s. Before that he played for the Royals.” Angie glanced at the jar in her hand, still amazed at J.T.’s thoughtfulness. “I don’t like to talk about him,” she said quickly, hoping to avert any further discussion of her father.

“Then we won’t.” She looked up and met J.T.’s solemn—almost tender—gaze and for some bizarre reason she wanted to run to him and throw herself into his arms. Stupid hormones. They were playing havoc with her emotions. Again. “I’m gonna hit the shower,” he said and turned to rifle through his bag.

Angie waited until J.T. was in the shower to open her small suitcase. Since they were only staying overnight she hadn’t packed much. Just something to sleep in, and clothes and underwear for tomorrow’s trip back to Sacramento. Someone—she wasn’t sure who—had brought the clothes and shoes she and J.T. had worn earlier in the day and placed them in the closet next to the bathroom. Seeing her clothes next to J.T.’s was oddly intimate and reinforced the fact that they were now husband and wife.

At the bottom of her suitcase she found what she was looking for—a pair of silky blue pajamas she’d never worn. They were a gift from her mother who wasn’t aware of Angie’s penchant for sleeping in the nude. Not that she’d be doing that tonight. Despite her attraction to J.T., having sex with him wasn’t in the plan. It would be much more difficult to leave him if she allowed herself get emotionally involved with him.

Just then, her cell phone chimed. She pulled it from the pocket of her purse and read the newly arrived text from her sister.

Sorry I wasn’t at the wedding. Mom is being a total pill. I miss u. C U at X-mas.

Angie typed a reply to Livvie, pressed send and hoped her mother would be over her snit by Christmas. Tonight at the reception, Sharon had mentioned inviting Selena and Livvie to join the Sawyers on Christmas Eve and Angie hoped they would make the drive to Sacramento. Despite her difference of opinion with her mother, it wouldn’t be Christmas without the two most important people in her life there to share it with her.

\* \* \*

Emerging from the bathroom, J.T. found Angie standing at the dresser with her slender arms lifted and her hands underneath her hair at the back of neck. She groaned as her frustrated gaze met his in the mirror. “Could you help me? I can’t seem to get the clasp of this necklace to open.”

“Sure,” he said and walked to the closet. After hanging up his suit, he moved to stand behind her—close enough to inhale her soft feminine fragrance. A jolt of heat hit him low in his gut as she lifted her long wavy hair to reveal the creamy perfection of her neck and shoulders. God help him, but he couldn’t keep from imagining sliding his hands down her shoulders and then reaching around to cup her full breasts. Blood rushed to his ears and for a moment all he heard was the pounding of his heart.

Steadying his breath, he worked the clasp with his fingers and tried not to be affected by the satiny skin of Angie’s nape. It wasn’t working. He was as affected as he’d been when he’d placed the chaste kiss on her lips at the end of the wedding ceremony. It had taken all the willpower he possessed not to exert more pressure and kiss her with all the pent-up sexual frustration that had been building inside him since August.

“It’s hard, isn’t it?” Angie murmured.

She didn’t know the half of it. His damn cock would be harder than steel in a matter of seconds if

he didn't put some distance between them. "Uh, yeah," he said and let out a breath of relief when the clasp popped open. She let go of her hair, the long soft strands brushed over his hands as she removed the necklace and set it on the dresser. Despite his best intentions, he couldn't move. His hand still rested on her nape and it was all he could do not to trail his fingers down the soft bare skin of her back. It was his wedding night, for Christ's sake, and more than anything he wanted to make love to his wife. But he'd agreed to no sex and he'd keep his word. Even if it killed him.

"I guess I'll go shower," she said, once again meeting his gaze in the mirror. Their eyes locked and the air around them shimmered with electricity. "I hope you left me some hot water," she said in a husky voice, breaking the charged silence.

That wouldn't be a problem. Not after the cold dousing he'd just subjected himself to. He wasn't particularly fond of ice cold showers but it had been a necessity. He'd been aroused ever since his first glimpse of her in the chapel. On his father's arm, she'd floated toward him, a vision in white. He'd never seen anything more beautiful.

"There's a TV in the armoire." She turned and pointed across the room, forcing J.T. to step back. He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. He didn't know which was worse, the cold shower or watching television on his wedding night. Actually, they both sucked equally hard.

"Did you call room service?" he asked, moving toward the armoire to escape the scent of her alluring perfume. But just like at home, it filled the room and made him even more aware of her.

"Not yet. I thought I'd wait until—" She broke off with a sharp gasp.

Alarmed, J.T. turned to find her halfway to the bathroom with her hands on her stomach and a look of astonishment on her face. "What's wrong?" Concern filled him as he quickly moved to her side. "Are you in pain?"

Her surprised expression turned to uncertainty. "I...I think the baby just moved."

J.T.'s pulse began to race as he tried to remember what he'd read about the baby's development. "Isn't it too early for that?"

"It can happen as early as sixteen weeks and I'm in my seventeenth week." She emitted another gasp and her eyes widened with wonder. "I felt it again," she said with breathy excitement.

"What does it feel like?"

"Like little flutters." She reached for his hand and placed it gently on her rounded belly. Through the sheer fabric of her dress, her skin felt warm and supple against his fingers. "Can you feel it?"

"No," he said, disappointed and somewhat envious that Angie was able to feel their baby move inside her. "I don't feel anything."

Angie covered his hand with hers. "You will when the baby gets a little bigger."

Standing so close to her and touching her again was more than J.T. could take. An erotic image of them entwined on the bed sizzled through his brain. He pulled his hand from hers and stepped back. "You should take that shower," he said and turned away from her confused gaze. He heard the bathroom door close and let out a controlled breath. This no-sex thing was going to be the death of him. Literally.

\* \* \*

Angie couldn't sleep. How could anyone sleep when lying just a few feet from the hottest guy in the freaking universe? Rolling to her back, she stared at the canopy and listened to the steady cadence of J.T.'s breathing. Insomnia didn't seem to be an issue for him.

Isn't he the lucky one?

It would be easy to blame her inability to fall asleep on J.T., but he was only partly to blame. Tonight her baby kicked. She'd felt the fluttering on and off for a few days and had written it off as gas. But tonight, when the flutters had become stronger and she realized it was the baby making its presence known, an unexpected feeling of joy bloomed in her heart. Placing a hand to her stomach, she waited for her little girl to move again but she'd been quiet since just before Angie showered. Like her father, she was in dreamland.

She. Like J.T., Angie was beginning to believe the baby was a girl. What would she look like? Would she have dark hair and blue eyes, or hazel eyes and tawny golden hair like J.T.? No matter who she looked like she would be beautiful, of that Angie was sure of. Just as she was sure it was up to her to give her little girl the best life possible.

She wasn't alone in that department. J.T. was intent upon doing the exact same thing. He'd more than proved that by marrying her this evening.

Damn it. He wasn't anything at all like she'd assumed.

Smothering a sigh, Angie tossed the sheet and blanket aside. Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Almost two-thirty. Much too early to hit the road to Sacramento.

Not wanting to wake J.T., she gingerly rose from the bed and followed the moonlit path to the window where she crawled onto the loveseat and stared out into the velvety night sky. There were no clouds—the storm that had passed through earlier in the day was long gone. There were, however, stars. Lots of them.

A long time ago she'd tried to count those stars. With her father. When she still believed him to be her hero. When they'd first moved to California, she'd begged him to bring her to Lake Tahoe and, shockingly, he'd been all for it. A father-daughter road trip he'd called it. Not long after and to her everlasting disgust, she discovered that he'd planned a clandestine meeting with two of his bimbos at the hotel while she was sleeping.

That was her father. A real prince of a guy. Why cheat on her mother with one woman when he could get it on with two? And that wasn't even the worst of his sins. Unbidden, moisture filled her eyes and angrily, she blinked it away. She hadn't cried over her father ever, she didn't plan to start now.

Lifting her arms to the top cushion, she rested her chin on her forearm and banished Dante DeMarco from her mind. It wasn't as easy to forget J.T. His awestruck expression when she'd felt the baby kick was priceless. Was he as scared as she was? He didn't seem to be. How was that possible? In little more than five months she was going to be someone's mother. The thought terrified her.

“Angie?”

J.T.'s voice, husky from sleep, startled her. She turned and could see his bare chest and the exquisite perfection of his face in the slant of the moonlight. Her breath jammed in her throat. And when did the room get so hot?

“Did I wake you?” she asked, surprised her voice was steady. Her equilibrium had been out of whack ever since J.T. had helped her remove the necklace. His fingers, as they'd brushed lightly over her neck, along with his freshly showered scent had sent a surge of longing through her body that, despite the cold shower she'd taken afterward, hadn't abated.

“No. I'm hungry.” He scrubbed his hand over his jaw and then ran his fingers through his tousled hair. “Do you think we can get room service at this hour?”

“I doubt it. But I'm sure something is available in the casino. Do you want to go downstairs?”

“Nah. That’s too much trouble. I’ll wait for breakfast.”

“Are you sure?” Angie smiled. “I’m not sleepy. I don’t mind going down with you.”

“Why can’t you sleep?” J.T. asked as he shoved the covers from his body and slipped out of bed. He adjusted the waistband of his navy blue sweats and then lifted his arms and stretched. A beam of moonlight illuminated the fascinating play of his muscles and washboard abs. Whatever training regimen Jake had him on was paying off in spades.

“Too much on my mind, I guess,” she said, letting her gaze follow him as he walked to the dresser and picked up the jar of maraschino cherries he’d given her earlier. “Do you normally wake up in the middle of the night to eat?”

“It’s not unusual.” He twisted the top of the jar; the suction caused it to pop as it opened. “So what’s on your mind?” he asked, moving toward her. “Maybe it’ll help if you talk it out.”

“Maybe.” She shifted on the love seat as he settled down across from her on one of the green velvet chairs. Despite her best effort not to, she stared at his chest. Not a good idea. Looking at his chest made her want to touch him which, in turn, made her lady parts tingle. She took a breath and forced her gaze upward. “Feeling the baby move tonight just made everything so...so real. My God, J.T. I’m going to be a mother and I have no freaking clue how to do that. What if I mess it up?”

“You won’t.” J.T. tossed the lid on the small round table between them. It landed on the Montblanc portfolio with a dull thud as he plucked a cherry from the jar and popped it into his mouth.

“How do you know that?” She brushed back the loose braid she’d woven her hair into before climbing into bed. “What if I drop her? Or what if she’s crying and I can’t figure out what’s wrong with her or what she needs?”

“You’ll figure it out.” J.T. reached into the jar again. Angie’s stomach rumbled. Come to think of it, she was a bit hungry too. So caught up in the thrill of the baby’s movements, she’d never called room service for her chocolate fix. “We both will. And don’t forget, my mom will be more than happy to answer any questions we might have,” he added in a maddeningly confident tone.

“You don’t seem worried at all.” She turned to her side and tucked her legs beneath her as J.T. ate another cherry. “Why is that?”

“I have the same fears you do. But worrying about them now is counterproductive. I think parenthood is like life. You figure it out as you go along.” He tilted his head and regarded her with a somber gaze. “I do have one major concern though.”

“What’s that?”

A devilish grin split his face. “I think I could become addicted to these maraschino cherries.”

Angie burst out laughing. “Be serious,” she admonished him with a smile.

“I am.” J.T. cast a cursory glance at the jar. “They look like the most disgusting thing on earth but they’re actually quite tasty.”

“Tasty?” Angie chuckled at his word choice. “Hey, don’t eat them all,” she said after he popped another one in his mouth and chewed. “Pregnant woman with cravings over here. I’d like some too.”

“Fine. I’ll share.” He leaned forward, but instead of handing her the jar he rose from the chair and moved to sit beside her on the love seat. There wasn’t much room for both of them. His thigh brushed against her knee causing her pulse to leap with excitement. Damn her treacherous body. It had a mind of its own when it came to J.T. “Did you like these before you were pregnant?” he asked as he dipped two fingers into the jar.

“I don’t remember,” she said in a breathy voice that didn’t sound like her at all. “If I did it was when I was a kid.”

“I bet you were a cute kid.”



“Hardly. My hair was an unruly mess, my legs were like sticks and I was a klutz. It wasn’t until I started playing softball that my coordination improved.” Her heart skipped a beat and then started to pound as J.T. pulled a cherry from the jar and held it to her lips.

Whoa. Wait. Was her going to feed her?

“Open.”

Holding his intense gaze, Angie obeyed his husky command and parted her mouth. The tips of his fingers brushed her lips as he fed her the cherry. Warning bells went off in her head. This could get out of hand if she didn’t jump up off the love seat this very moment and put some distance between them.

She didn’t move. Instead she ate the cherry and then licked the sweet juice from her lips. J.T.’s gaze lowered to her mouth, lingered for several heart stopping seconds, then lifted. Their gazes collided and her breath caught at the raw sexual heat smoldering in his eyes.

Angela, get off the love seat...now.

And yet she still didn’t move. Her thighs trembled with anticipation as J.T. reached into the jar one more time. Seconds passed, seconds filled with sexual tension. This—what was happening right now—was dangerous and she knew it. But much like that steamy August night when she and J.T. had made love for the first time, she didn’t care.

This time when he held the pink fruit to her lips he didn’t have to say a word. She obediently opened her mouth and let him feed her. Before lowering his hand, he gently rubbed her bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. A thrill raced up her spine.

Unable to resist, she lifted her hand to the jar he held between them. The liquid inside coated her fingers as she selected a cherry and then placed it against his lips. Her gaze zeroed in on his mouth and after he accepted the fruit, she traced the perfect bow of his upper lip with her finger.

Lord, he has the sexiest lips.

Shocked at her boldness, she attempted to lower her hand but J.T. stopped her by wrapping his strong fingers around her wrist. A bolt of fire lanced through her as he drew her finger into his warm moist mouth and swirled his tongue around it. He held her gaze with eyes so dark and intense she shivered. And then, a memory so vivid it caused a fierce rush of heat in her lower body, flashed in her brain. His mouth wasn’t between her thighs, but what he was doing made her remember every exquisite detail of when it had been.

“I don’t think...” she began, then trailed off when he pulled her finger from his mouth and shifted slightly to set the jar on the table. Closing her eyes, she inhaled his scent and primal hunger overloaded her senses. Another round of sirens went off in her head warning her to evacuate the premises, or at least get off the damn love seat, but she couldn’t move. She was paralyzed with lust.

“Angie.” Opening her eyes, she melted under his blistering gaze. “You think too much,” he said in a thick husky voice and leaned forward.

Angie moaned as J.T.’s mouth claimed hers in hot demanding kiss. For months she’d wondered if she’d only imagined how amazing his kisses were. She hadn’t. Nor had she imagined the sharp talons of desire that tore at her insides. It was real then and it was real now. This was why she’d run from him the first time—no other man had ever made her feel such hunger...such desperation.

Just like the last time they were together, desire overrode caution. She didn’t protest when he hauled her to his hard body and leaned back against the arm of the love seat. Eagerly, she parted her mouth and met his tongue with hers. He tasted of sweet cherries. His chest felt like steel against the soft fullness of her breasts. And...oh, God...she needed him like she’d never needed any other man before.

As their kiss turned deeply intimate, J.T. slid his hands down the curve of her back and slipped them under the waistband of her pajamas. Moist heat throbbed between her legs as he cupped her ass and gently kneaded her soft flesh. She was already wet and ready. It would be so easy to give herself to him. Just as she had before.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” she whispered between frantic kisses.

“Why not?” J.T. muttered against her lips. “We’re married.” He moved his leg, causing her lower body to come into contact with the hard ridge of his erection. She gasped and pulled back, her breathing labored as she met his hooded gaze.

“I can’t,” she whispered. Immediately J.T. released her and she pushed off him and moved across the room to stand by the end of the bed. She stared at the rumpled linens and couldn’t imagine sharing that bed with him now. Not after what had just happened.

She put her palm to her cheek. It was hot...just like the rest of her body. This was what she’d been afraid of. Being in such close proximity to J.T. could only lead to complications she didn’t need.

She let out a startled gasp when she felt J.T.’s hand on her shoulder. His warm touch burned straight through the flimsy silk of her pajamas directly to her skin and her legs quivered like gelatin.

“Don’t worry. I said I wouldn’t force myself on you and I won’t,” he said, then pressed his fingers gently into her shoulder. “Wow. Your muscle right here is really tight. You can relax, Angie. I’d never do anything you didn’t want me to do.”

And that was the crux of the problem. She did want him to do things to her, and she wanted to do things to him in return. The best sex of her life had been with J.T. Why couldn’t he have been a dud in the sack? That would make this marriage so much easier.

“I haven’t been able to relax since I found out I was pregnant,” she admitted in a low voice.

“Maybe you should book a massage before we leave tomorrow.” He lifted his other hand and began to knead her tense muscles with his magic fingers. Closing her eyes, she tipped her head forward as he worked the knots in her shoulders and at the base of her neck. “They can do a much better job than I can.”

“You’re not doing so badly.” She let out a contented sigh as he continued his gentle yet firm massage. “I’m sorry I’ve been so...so moody.”

“What you’re feeling is normal.” His hands slid over the curves of her shoulders to her bare upper arms. Pleasurable goose bumps rose on her skin. “I read it in that book you bought.”

She twisted around and lifted her gaze to his. “You read the pregnancy book?”

“You left it in the kitchen so I took a look at it one night when I couldn’t sleep.” He lowered his hands and gave her a reassuring smile. “It said that one minute you could be happy and the next you could be crying over something as simple as a television commercial.”

Is he for real? With each day that passed he seemed to get more perfect.

“I guess I didn’t read that part.”

J.T. chuckled. “But I did, so I’m prepared. Bring on the mood swings. I can handle them.”

Maybe he could handle them, but Angie wasn’t so sure she could. This whole arrangement was blowing up in her face. And it was all J.T.’s fault.

## Chapter Twelve

J.T. followed the incredible aroma of sugar and cinnamon to the kitchen and wasn't surprised to see Angie with oven mitts on her hands pulling what looked like muffins out of the oven. In the week since they'd been married Angie had gone crazy in the kitchen—or more to the point she'd gone crazy trying out her grandmother's recipes. Not that he minded. Everything Angie prepared was mouthwatering. He just might have met the one woman who was as skilled in the kitchen as his mother.

“Can I have one?” he asked as his stomach growled appreciatively.

“Only if it's just one. And let it cool for a minute or two.” She set the muffin pan on a wire rack on the counter, then pulled off the oven mitts and tossed them next to the pan. With her hair pulled back in a ponytail and wearing a bright yellow apron with red lettering on it that read Practice safe eating. Always use condiments, she looked damn appetizing. “Your parents and Jake will be here soon and since they're doing us a huge favor by helping us paint I want to make sure they're well fed.”

J.T. took in the array of cookies, scones and mini-loaf cakes on the center island. The kitchen looked and smelled like a small bakery. Again, J.T. didn't mind at bit. “I think you've got that covered.”

“I'm giving some of that to your parents and Jake and freezing the rest.” She put her hands on her hips and frowned. “Do you think lasagna is okay for lunch? If not, we can have it for dinner.”

“Lasagna is fine. When it comes to food, we Sawyers are easy to please.” J.T. pulled his baseball cap from his back pocket and slapped it on his head. “I moved the furniture and the television into the middle of the living room. With all of us painting I think we'll be able to finish both the living room and the dining room today.”

“Are you sure you're okay with the color I picked out for the living room?”

After spending an hour and a half in the paint section of Home Depot when he should have been at the gym, J.T. would have agreed to paint the entire house purple just so he could get the hell out of the store. But this was Angie's home now. Not just a place where he bided time until baseball season started. “I trust your judgment. If you say that shade of green will work, I believe you.”

She favored him with an indulgent smile. “That shade of green is called Plantation Moss and it's going to look beautiful with the white trim and crown molding.”

“What about the nursery? What color should we paint that?”

“I haven't thought much about it,” she said, moving to the sink and turning on the water. “We've got time.”

“Yeah, but I'd like to get it finished before spring training.” J.T. skirted the counter and picked out one of the warm muffins from the pan. The largest one, of course. He was hungry.

“I forgot all about that.” Angie cast him a glance over her shoulder and then began rinsing utensils and placing them in the dishwasher. “You report in mid-February, right?”

“Yes. Someone from the front office should be contacting me soon about logistics.” Lowering his gaze, he admired the curve of her ass. It wasn't the only thing about her he'd been admiring. Her breasts, which had always been spectacular, were now full, voluptuous and capable of inducing major wood. He wasn't a damn teenager anymore but the way his cock reacted whenever he was in Angie's presence made him feel like one.

J.T. bit into the muffin and flavor exploded in his mouth. “Jesus, this is good. What is it?” he

asked after swallowing.

“I call it a mixed berry muffin.”

He took another bite. It was just as good as the first. “Is this one of your grandmother’s recipes?”

“No. It’s one I came up with on my own.”

“You should sell these. You’d make a fortune.”

Angie turned off the water and reached for the dish towel on the counter next to the sink. “I appreciate the compliment, but since you’re the self-proclaimed human garbage disposal who’ll eat anything, I’m not sure your opinion is valid.”

“Hey, I know a damn good muffin when I eat one.” He paused. “Did that sound slightly dirty?”

Her lips twitched. “Only if by muffin you’re thinking of something entirely different than...” she pointed to the pan, “...those.”

“I wasn’t.” He grinned. “But now that you mention it, I’ve tasted your muffin and I wouldn’t mind tasting it again.”

Angie’s eyes widened as a vivid shade of pink flooded her cheeks. “J.T., don’t...”

“Don’t what? Tell you that I want you? I think it was pretty obvious on our wedding night, don’t you?”

“You said you wouldn’t pressure me.”

“I’m not pressuring you.” J.T. set the remainder of the muffin on the counter. “I’m being honest. And while we’re on the subject, I’d like to know why you slept with me and then just disappeared the next morning without a single word, or even a note. I didn’t deserve that.”

Angie’s eyes glittered like chips of blue ice. “So it’s okay when you men do it, but if a woman does it it’s the crime of the century?”

“It’s never okay, Angie. I’ve never done that to a woman and I resent you lumping me in with men who do.” Her chin lifted defiantly as he moved forward to stand in front of her. “I don’t know who hurt you, but it obvious someone did. It can’t be Steve since you were engaged to him, so who was it? Who made you distrust men?”

“Scott,” Angie said with a sharp edge to her voice. “His name is Scott, not Steve.”

J.T. rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Was it a ballplayer? Kelly said you had a strict policy against dating ballplayers. Was that because you were involved with one and he treated you like shit?”

“I didn’t have to date an athlete to know they treat women like shit. I saw it up close and personal in my own home.”

It took a second, but her comment registered. “Do you mean...are you talking about...your father?”

“That’s exactly who I’m talking about,” she snapped. “My father may not have been the best player on the field, but he was a highly skilled player off the field. He cheated on my mother for years, long before I ever found out.” Her eyes flashed with anger. “And do you want to know how I found out?” She paused to take an angry breath. “I walked in on him and one of his cleat-chasers.”

“Walked in?” J.T. asked, fearing what was coming next.

“You got it.” She glared at him. “School let out early that day. But instead of hanging out with my friends, I went home. As I was heading to my bedroom I heard a noise in my parents’ room. My mom was out of town, visiting a friend back in Kansas City. I thought she’d returned earlier than planned so I went to their bedroom and found my father screwing someone who—surprise—wasn’t my mother.”

“How old were you?”

“Twelve. I was twelve when I found out the kind of man my father was. Now you know the whole sordid story.” She slapped the towel on the counter. “Are you happy?” she said and brushed past him

to run out of the kitchen. Seconds later, the slamming of her bedroom door only solidified what J.T. already knew.

Angie was pissed. And he was nowhere near happy.

\* \* \*

Slumped on the window seat in her bedroom, Angie stared out the window to the backyard below. The neighbor's orange tabby cat stealthily cut through the garden beyond the pool but its furtive stalking didn't bring a smile to her lips as it usually did. She didn't know which was worse—that she'd lost her temper with J.T. or that she'd told him about her father.

It would be easy to blame her outburst on her hormones but she couldn't do that. Not this time. And what made it worse was that it appeared J.T. had been genuinely hurt by her fleeing his condo after their night together.

For months she'd believed the worst mistake of her life was making love with J.T., but it wasn't. The worst mistake was running away afterward and then hastily agreeing to marry Scott when she knew in her heart she didn't love him. Safe and predictable Scott was a means to an end. By marrying him she'd never have to face her feelings for J.T.

What was truly sickening was that she'd almost gone through with it. Thank God she'd listened to that tiny voice deep inside of her telling her she wasn't being fair to Scott.

After ten minutes, Angie knew what she needed to do and left her bedroom. She wasn't being fair to J.T. either. More and more he was revealing himself to be a man of character and compassion. She, on the other hand, possessed barely a modicum of either.

She found him in the empty dining room with a roll of blue painting tape in his hand. He turned when he heard her footsteps and regarded her warily. She didn't blame him. For all he knew, she was going to go ballistic on him again. She smoothed her hands over the apron that covered thighs with shaky fingers.

"I'm sorry I went off on you like that," she said, getting the apology out quickly. "You didn't deserve it."

"And I'm sorry you had a bastard for a father. You didn't deserve that."

"I told you I didn't like to talk about him. Now you know why."

"Not all men are like him, Angie."

"I'm beginning to figure that out."

J.T. tossed the painters tape onto a folded drop cloth on the floor. The Blaze baseball cap turned backward on his head was endearingly boyish. Not so the rest of him. The well-worn jeans and white T-shirt only emphasized the hard masculine lines of his body. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not defending all men. A few of my married teammates have no qualms about sleeping with cleat-chasers when we're on the road."

"I know. Kelly's told me a few stories."

"You'll never hear my name in those stories." He held her gaze for several long seconds and she so wanted to believe the sincerity reflected in his eyes. But despite what she was coming to know about him it was still so hard to trust. "Look, I think I get why you left that morning. You assumed I was one of those guys, or worse, that I was like your father."

"I don't know if there's anyone worse than my father." Angie's stomach churned with revulsion at the memory of witnessing him in the act of having sex with some strange woman in the bed he shared with her mother and was forever grateful she'd only gotten a brief glimpse before running to her

bedroom and locking the door. “He left us with almost nothing, J.T. My mother has had to work her fingers to the bone to provide for me and Livvie.”

A frown marred J.T.’s forehead. “What about alimony or child support?”

“He was ordered by a judge to pay both, but after a few months—when his contract was up—he got cut by the A’s and stopped paying. No other team wanted him and six months later he ended up filing for bankruptcy and shacking up with one of his mistresses. When he died, my mom tried to collect on his pension but she wasn’t able to get it. Years ago—when they were first married—he somehow conned her into signing a spousal waiver form. And when she asked about his life insurance she found out that he’d taken her name off of the beneficiary form after the divorce and replaced it with the woman he was living with. My mom will receive a survivor benefit from Social Security when she’s sixty-two because they were married for more than ten years before they divorced, but it probably won’t be much and it doesn’t help her out right now.”

Disgust flickered in his eyes. “How did he die?”

“Heart attack.” Angie pulled the blue and white gingham bandana she planned to wear when the painting started from the pocket of her apron. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t keep paint droplets from covering her from head to toe whenever she painted. “We heard it happened in his sleep so he probably never felt a thing. I know this sound callous, but a part of me wanted him to suffer. The way he made us suffer.”

“I think that’s a normal reaction when someone you love treats you so badly. Especially when it’s one of your parents.”

“I worshipped him,” she said and deftly covered her upswept hair with the bandana and tied it at the nape of her neck. “When I found out what he was really like, the world as I knew it changed forever. I hated him for what he did to my mom, and what he did to our family. He cared more about himself than he did about us. I used to think it was cool when people fawned over him because he played in the major leagues. And then I realized that’s why he was able to get away with so much. He had women throwing themselves at him all the time and he took advantage of it.”

“Is that when you decided all ballplayers are scum?”

“Yes.”

“Then why did you come back to the condo with me?”

Because I wanted you so much I ached.

“I’d had a fight with Scott that day. I wasn’t thinking clearly.” Flustered, the lie slipped from her lips before she could stop it.

J.T.’s eyes narrowed. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Does it matter why I slept with you? It happened and here we are. Married.”

“It matters to me.” The tense silence that followed was shattered by the ringing of the doorbell. As Grandma Sophia would say, she’d literally been “saved by the bell.”

Straightening her shoulders, Angie pasted on a smile. “The painting brigade is here.” She launched forward, intending to head to the living room to greet her in-laws but was stopped short by the strong grip of J.T.’s fingers around her upper arm. He pulled her close. So close she could see the golden flecks in his hazel eyes. So close her senses filled with his clean male scent. Every bone in her body seemed to liquefy from the heat that ran like fire in her blood.

“Do you still love him?”

“Who?” she murmured, dazed from the primal urges running rampant within her.

A hint of a smile played around the corners of his mouth. “If you have to ask, the answer must be no.”

His smug tone irked her—even though he was right. “You’re wrong, I still love Steve.”

“Don’t you mean Scott?” J.T. asked with a satisfied grin.

Crap.

“That’s who I meant,” she said with a haughty tone, then jerked her arm from his grasp and left the room. Behind her, she heard his low chuckle and silently cursed herself for her slip-up.

There was no doubt about it. Her well-laid plans were going to hell in a hand basket. And Grandma Sophia had a cliché for every occasion. Wasn’t that just grand?

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J.T. surveyed the living room with astonishment. “What a difference some paint makes.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Jake slapped him on the back. “Now you just need to get rid of that eyesore you call a couch.”

Offended, J.T. turned to his brother. “Hey, I like that couch. It’s comfortable.”

“That may be but I stand by my earlier statement. It’s an eyesore.” Jake put his hands on his hips and looked at couch they’d just pushed back into its spot against the wall. “That shade of green doesn’t go with Plantation Moss at all. You need some contrast.”

“Have you been watching that decorating channel again?”

Jake scowled. “You can learn a lot from those shows.”

“Quit bickering and get in here,” their mother called from the kitchen. “The lasagna is getting cold.”

J.T. cocked his head and narrowed his gaze on the couch. “Maybe you’re right. Is it my imagination or is it sagging in the middle?”

“It’s definitely sagging,” Jake said as they turned and headed for the kitchen.

“What’s sagging?” Angie asked as J.T. preceded Jake into the kitchen where, instead of fresh paint, the room was filled with the mouth-watering aroma of tomato sauce and oregano.

“Jake’s testosterone level,” J.T. said with a grin and then winced when Jake punched him in the arm. “Owww.” He rubbed his arm. “Mom, tell him to stop.”

His mother sighed and shook her head. Something she’d done a lot when they were kids. “If I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard that.”

“You’d be richer than Trump,” Jake said, and moved to stand by Sharon, who was cutting into the pan of lasagna with a knife. “J.T. was always such a wimp.”

“Was not.” J.T. met Angie’s amused gaze. “How are you feeling? You were going at it with that paint roller.”

“My arms and shoulders are a little sore,” she said with grimace. “I wish I could get in the hot tub but the pregnancy book warns against it. It’s not good for the baby.”

“What about the whirlpool tub?” Jake asked and looked at Angie.

“What whirlpool tub?”

J.T. shot Jake a warning look. “The one in our bathroom,” he said, swung his gaze to Angie’s and inclined his head. “Remember?”

Angie frowned and then a fraction of a second later, her eyes widened as she nodded. “Oh. Right. I forgot about the whirlpool bathtub.”

“She hasn’t used it yet,” J.T. said, looking at his parents before turning his attention back to Angie. “You can use it tonight. It should be safe as long as you keep the water temperature lukewarm.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Her wide smile took his breath away. The bandana covering her head and the paint splatches dotting her shirt and pants didn’t detract from her beauty one iota.

“As I recall,” his father spoke from the kitchen table where he’d been nursing a beer, “your mother was addicted to warm baths when she was pregnant with Josh.”

“That I was. The jets in our whirlpool tub were great for my legs and back. I also took an aqua exercise class at the Y. It helped keep me in shape during the pregnancy.”

“Angie, we have low-impact aerobics classes at the gym.” Jake plucked a black olive out of the salad sitting in a large wooden bowl on the counter and popped it into his mouth. “You should give it a try.”

“I’ve never taken an aerobics class,” Angie said as she turned to open the fridge and pull out a bottle of salad dressing. “What if I can’t do all the moves?”

“The instructor is easy to follow, you’ll pick it up pretty quickly. One of the members I’m training just started going so you won’t be the only newbie.”

“Would that be Melissa?” J.T. asked, motioning for Angie to give him the bottle. His fingers brushed hers as they made the exchange and as their eyes met, J.T.’s breath caught in his throat. Damn. It was just like the time he’d been taken down hard at home plate and had the wind knocked out of him. Just like then, he could barely breathe. His gaze lowered to her naturally pink lips and he had to force himself not to pull her into his arms and kiss her.

“Yes. She’s taking the class tomorrow afternoon. If you’d like, I can introduce you to her,” Jake said, and the scorching moment passed.

“I’d like that. Thanks, Jake.” Angie looked from Jake to J.T. “You know, I just noticed something.”

“What?” he and Jake said in unison.

“All of the Sawyer brothers’ names start with a J.”

“It’s a Sawyer tradition to give their babies names that start with a J,” Sharon said as she picked up the lasagna tray and moved to set it on a trivet in the middle of the kitchen table.

“What does J.T. stand for?” Angie turned her gaze on him.

“James Taylor. Like the singer.” J.T. set the salad dressing on the table.

Angie tilted her head and her dubious gaze darted to each Sawyer in the room. “Is that true?”

“It’s true.” Sharon nodded and then sighed. “J.T. was conceived the night we saw him in concert. It was a magical evening.”

J.T. winced. “Too much information, Mom.”

“I think you should name your kid after our great grandfather.” Jake leaned a hip against the counter and grinned. “Jebenezer Sawyer has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

“Uh, that would be a big fat no.” Angie wrinkled her nose. “No offense, but that’s like the worst name ever.”

“Angie. Angie.” Jake shook his head. “You’re missing the point. Think of the cool nicknames. Jeb. Jebby. Neezy. Neezer. I’m telling you, you can’t go wrong with Jebenezer Sawyer.”

J.T. smothered a laugh and met Angie’s horrified gaze. “I think we should consider it.”

“Are you crazy?” Angie braced her palms on the counter. “There is no way I’m naming our child Jebenezer. The poor kid would be teased unmercifully. Besides, we’re having a girl, remember?”

“You are?” his mother exclaimed with excitement. “I didn’t realize you knew the sex of the baby.”

“We don’t know for sure. I have an appointment on Monday for an ultrasound. The doctor said we may be able to find out then if we want to know. We just have a strong hunch it’s a girl.”

“So Jebenezer’s out,” Jake said glumly, then brightened. “Hey, how about naming her after our



great aunt Jeraldine?”

“That starts with a G,” Angie said and shot Jake a wry look.

Jake chuckled. “Not in our family.”

\* \* \*

Four hours later, J.T. was sprawled on the couch with his laptop resting on his thighs. Studying the league’s best and most feared hitters had been his nightly ritual since the season had ended. The grueling physical training Jake had been putting him through was only one part of his off-season regimen. If he wanted to be a starter, learning each player’s strengths and weaknesses at the plate was crucial. Tonight, however, his heart wasn’t in it. He found himself staring at the screen not seeing a damn thing.

All he could think about was Angie.

In light of what he’d learned about her father this morning, her contemptuous remarks about ballplayers now made sense. And while it wasn’t fair of her to assume that all ballplayers were womanizers and dead-beat dads, the trauma she, her mother and sister had gone through at the hands of her father explained why she’d initially refused his marriage proposal. She was probably scared to death she’d be tied to a man who would treat her the way her father had treated her mother. She was dead wrong and he planned to prove it to her. No matter how long it took.

J.T. was ninety-nine point nine percent positive the ex-fiancé wasn’t a factor, but even if he was, the way Angie had responded to him on their wedding night proved she wasn’t immune to him. There wasn’t a doubt in his mind that he could make her forget Steve, Scott or whatever the dude’s damn name was. He had two years to make it happen. He only hoped it didn’t take that long.

The sound of Angie’s light footsteps on the hardwood stairs pulled him from his thoughts. “I thought you went to bed,” he called out before she made it to the bottom floor.

“I thought I’d see if it was okay if I used the whirlpool tub in your bathroom,” she said as she paused at the base of the staircase and gave him a tentative smile. Her hair was pulled up in a tousled knot and she wore a short silky robe that didn’t do a damn thing to disguise her amazing body. J.T.’s pulse kicked at the erotic sight of her nipples pressing insistently against the satiny blue fabric.

“Sure. My room is kind of messy, but the bathroom is clean.” J.T. closed the laptop, grateful it covered his junk. There were times when he had no control over his cock when he was looking at Angie and this was one of those times. “Don’t make the water too hot. You don’t want your body to get overheated.” The way his was right now from just looking at her.

“I won’t.” She took two steps, stopped, then turned her head to meet his gaze. “Thank you, J.T.” He frowned. “For what?”

“For caring about the baby.” She gave him a soft warm smile. “You’re going to be a wonderful father.” And with that she headed upstairs.

J.T. opened the laptop and clicked the button to restart the video he’d been trying to watch ever since he sat down. As the one of the most feared batters in the league walked up to the plate, he tried to pay attention to the progression of the at-bat, but soon the image on the screen blurred and studying hitters didn’t seem quite so important.

## Chapter Thirteen

Angie let out a blissful sigh as she eased herself into the warm bubbling water. After a long day of painting, a late lunch and then the clean-up, her sore muscles were in dire need of relaxation—and since she didn't have a personal masseuse at her beck and call, a nice calming bath would have to do.

J.T. was right. His bedroom was a mess. Such a mess she'd been a little leery of stepping foot in his bathroom. But she needn't have worried. The tornado that had struck his room and left clothes, books and sports magazines over every available surface hadn't made it any farther. His large bathroom—which looked like it had been recently remodeled and boasted a separate shower, as well as the spacious whirlpool tub—was almost as clean as hers.

Buoyed by the frothy water, she closed her eyes and rested her head against the built-in headrest. Her tired muscles welcomed the gentle pressure from the water jets and she couldn't help but wonder why J.T. chose to use the hot tub in the backyard when he had this wonderful tub right in his bathroom.

Perhaps he preferred to be outside where he could gaze up at the blue sky during the day or the stars and the moon at night. Or maybe he just enjoyed torturing her. On second thought, that couldn't be it. J.T. had no clue that she'd recently taken to observing him from her bedroom window whenever he used the hot tub. Angie had never considered herself a voyeur. Watching someone when they weren't aware of it seemed like an invasion of privacy, and since she wouldn't like it if someone was spying on her, she'd never considered doing it to anyone else.

She was ashamed to say that all that had changed a few days ago when she'd noticed J.T. in the hot tub after he'd returned from a workout at Jake's gym. It was innocent, really. She'd only intended to measure the window seat in her bedroom but when she caught a glimpse of him, she couldn't look away. And seriously, what red-blooded woman who enjoyed looking at hot guys wouldn't have sat down on that window seat and fantasized about running her hands over his sinfully delicious shoulders and sculpted pecs? And what woman wouldn't have wanted to twine their fingers through his tousled hair? And what woman wouldn't have returned to that very same spot the next time he was in the hot tub?

Well, obviously not her. She'd done all three.

You're such a perv, DeMarco. Smiling at the inner voice that sounded a lot like Kelly, Angie opened her eyes, gasped and then let out a high-pierced scream at the sight of a black spider crawling on the ceiling directly above her.

With her heart thundering at full-tilt, she bolted upright, screamed again and then using her hands, she pushed herself into a standing position—all the while keeping her eyes trained on the spider. "Don't you dare move," she yelled at the hideous thing and then whirled around in the tub as J.T. barreled into the bathroom wielding a baseball bat.

"What the hell's going on?" he demanded in a taut voice, then stopped short and glanced quickly around the bathroom, before pinning her with a puzzled gaze. "I thought someone was attacking you."

"Kill it." She pointed to the ceiling, unable to stop her entire body from shaking. She wasn't afraid of many things but for some unknown reason, spiders terrified her. "Please. I can't be in the same room with that thing."

"Calm down," he said in a soothing voice and moved to the vanity. He leaned the bat against the cabinet and grabbed a towel from the top of the marble countertop. "I'll take care of it." He crossed the room and unfolded the large bath towel. Still shaking, Angie let him wrap the towel around her

body and didn't protest when he put his hands to her waist and easily lifted her out of the bathtub. "Are you okay?" He smoothed several tendrils of hair from forehead and searched her face with concerned eyes.

Angie glanced at the ceiling and shook her head. "No." Her voice was unsteady. "I have to get out of here."

"Go to the bedroom. I'll get rid of the spider."

With a nod, she stepped around him and fled the bathroom.

A few minutes later, she was still shaking. Ever since she was a kid she'd been afraid of spiders. Which was odd. She had no fear of any other type of insect. Heck, she wasn't even afraid of mice. But spiders were her kryptonite and as such she'd always kept a can of bug spray at both home and wherever she worked.

At the sound of the toilet flushing, Angie hugged the towel to her still damp body and waited for J.T. to emerge from the bathroom. "Did you kill it?" she asked as he entered the bedroom.

"Yes." He moved toward her. "Do you want to get back in the tub?"

Biting her lower lip, she shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Why don't you sit down for a minute and think about it?" He put his arm around her shoulders and guided her toward the side of his bed where he tugged at the rumpled sheet and blanket in a half-hearted attempt to tidy it. "I don't get many spiders inside the house. I doubt you'll see another one tonight."

She wouldn't see another one tonight? What about tomorrow and the next day? She didn't want to see any spiders ever again. Especially not big black ones. Could it have been a Black Widow? She'd read about them but had never seen one. It wasn't a tarantula. She'd seen one of those on a school field trip to Yosemite during eighth grade. A tarantula was much bigger than that thing in the bathroom though, and the one she'd seen wasn't black. It was a sort of brownish color. Angie shivered and sank to the bed. "You must think I'm a baby."

"No. As much as I hate to admit this, I'd probably scream like that if I saw a snake," he said and sat beside her. His close proximity jumpstarted her heart; it began to pound anew. "I hate those things." He paused. "You're still shaking. Are you cold? I like fresh air so I usually keep the window open. I can close it if you want."

"I'm not cold. I'm just deathly afraid of spiders. I need to think about something else. Can we just talk for a little bit? That'll help."

"Sure. What do you want to talk about?"

"Do you like how the living room looks with the new paint?" She angled her head toward him. "I think it's made a world of difference. It feels so cozy and warm."

"It isn't the paint," J.T. said softly.

Angie frowned. "What do you mean it isn't the paint?"

"It's you. In less than a month you've made this house more of a home than I have in two years."

"I haven't done anything," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Really?" He cocked his head. "Who buys flowers at the grocery store and puts them around the house? Who found the place mats and fancy napkins I got as housewarming gifts and sets the table with them when we eat? And who suggested we paint the walls in the first place?"

She gave him a sheepish smile. "I didn't think you noticed the flowers or the place mats. As for the paint, I'm glad you let me change the wall color."

"You can change anything you want. This is your home and I want you to be comfortable here."

"Thank you," she whispered.

He reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “We can make this work, Angie. I honestly believe that.”

For several long seconds neither of them spoke, and in those seconds the air around them shifted. Her breath hitched when he began to make slow lazy circles over the back of her hand with his thumb.

“Were you studying hitters again?” Angie asked, trying to sound nonchalant. She wasn’t sure it was working. The spider was no longer the cause of her trembling. It was the fact that she was nearly naked and sitting next to the only man who’d ever made her lower her inhibitions and give into her most basic desires. How did she ever think she could live with him and not want to jump his bones?

“Yeah.”

“I’m curious. What do you look for?”

“Patterns mostly. I look to see if a guy is overanxious at the plate, if he’s patient and able to draw walks or if there’s a certain pitch he can’t lay off of. That kind of thing.”

“Did you always want play ball?” she asked, shifting toward him. For weeks she’d been so wrapped up in herself that she hadn’t bothered to ask J.T. about his career, or anything else for that matter. But now the little she did know about him wasn’t enough. She hungered to know more.

“I’ve lived and breathed baseball ever since I can remember. All through high school I idolized Pudge Rodriguez and wanted to be just like him. I used to dream of winning an MVP award just like he did.”

“Is it everything you thought it would be? Being in the majors?”

“Yes and no. I love getting paid for a game I’d play for free, but I’m not satisfied with being back-up.”

Angie couldn’t help but stare at his lips. The urge to lean forward and kiss him was so powerful she had to force herself not to move. “Is that why you’re training so hard?” she asked, lifting her gaze to his. In the dim light of the room, his eyes appeared dark and sultry and just like the first time she’d looked into them, her hormones sizzled like oil on a red hot skillet.

“That was my plan. My contract is up at the end of next season. And since it looks like Matt’s not going anywhere, I thought I might have the opportunity to get picked up somewhere else and be a starter.”

“What do you mean that was your plan?” Angie frowned. “Don’t you still want that?”

“I want it more than anything, but things have changed.”

Of course they had. The second she and J.T. hadn’t used a condom.

“Because of the baby?”

J.T. nodded. “It’s not just about me anymore. From now on you and the baby factor into any decision I make.”

Mutely, she stared down at their clasped hands—not surprised that he’d completely disproved another one of her assumptions about him. He’d been doing that a lot lately. “My father never consulted with my mother about his career decisions. According to her, he’d come home and tell her to pack their bags because they were hitting the road.”

“Angie, you’ve been around baseball long enough to know that trades happen, contracts aren’t picked up and players move from team to team like chess pieces. That’s part of the life of a ballplayer and with my contract expiring after the coming season it might be something we have to deal with.”

She wasn’t aware J.T. moved until she felt his fingertips on her chin as he urged her to look at him. “As long as we’re married I promise I’ll never make a major decision without you.” The intensity in his eyes almost sucked the air out of her lungs. “You’re my wife.”

“In name only,” she said softly, suddenly overcome with emotion.

J.T. leaned forward, his beautifully shaped lips just inches from hers. Sensual energy so strong it shook her to her core passed between them. “It could more than that.” His husky words excited her; she was transfixed by the raw desire that burned in his eyes. “All you have to do is say the word.”

As Angie drowned in the smoldering depths of J.T.’s eyes, every single reason why she shouldn’t let this go any further soared through her brain and left her breathless. But all those perfectly valid reasons were trumped by one undeniable fact—she’d wanted J.T. Sawyer the moment she’d seen him step out of the elevator in the Blaze front office and—God help her—she wanted him still.

“The word,” she whispered and saw a flare of heat in J.T.’s eyes as she pressed her mouth to his. With a low growl, he exerted a more provocative pressure and parted her lips. In a heartbeat the kiss turned ravenous. Their tongues met and tangled in a sensuous wet dance and as J.T. slid his hand around her waist and pulled her to him, Angie thought she might explode. Never in her life could she remember wanting a man this much. She didn’t resist when he spanned her waist with both hands and pulled her effortlessly onto his lap so she was straddling him.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she widened her mouth and sank deeper into the kiss. Between the juncture of her thighs, she felt his erection straining against the most intimate part of her. Flaming hot desire shot through her body and driven by primal need, she gyrated against him mimicking what she wanted so badly—his cock inside her, hot and hard. J.T. groaned, slid his hands up her back and with deft fingers, pulled the towel from her body.

“God, Angie. I want you so damn much,” he murmured, trailing his mouth to her jaw and then to the curve of her neck. Breathless, Angie tilted her head and looked to the ceiling. As cool air whispered across the heated flush of her body, she whimpered in pleasure at the touch of J.T.’s lips at the hollow of her throat. Tonight no warning bells went off in her head. They wouldn’t dare. On this night, she planned to give into her desire and damn the consequences.

Eagerly, she slid her hands to J.T.’s shoulders and leaned back. His eyes sought hers and she saw a mixture of disappointment and frustration in their depths. No doubt he was expecting a repeat of their wedding night. She couldn’t blame him. To quickly dispel the notion, she whispered, “Kiss my breasts.” J.T. didn’t hesitate; he leaned forward to lave his tongue over one taut nipple. Despite the hot blood coursing through her veins, she shivered with need.

Angie bit back a moan as she watched J.T. draw her entire nipple into his mouth. The pregnancy had made her breasts ultra-sensitive; the feel of J.T.’s warm moist mouth suckling her was exquisite agony. Each stroke of his tongue sent a current of heat straight to her core. Shamelessly, she rubbed herself against the hard ridge of his erection, seeking relief.

Releasing her nipple, he looked up and a wicked smile curved his lips. “I should have thanked that spider before I flushed it.”

She laughed and then the blood in her veins turned molten at the sudden intense heat in J.T.’s eyes.

“Take down your hair.” The low gravelly cadence of his voice sent a thrill up her spine. Obeying his command, she reached up with one hand and pulled the butterfly clip from her hair. It tumbled around her shoulders in wild disarray. “You’re so beautiful,” he whispered reverently.

“So are you,” she said, then smiled at the grimace that twisted his mouth. “Men can be beautiful too, you know,” she added and tossed her hair clip behind him on the bed. “Did you know you were voted the professional athlete most women wanted to have sex with in a Cosmo survey a few months ago?”

J.T. cocked his head. “Cosmo?”

Angie laughed at his puzzled expression. “It’s a magazine. Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of it.

It's been around since before we were born."

"The only magazines I read are Sports Illustrated and Baseball Weekly." J.T. grinned. "Is it an old lady magazine?"

"Hardly." Angie slid her hands over his shoulders and then lower until she found the hem of his T-shirt and tugged at it. He lifted his arms and let her pull his shirt off. She flung it on the bed and then smoothed her hands over the smooth hard contours of his chest. "Their target market is women in their twenties and thirties. Like a certain men's magazine it has some insightful articles but the majority of the content is sexual."

J.T.'s brows knitted. "Like what? Naked guys?"

"More like what men like in bed, how to turn a guy on, and what sexual positions are the most pleasurable. Stuff like that."

J.T. slipped his hands underneath her ass and held her securely as he stood up. After he turned and deposited her gently on the bed, she shifted to her side as he stretched out beside her.

"Sounds like interesting reading," he said as he brushed her hair over her shoulder and then trailed his fingers to her breasts.

"Oh, it is," she said, then let out a soft gasp of pleasure when he leisurely brushed his thumb over one nipple. In response she reached between them and massaged the hard ridge that strained against his sweats. She smiled with satisfaction as he sucked in a swift breath.

"If you keep doing that I won't last another minute." When she didn't stop he lowered his hand to hers and stilled her movements. "I'm serious. It's been a while. It won't take much to make me come."

"How long is a while?"

"Since August." As his eyes roamed over her face, the implication of his words registered.

"Are you...do you mean?" she stammered, stunned at his revelation.

"I haven't been with anyone since I was with you."

"You've gone without sex for four months?" Angie asked incredulously.

His lips twitched. "It's not unheard of."

"Yes, but didn't you just hear what I said? An overwhelming majority of Cosmo readers want to have sex with you."

J.T. chuckled. "That doesn't mean I want to have sex with them. Contrary to what you may think, I'm selective when it comes to my sexual partners."

"But you could have any woman you want, anytime you want."

"That's not quite true, is it? I wanted you the minute I met you in the Blaze front office but you wouldn't give me the time of day." He slid a hand to her belly. "At least until the night we made this baby." He paused. "Has she been kicking?"

"A little bit." Angie placed her hand over his and smiled "We'll get to see her on Monday when I go to the doctor. I wonder who she'll look like."

J.T.'s eyes crinkled at the corners as he grinned. "I don't think we'll be able to see who she looks like on the ultrasound."

"I meant when she's born," she clarified with a smile.

He leaned forward and whispered, "I hope she looks like you." His breath, warm on her lips, prickled her skin with awareness. "Angie?"

"Hmmm?" she murmured.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

In the dim light of his bedroom, with her glorious hair fanning out like a thick curtain over the pillow, Angie had never looked more breathtaking. J.T. had to commend himself on his restraint. As much as he wanted her, he'd promised her that he wouldn't pressure her to have sex. And even now, when his control was about to snap like a frayed rubber band, he still had to be sure it was what she wanted. He couldn't take the chance of being on the receiving end of her regret a second time.

Her blue eyes were unreadable and he prayed that she wasn't marshaling her defenses against him. If there was something he could say to convince her he wasn't like her father he'd do it in a hot second. But promises were empty if not kept. The only thing he could do was to keep trying to prove to her that he could be trusted.

"Did you really want me the first time we met?" she asked in a husky whisper.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I can't explain it other than to say it was an instant attraction. No other woman has ever affected me that way before."

"Then we're even. No other man has affected me the way you do."

Knowing it would be so wrong—not to mention a bit juvenile—to pump his fist in the air, J.T. kept his expression neutral. "Not even Scott?"

She wrinkled her pert nose as she shrugged. "I may have exaggerated my feelings for Scott."

"So you aren't in love with him?"

"No."

Fuck yeah. "I'm glad to hear that," he said, lifting his hand to caress her cheek. Her skin felt baby soft against his fingers. She tilted her head, leaning into his touch.

"Why?"

"Because when I make love to you I don't want you thinking about anybody but me."

Her eyes darkened, sending an arrow of heat straight to his groin. "Are you going to make love to me soon?" She reached for his hand and pressed her lips to his palm. "Because I want you, J.T.," she murmured against his skin. "I want you so much."

Desire surged through J.T.'s body. "How about right—"

The pounding on the front door caused both of them to jump.

"J.T. Open up," Jake bellowed from the front porch, which—to J.T.'s chagrin—happened to be just below his open bedroom window.

"What the...?" His thundering heartbeat echoed in his ears as he met Angie's startled gaze.

"J.T.! Angie!" Jake yelled. "Open the door."

"I'll get rid of him." Irritated at his brother's rotten timing, J.T. rolled off the bed, left the room and bolted down the stairs. He had no clue why Jake was at his door, but if he'd dropped by for a brotherly chat he wasn't going to be invited in. No way. No how. Not when Angie was naked in his bed.

The hardwood floor was cold under his feet as he strode to the front door. He twisted the deadbolt and pulled the door open. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" J.T. demanded angrily as the cold air whooshed over his chest. He was so ticked off it barely registered.

"I tried to call you." Jake's expression was grim, his skin pale. "I tried to call you both, but neither of you picked up."

"What's wrong?" A sense of foreboding filled J.T. as Jake ran an agitated hand through his

cropped hair. "Has something happened to Mom or Dad?"

Jake shook his head. "It's Justin. He's been shot."



## Chapter Fourteen

Hospitals weren't high on Angie's favorite places to visit. The last time she'd stepped foot in one her grandmother had been losing her battle with cancer, and then all Angie could do was try to make those final days bearable for the woman who'd meant so much to her. Watching someone you love die wasn't easy and neither was living without them. The loss of Grandma Sophia had left a hole in her heart that would never be filled.

Now with that same sterile odor invading her nostrils, she sat on a blue vinyl covered bench, sandwiched between J.T. and Josh, who'd dashed into the waiting room just seconds after she'd arrived with J.T. and Jake. Josh's shoulder length hair was loose around his shoulders, and in his navy blue UCD sweatshirt, faded jeans and sneakers, he looked every inch the college student he was. Like J.T, he'd been silent and still, only shifting on the bench when footsteps echoed on the linoleum near the waiting room's entrance. So far, no one entering the room had anything to report on Justin but another family had just received the good news that their daughter had made it through an emergency appendectomy.

Across from her, Jake and Joe Sawyer sat next to each other and spoke in low tones. Every so often Angie overheard the word undercover. It appeared—at least to her—that Justin had been wounded in the line of duty.

After hastily dressing in black wool skirt and a burgundy sweater, she and J.T. had climbed into Jake's Land Rover and the three of them made the trek to Sutter Hospital. The drive was mostly silent but the tension was palpable. Jake's information was sketchy and it wasn't until arriving at the hospital that they'd discovered that Justin had been shot in the leg—the upper thigh to be precise—and was in the operating room where a surgeon was in the process of removing the bullet. As gunshot wounds went it wasn't the most critical wound J.T.'s brother could have sustained but, still, the mood in the waiting room was somber.

Behind Jake and his father, Sharon Sawyer stood in front of a large window covered with white vertical blinds partially opened to reveal a view of the lighted parking lot beyond. Just minutes before, Sharon had calmly assured everyone that she was confident Justin would be fine—that it was just a flesh wound and he'd be out of the hospital in a couple of days. But now, with her back to her family and her arms wrapped around her slender body, she appeared vulnerable and somewhat fragile.

Suspecting that Sharon's confidence was a front, Angie turned to J.T. "I'll be right back," she whispered and at J.T.'s silent nod, she rose from the bench and moved to the window. "Sharon." She lightly touched her mother-in-law's shoulder. "Is there anything you need? Anything I can get you? Coffee? Or maybe some tea?"

"No." Sharon looked at her and Angie's heart constricted at the fear and worry that clouded her usually cheerful face. "Thank you, but I—I don't think it would do me much good right now." She paused, blinking to keep unshed tears from spilling down her cheeks. "I expected this, you know."

"Expected what?"

"That my son would end up here." Sharon let out a shaky breath. "When he was seventeen, Justin decided he wanted to go into law enforcement. As much as I hated the thought of it, I didn't try to talk him out of it. That boy is as stubborn as a mule and when he wants something he can't be dissuaded. And of all my sons, he's the biggest risk taker." A tremulous smile played upon her lips. "When he was four he tied a towel around his shoulders and jumped off the back of the couch because he

believed he could fly. And when he was seven, he ended up face down in a ditch after attempting to sail his bike over it. He really thought he could do it.”

“Aren’t most little boys like that?” Angie asked.

“To an extent, but Justin always took it to the next level. Ever since he started working undercover it seems all I do is worry. Especially when we don’t hear from him for weeks.”

“Did this happen on the job?”

Sharon nodded. “Before you arrived his captain was here,” she said. “He couldn’t say much, but evidently Justin was shot during a raid on a meth house. The two men in the house with him decided not to give up quietly and the officers had no choice but to return fire. One of the drug dealers—or whatever you call them—was killed. The other one got away.” She shuddered. “I thank God every day none of my other sons decided to follow in Justin’s footsteps. I’d be a basket case.”

“So it’s true then.” Angie put a hand to her abdomen. “You never stop worrying about your children. Even when they’re adults.”

“It’s true.” Her voice broke as she blinked back her tears. “You never stop being a mother.”

Angie gently wiped a tear from Sharon’s cheek. “Are you sure you don’t want some tea? The doctor said it would be a while before Justin is out of surgery. Why don’t we go to the cafeteria?”

One of Sharon’s brows ticked up. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“Yes.” Angie smiled, not bothering to deny her motives. “But I’d also like to hear more about Justin. He sounds completely different from his brothers.”

“Oh, he is. In fact, I’ll bet the first thing he’ll want to do when he gets out of surgery is go back to work. But this time I’m putting my foot down.” Sharon’s eyes flashed mutinously. “It’s almost Christmas. I’ll be damned if I’ll spend it worrying he’s going to get himself shot again.”

\* \* \*

J.T. watched as Angie and his mother left the waiting room and headed in the direction of the cafeteria. His mother was the strongest woman he knew, but that strength was being tested tonight. The thing she most feared had finally happened and although Justin wasn’t in critical condition, it had to be tearing her up inside that he’d been shot at all.

He understood her fear much more than he would have a month and a half ago. His and Angie’s baby wasn’t even born yet but the thought of anything, or anyone, harming their child caused a cold knot of anxiety to form in the pit of his stomach. He had a strong hunch that this parenting thing was going to be one hell of emotional rollercoaster ride.

“Justin’s going to be all right, isn’t he?”

J.T. shifted on the bench and met his younger brother’s worried gaze. “Yes. You heard Mom, the doctor said the bullet didn’t hit an artery or the bone. They’ll remove it and Justin will be out of here in a few days.”

Josh nodded, pulled his phone from his sweatshirt pocket and began texting.

Thirty minutes later, Angie and his mother returned to the waiting room and despite the circumstances, every nerve ending in his body kicked into high alert. Those few minutes before Jake had pounded on the front door were indelibly seared into his brain. For Angie to admit she wanted him was a huge step forward. He only hoped when this crisis was over she wouldn’t retreat into her shell and shut him out.

After Angie gave him a reassuring smile J.T. swung his gaze to his mother, relieved to see her visibly more relaxed. As she went to sit next to his father and Jake, Angie moved toward him and

plopped down on the bench between him and Josh.

“How are you doing?” She tossed her hair over her shoulder then reached for his hand. “You’ve been quiet ever since we left the house.”

“I’m fine,” he assured her, loath to admit he’d been scared shitless until they’d arrived at the hospital and discovered that Justin wasn’t bleeding to death in the emergency room. After imagining that gruesome scenario, a bullet to the thigh seemed considerably less frightening. “Where did you and Mom go?”

“To get some tea.” Angie didn’t let go of his hand, instead she twined her warm fingers with his as if she’d been doing it for years. A lot had changed in just one day. “We talked about Justin and his many exploits as a child.” Amusement flickered in her eyes. “Do you think it’s possible our daughter might inherit her uncle’s love of danger?”

“God, I hope not,” J.T. said and watched his father put an arm around his mother’s shoulders and pull her close. As she rested her head on his shoulder, Jake rose from the bench and gave Josh’s foot a kick.

“Let’s go to the cafeteria.”

“No cash, bro,” Josh replied, looking up at Jake.

“So what else is new?” Jake said with a grin as Josh rose from the bench and followed him out of the waiting room.

Angie glanced at his parents. “How much pull do you have with Justin?”

“Not a lot,” J.T. admitted. “Why?”

“Because your mom is afraid he’ll go back to work before he’s completely healed. Maybe you could talk to him and ask him to wait until after New Year’s.”

With his free hand, J.T. scrubbed his jaw. Talking to Justin was like talking to a brick wall. Lately, his single-minded focus on his career took precedence over everything else—including his family. “I can try, but I can’t guarantee he’ll listen.”

“Maybe if he knew how much he was missed at Thanksgiving and what it would mean to Sharon for him to spend Christmas with his family, he’ll wait until he’s completely healed to go back to work.”

“I’ll tell him that,” he said, and squeezed her hand. “I’m glad you’re here with me.”

Her luminous smile almost stopped his heart. “I wouldn’t be anywhere else.”

\* \* \*

Well after midnight, Angie stepped out of the shower and quickly dried herself with a plush towel. Despite the hour, she wasn’t tired—an unexpected cat-nap in the hospital waiting room had seen to that. As she applied her favorite jasmine scented lotion on her arms, she couldn’t help but think of J.T. and what had almost happened between them before Jake had shown up with the news about Justin.

Now that Justin was officially deemed to be in stable condition and had an estimated release date of a few days, the mood in Jake’s SUV on the drive back to the house had been decidedly less tense. Still, there had been an undercurrent between her and J.T. that couldn’t be ignored. As she’d sat in the passenger seat beside Jake, Angie could feel the heat of J.T.’s gaze hot on her skin and the effect was every bit as powerful as if he’d reached out and touched her.

So color her surprised when—as soon as they walked into the house—J.T. mysteriously disappeared. A few minutes later, the sound of the water running upstairs indicated that taking a

shower ranked higher on his list than talking to her.

Slapping a palm full of lotion on her leg, she spread it evenly up to her thigh, completed the same task on her other leg and then slipped on her robe and left the bathroom. Ten minutes later, she was lying on her bed trying to read her pregnancy book. But no matter how hard she tried she couldn't get past the first paragraph. Either it was because the passage dealt with a detailed description of what happened when the baby traveled through the birth canal, or she just couldn't shake J.T.'s odd behavior. Just hours ago they'd been so close to making love and then at the hospital J.T. had seemed grateful for her presence. So what changed? And why?

With a sigh, Angie closed the book and set it on the nightstand. She didn't feel like reading about cervix dilation, or anything else pregnancy related. All she could think about was the fact that J.T. had done a complete about face ever since they'd returned from the hospital.

Shoving the sheet and blanket aside, she slid out of bed and left her bedroom. She paused at the top of the stairs and noted the sliver of light under J.T.'s bedroom door at the opposite end of the hall. So he was still awake. And obviously not interested in picking up where they'd left off before Jake arrived.

Pressing her lips together, she moved to the stairs and made her way down to the kitchen. After heating some water in the microwave, she made herself a cup of tea and carried it to the table. In the muted light of the kitchen, she wrapped her fingers around the warm mug and found a familiar comfort in the gentle hum of the refrigerator and the aroma of oregano and garlic that still lingered in the air.

The first day she'd moved in she didn't think she could ever feel comfortable in J.T.'s house, but in the space of a few weeks that had changed. Yes, it still needed to be fully furnished and there was more painting to be done, but it felt like home. A home she would leave in two years.

I don't want to leave.

Angie emitted a gasp as the thought popped, unbidden, into her head. With trembling hands, she lifted the mug to her lips and took a sip of her tea. What in the world is happening to me? Nothing was going as she'd planned. She loved this house, she adored J.T.'s family, and J.T. had proven himself to be nothing like her father. Not even close.

Rising from the chair, she carried her mug to the back door and stared at the placid surface of the hot tub, illuminated by the light of the moon. She closed her eyes and her stomach flip-flopped as she remembered the moist warmth of J.T.'s mouth on her breasts. She'd wanted him so badly tonight—just as she had the night their baby had been conceived.

“I guess both of us couldn't sleep.”

J.T.'s low deep voice sent her heart into overdrive. Turning, she tightened her fingers on the mug as she met his solemn gaze from across the room where he leaned against the door frame. As usual, he was shirtless, wearing only his sweats. She lowered her gaze to his abs—abs so sharply defined they could grate a freaking block of cheese. Her stomach did another cartwheel and sexual awareness filled every cell in her body. It took every ounce of willpower she possessed to return her gaze to his. “It appears so,” she said in a tone that bordered on frosty. Amazing, the rest of her wasn't anywhere near cold.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing.” She moved to the center island and set her mug on the countertop.

J.T. pushed off from the door frame and moved to stand on the other side of the island. He braced his hands on his hips and studied her with skeptical eyes. “I'm not buying it, Angie. I'm not sure what I've done but it's obvious you're ticked off at me. What is it?”

Angie let her gaze roam over his face. The crease between his eyes and his perplexed expression

indicated that he was totally clueless as to why she might be upset. Well, he was a man. Maybe that explained it. “Why’d you disappear upstairs without a word?”

J.T. expelled a breath and ran his hand through his hair. “First of all, I hate the smell of hospitals. I had to wash it off of me if...if that makes sense.”

Considering how she felt about hospitals, she could definitely understand that, but still. “Why didn’t you say so? After what almost happened earlier, I thought...” Her face warmed under his intense scrutiny. “I thought...” She shook her head, picked up her mug and turned to move to the sink. “Never mind,” she said as she emptied the mug and set it on the counter. Just then the baby decided to move. Angie let out a surprised gasp and in a flash J.T. was behind her as she pressed a hand to her belly.

“Is it the baby?” Concern edged J.T.’s voice.

Angie nodded. “Give me your hand.”

As J.T. slipped his arm around her waist, she reached for his hand and placed it on her abdomen. “She’s restless,” she said just as she felt another strong flutter. “Did you feel that?” she asked, still a bit awestruck whenever the baby moved.

“No. What’s she doing in there?” J.T. whispered.

Angie couldn’t help but smile. “Why are you whispering?”

“I don’t know,” he replied in his normal tone. “Does it hurt?”

“No. It just takes me by surprise because I’m not expecting it,” she said as the tangy citrus scent of his shampoo drifted into her senses. J.T. splayed his fingers over her stomach. They seemed to burn straight through the fabric of her robe to her skin. Her knees quivered and she had to fight the urge to lean back against his solid body.

“Did you think I didn’t want you?” The husky notes of his voice triggered her pulse and filled her lower body with heat. Heat that quickly spread through her veins like wildfire.

Several long seconds passed and with each one the air in the room grew taut with unspoken emotion. “Yes,” she finally said in a soft voice.

“Angie. Baby,” he murmured the endearment like he’d said it a million times, but he hadn’t. Except on that night in August and hearing it again now made her insides melt. “I wanted you the first moment you looked at me with those gorgeous blue eyes of yours. But after you conked out in the waiting room it was pretty obvious you were dead tired. I assumed you’d just want to go to bed.”

“I do want to go to bed,” she whispered. “With you.”

With a low groan, J.T. slipped his other arm around her waist and gently pulled her against him. Wrapped in the warm cocoon of his embrace, Angie closed her eyes and tilted her head as he kissed the base of her neck. Her breath caught as he lifted his hands to her breasts and cupped them.

“Do you know how hard it is lying in bed at night knowing you’re just down the hall?”

“I have a pretty good idea.”

“So I’m not the only one losing sleep?”

“No.”

His hands stilled. “Do you think about me? At night?”

The blood in her veins went hot and molten. If he only knew how much she thought about him, and how erotic those thoughts were. “Yes.”

“Do you touch yourself?”

“J.T....” she murmured, both stunned and aroused at his question.

“Don’t be embarrassed.” He lowered his hands and as he pressed his lips to her neck, he began to untie the belt at her waist. “If you do, you’re not the only one,” he said as he freed the belt from its

knot and separated the lapels of her robe. The silky fabric brushed against her nipples, stimulating them even more.

Driven by desire too long suppressed, she reached for J.T.'s hands and lifted them to her breasts. "Touch me," she whispered, then melted against him as he scraped his palms over her nipples. His erection nudged the crevice of her ass.

Except for the dull hum of the refrigerator, the kitchen was silent as he gently massaged her breasts. His lips on her neck weren't enough—she wanted more. She turned her head and met his hooded gaze just before his mouth covered hers in an urgent kiss that sent a deep, hungry throb of desire to the very center of her being. Their tongues met, and with a muffled growl J.T. lowered his hands to her hips, urging her tighter against him.

Seconds—or maybe it was minutes, she wasn't sure—later he broke the kiss and drew in a ragged breath. Dazed, she searched his face, her insides liquefying at the raw sexual need burning in the depths of his eyes. "Can you feel how much I want you?" he asked in a low gravelly voice. Instead of answering, she moved sensuously against him. He groaned and dug his fingers into her hips. "Are you trying to stop this before it even gets started? Because if you keep doing that I may not last long." He moved his hand to her stomach and lightly feathered his fingers over her skin. "Do you know what I remember about the night we spent together?"

"Let's see. It was after my softball game. So I don't imagine it was the scent of my perfume."

J.T. chuckled. "You looked hot in your uniform. I got semi-hard watching you pitch."

"Only semi-hard? I'll have to work on my technique."

"I made up for it later."

"You sure did," she said, and felt her face grow warm at the memory of him hot and hard inside her. In that moment she'd finally discovered what it felt like to be truly connected with someone. But instead of embracing it, she fled his condo and tried to pretend that her world hadn't just completely changed. But it had, and it wasn't just because they'd conceived a baby that night.

"So if it wasn't my alluring scent, what is that you remember about that night?"

His eyes darkened and burned into hers. "Everything."

A surge of heat throbbed low in Angie's belly. Turning in his arms, she sought his mouth and then nothing else mattered. All she wanted was J.T. For months, even when she tried to get him out of her mind, she couldn't. She'd been a fool to think she could ever resist him and she was done trying.

Angie was breathless when his lips left hers to sear a scorching path to her jaw and then to her neck. As he kissed the throbbing pulse at the base of her throat, he lifted his hands and slid the robe from her shoulders. The silky fabric grazed her thighs before it slid silently into a puddle on the floor. Goosebumps formed on her skin as the cool air washed over her overheated body. J.T. lifted his head and their eyes met with a force that licked through her body.

"Are you sure?"

Never more sure of anything in her life, she nodded. "Yes."

His hazel eyes burned into hers and she trembled at the intensity of his gaze. Without another word, he pulled her to him and reclaimed her mouth. As their lips fused hotly, she felt his hands span her waist. He lifted her and automatically she wound her arms around his neck and wrapped her legs around his hips. His erection pressed into the juncture of her thighs and as anticipation filled her, she kissed him voraciously, her tongue meeting his in a slow, wet, mindless kiss that rocked her to her core. No one had ever kissed her like J.T. She had a strong hunch no one else ever would.

Angie's heart pounded furiously as he pulled his lips from hers and—as if she weighed nothing at all—carried her from the kitchen and up the stairs. She buried her face in the crook of his neck and

inhaled his clean male scent. It danced along her nerve endings, making her wholly aware of him.

Instead of his room, he chose hers and after laying her gently on the bed, he stripped off his sweats and stretched out alongside her, propping himself up with one elbow.

The dark intensity of his gaze burned into hers and then with a stifled groan, he lowered his head and reclaimed her lips with a kiss so demandingly forceful it sent a shot of desire barreling through her veins, setting her on fire from head to toe. A low moan of pleasure escaped her as he palmed her breast and then brushed his thumb over her taut nipple. He drew back, his eyes glittering with arousal as they roamed over her face.

“You are so damn beautiful.” The husky cadence of his voice only intensified her need for him. “I tried to forget about you and about that night. But I couldn’t.”

“Neither could I.” Her heart clenched as she lifted her hand to brush an errant lock of hair from his forehead. “It scared me. That’s why I ran.”

“Don’t run this time, Angie.” He slid his hand to her abdomen. His fingers were warm on her skin as he rubbed her slightly rounded belly. “There’s too much at stake now.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she whispered and moved her hand to his nape to pull him toward her. At first the kiss was tender and as light as a summer breeze but within moments their need for each other won out, she opened her mouth eager for the taste and feel of his tongue stroking hers.

Lost in the fierceness of his kiss, she gasped when he eased his hand lower and sank a finger into her swollen folds. He made a sound that resembled a groan. “You’re soaked,” he murmured against her mouth. “Spread your legs.”

Obedying his husky command, Angie spread her legs and drew in a ragged breath as J.T. teased her with long slow strokes, each one closer to her throbbing clit. Time slowed as he moved lower and slid a finger inside her. “You feel so good,” he murmured. “So wet. So tight.” A soft gasp escaped her lips as he withdrew and circled his finger around her clit. The corner of his sensual mouth lifted in sexy, half smile and she could barely breathe from the sweet tension he’d created. He slipped two fingers into her this time. Her wet sheath clenched around him and heat swept across her body as he mimicked what she was dying for him to do with his cock. Grabbing a fistful of his hair, she pressed her mouth to his and kissed him with the same hunger she’d felt the first time he kissed her.

The kiss lasted until they both needed air. J.T. pulled back and gazed at her with a look so intense her skin pebbled with goose bumps. “I want...no, I need you. Inside of me. Right now,” she whispered and saw his eyes flare with arousal.

J.T. slipped his fingers from her and lazily brushed his thumb over her sensitive clit. “I want to watch you come first.” His eyes bored into hers. “I want to feel your body tremble and hear those soft sexy moans you make when you go over the edge. You have no idea how many times I’ve fantasized about making you come in every possible way.”

Angie released her grip on his hair and trailed her fingers to his shoulder. “I don’t remember you talking so much that night at your condo. But I like it.”

“You didn’t give me a chance. You were all over me.” A cocky grin spread across his face.

She laughed. “I think I was over you and under you.”

“You’re very flexible.” J.T.’s grin faded as he held her gaze. Then his finger zeroed in on her clit and he worked his magic. Angie bit back a sob as, within seconds, his expert touch caused her to shatter. Unable to contain herself, she moaned as her entire body throbbed with wave after wave of exquisite pleasure. “You’re so fucking sexy,” he said in a low rough voice, then slipped his hand from between her legs and with a wicked gleam in his eyes, licked his finger. “Next time I’ll make you come with my mouth.”

Despite the fact that her body was coming down from her orgasm, Angie's pulse kicked at the thought of J.T. going down on her. There'd been many nights when that particular memory had fueled her fantasies. It wouldn't be a fantasy for much longer.

"Promise?" she asked, and threaded her fingers through his silky hair.

"Yes." He grinned, grabbing her hand and pressing his lips to her palm. "I want you so much," he murmured against her skin. "But I don't want to hurt the baby."

"You won't."

A frown marred his brow. "Are you sure?"

"I'm surprised you haven't read the sex chapter in the pregnancy book."

He gave her a lopsided grin as he pushed himself up and moved between her thighs. She spread her legs wider to accommodate him. "I didn't want to get my hopes up," he said, moving over her and bracing his hands on the bed on either side of her upper arms. The muscles of his broad shoulders bunched as he supported himself over her. She skimmed her fingertips over his warm skin, tracing the hills and valleys of his chest and back. The tip of his cock brushed against her slit and the anticipation of feeling him inside her again was almost more than she could bear. She tilted her hips, anxious for him satisfy the sweet ache between her thighs.

"We can have sex up until the baby's born if we want to. We'll just have to get more creative as my stomach gets bigger."

"Creative?" A wicked gleam danced in his eyes. "I can do that."

"I'll bet you can," she said, and let out a blissful sigh as he slowly entered her and then stilled.

"Christ, you feel good," he said in a low controlled voice. "Better than I remember."

Angie slipped her hands around his back, then slid them to his ass to urge him on. "It's okay. You're not hurting me, or the baby." Her words of assurance seemed to satisfy him and he began to move, slowly at first and then faster. It didn't take long for her to match his rhythm. She closed her eyes and focused on the exquisite sensation of him filling her with his hard cock.

Seconds later, he let out a low sound of pleasure and the tempo of his thrusting increased. She opened her eyes and found him watching her with smoldering intensity. Their gazes locked as stroke after sensuous stroke, he chased his orgasm. Sliding her hands to his ass, she rocked with him until he tensed, let out a masculine moan of pleasure and erupted inside her.

"Are you okay? I wasn't too rough, was I?" he asked seconds later, still inside her. Angie's heart clenched at the concern that shined in his eyes.

"I'm fine. And no, you weren't too rough." She slid her hands up his back, reveling in the taut smooth feel of his skin. She grinned. "Next time I'll take the top so you won't worry so much."

"I like that idea." Balancing his weight with his left hand, he slipped his hand under the small of her back, then rolled to his side bringing her with him. A fine sheen of perspiration glistened on his forehead. She wiped it away with her fingers before lightly caressing his cheek.

"We should have done this on our wedding night."

"It wasn't the right time." J.T. smoothed his palm over her shoulder, then trailed his hand to her back where he fingered the thick braid she'd woven after her shower. "As much as I wanted you that night, you weren't ready." He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. After a gentle kiss he pulled back and gazed at her with such tenderness she felt like she might cry.

"You're nothing like my father," she said and blinked to keep her tears at bay.

"I'm glad you finally figured that out." He reached for the sheet and covered them with it. "Can I sleep with you?"

"Yes." Swamped with emotions, she slipped her arm around his waist and buried her face into his



chest.

A little while later, wrapped in the warm cocoon of J.T.'s strong arms, Angie listened to the steady cadence of his breathing and finally admitted to herself something she'd known for days.

The marriage agreement was toast.

## Chapter Fifteen

Angie awoke as soon as the sun's early morning rays filtered into the room through the slats of the blinds. Despite not working for almost two months now, her body's internal clock was still set on early-to-rise mode. Even when she stayed up late, she couldn't seem to sleep past six.

Although she'd fallen asleep in J.T.'s arms, she was now on her back and J.T.'s forearm was slung over her as if—even in slumber—he was afraid she might try to bolt like she had four months ago. She turned her head and as always, her heart did that same crazy flipping thing that it had the first time she'd seen him. Only now her body's response wasn't based on physical attraction alone. That one man should be blessed with not only amazing good looks, but infinite thoughtfulness had to be an anomaly. Or maybe not. So far, every Sawyer she'd met had treated her with nothing but kindness. They were an exceptional family—a family she was now a part of.

Judging by the steadiness of J.T.'s breathing, he wouldn't be waking up anytime soon. He wasn't an early riser—probably due to his schedule during the baseball season. The Blaze played a lot of night games and the players usually didn't leave the ballpark until after ten, sometimes later if they were required to talk to the media. His body clock had adjusted to his schedule just as hers had to her eight-to-five work days.

For a good five minutes she watched him sleep, content to just look at him. But soon the pressure on her bladder was too insistent to ignore and since there would be no going back to sleep, she gently lifted his arm and slid out of bed. Other than letting out a soft snore, J.T. didn't move a muscle. Angie pulled the sheet back over him and headed for her bathroom.

After using the toilet, she pulled the elastic band from her braid, quickly brushed her teeth and then crossed the cool ceramic tile to the large glass shower enclosure and opened the door. Turning on the water, she tested it with her fingers for several seconds before she stepped inside to let the warm water sluice over her head and down her body. It caressed her skin, evoking memories of last night and how J.T. had been so gentle with her. If she hadn't already slept with him she probably wouldn't have known the difference, but she had slept with him and therefore knew that he'd restrained himself when he was inside her. She supposed it was natural for him to be concerned about hurting the baby and he'd probably continue to be. But like she'd told him last night, they'd just have to be more creative as the baby grew and her stomach got bigger.

Reaching for her shampoo, she washed her hair, rinsed it and as she started to apply the conditioner she almost jumped out of her skin when a light knock sounded on the door.

"If you need someone to wash your back, I'm available," J.T.'s raised voice carried through the door. "I'm very thorough."

"I'll bet you are." She smiled and smoothed the conditioner over the ends of her hair.

"May I come in?"

"Only if you follow through on that offer to scrub my back." She rinsed the conditioner from her fingers and wiped water condensation from the glass as J.T. opened the door and stepped inside.

"What are you doing up so early?" she asked and let her gaze wander down his broad chest, past his six-pack abs and then lower, where a silky light brown hair began just below his navel and trailed to his groin. The mirror behind him, just above the vanity, provided an excellent view of his perfectly formed ass. "Did I wake you?"

J.T. ran a hand through his tousled hair. "I had to use the bathroom." He grinned. "I went to mine. I'm not sure we're ready for that just yet."

Angie laughed. "I'm surprised you didn't go back to bed."

"That was my intention." His gaze raked over her body and then lifted. "But I changed my mind."

A thrill raced up her spine. The wicked gleam in J.T.'s eyes telegraphed he had more on his mind than an innocent back scrubbing. Her heart hammered against her ribs as he moved to the shower and opened the door.

"What are your plans today?" she asked and moved a step back so he could stand under the shower head.

"Besides visiting Justin at the hospital, I definitely need to carve out some time at the gym," he said, then hesitated. "Are you okay with that?"

"Of course," she assured him. "I know working out is important to you."

His prolonged gaze seemed to burn right into her. "So is spending time with you."

"Then why don't I meet you at the gym after you visit Justin?" she suggested. "I'd love to try that low-impact aerobics class Jake told me about."

A flicker of relief crossed his eyes. "It's a date." He closed his eyes and tipped his head back to let the water slick back his hair. Unable to resist, Angie slowly lowered her gaze and drank her fill of him.

"Like what you see?"

She jerked her head up and found J.T. watching her. Amusement quirked his lips. "Yes," she said, not bothering to hide the fact that she'd been admiring what was right in front of her. "You must know you have an amazing body."

J.T. shrugged. "In my profession I have to be in shape. Other than that, I don't think about it that much." He flashed a sinful smile that tripped her pulse. "But I'm glad you're thinking about it."

"About what?"

"About my body." He took a step toward her. "Because I think about yours all the time."

"Let's see if you feel that way when I'm as big as a house."

"You'll be beautiful even then, and I'll want you as much as I do right now." His strong hands spanned her waist. "I thought it was some sort of myth that pregnant women glowed, but you do, Angie. Every time I look at you, you take my breath away." He searched her face as if committing it to memory and then backed her up against the wet tile.

Angie moaned as his mouth came down on hers. Reaching up, she wound her arms around J.T.'s neck and gave herself up to his hard demanding kiss. Never had she imagined that just a kiss could lead to such raw hunger—such aching need. She'd always prided herself on her control, on her ability to stay detached when it came to sex. But then J.T. had come along and changed everything.

With a low, nearly inaudible growl, J.T. blazed a scorching trail to her collarbone. She unwound her arms from his neck and let out a soft gasp as he lowered his head and captured one taut nipple into the hot, wet heat of his mouth. Each tug of his lips sent a blistering current of electricity straight to her core. In no time at all she was wet and ready for him.

Anticipation hummed in her veins as J.T. dropped to his knees. She braced her hands on the slick tile, oblivious to the spray from the shower head as he tilted his head back and gazed up at her, his eyes simmering with arousal. Tiny droplets of water pearled on his lightly stubbled jaw and that, combined with his slicked-back hair, damp and darkened from the shower spray were so compellingly sensual that a whimper slipped past her lips, a helpless husky sound of pure lust.

"Time to keep my promise," he said, the throaty words sizzling over her skin as he pressed his lips to her stomach. Feeling like she was on fire, she couldn't tear her gaze from J.T. as he urged her legs wider with his hands and then fulfilled his promise with a long leisurely swipe of his tongue

over her swollen folds. Angie gasped and arched her back, pressing into his mouth.

As if he had all the time in the world, J.T. lifted her leg, hooking it over his right shoulder, giving himself even greater access to her throbbing flesh. “You taste so good,” he murmured, then circled his tongue around her clit. The pleasure was sweet torture. She leaned her head back against the tile as he suckled her, his warm, moist mouth fanning the embers he’d ignited into flames. The need to come was intense. Blindly, she reached for his head and pulled him closer, rubbing herself brazenly against his mouth, desperate for the pleasure just within reach.

She softly cried out as the first wave of her orgasm crashed over her. Just like the echo of her moans, the intense pleasure seemed to go on forever as J.T.’s lips and tongue coaxed her into a long and satisfying release. Relaxing her grip on the back of his head, she drank in a ragged breath, grateful for his hold on her. If not for him, she would have slithered into a gelatinous heap on the shower floor. J.T. gave her a final hot lick and then pressed his lips to her inner thigh.

Opening her eyes, she looked down and met J.T.’s scorching gaze as he slid her thigh from his shoulder. She smiled, and as he rose to his feet, one of Grandma Sophia’s favorite bible sayings—of all things—crossed her mind. Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. Now that was a bible verse she could wholeheartedly get behind.

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Bracing his palms to the wet tile, J.T. leaned forward and covered Angie’s mouth with his. The soft moan she made as their kiss deepened only served to turn him on even more. After what had just transpired, his cock was rock hard. He ached to bury himself deep inside her tight, hot pussy and never come out.

Before he could fathom her intentions, she pressed her hands to his chest and pushed him until his back came into contact with the cold shower door behind him. His breath jammed in his throat as she knelt before him and then swirled her tongue around the head of his cock.

“Fuck,” he muttered as her hot moist mouth closed over him and took him deep. It was almost more than he could take. Closing his eyes, he slapped his palms against the glass for support and drew in a sharp breath. He wanted to come so fucking much, but he also wanted it to last as long as it could. For months he’d been fantasizing about her sucking him like she had that night in August. And now that she was, it was better than any fantasy. Shit. This was almost better than winning the World Series.

J.T. opened his eyes, looked down and the erotic sight of her kneeling before him, working him with her mouth almost made him explode. He closed his eyes and willed it not to happen. Not yet.

He released his breath as she pulled back and his cock slid out of her mouth. His disappointment didn’t last long. Mesmerized, he watched as she tilted her head, held his cock and trailed her tongue down the length of his shaft. He let out a choked groan and closed his eyes again as she slowly drew one of his balls into her moist warm mouth.

“Oh, yeah,” he whispered as she let it slip out with such aching slowness that he couldn’t stop the moan that escaped his lips. Before he could catch a breath, she wrapped her fingers around the base of his cock and gloved him again with her mouth. The combination of both was so warm, and so tight, it almost felt like he was inside her. And although that’s where he’d intended to be when he got into the shower, he didn’t stop her. He couldn’t, he was too far gone.

Instinctively, he reached out and put his hand on the back of her head. Unbearable tension gathered within him as Angie took everything he had to give and then some. Finally, when he couldn’t

wait one more second, he relinquished what was left of his control and let her send him over the edge. The pleasure exploded and so did he. It started at his groin and radiated throughout his body with an intensity that threatened to buckle his knees. And just as he'd done for the past two years, the name he whispered hoarsely as he came was Angie's.

As the last vestiges of his orgasm faded and the pounding of his heart began to subside, J.T. guided her up and pulled her against his body. Water from the shower head pelted one shoulder as he wrapped his arms around her and held her close. That she fit perfectly didn't surprise him, the desire to never let her go did.

"You've depleted me. I don't think I can move," he said as he fingered the long wet strands of her hair and inhaled the clean fresh scent of her shampoo.

"We have to. Soon. The water's almost cold." She pressed her lips to his chest and sighed. "That was...well...wow."

"That was more than wow." J.T. grinned. "I was hoping you'd do that."

Her breath heated his skin as she chuckled. "Who says women don't do that after they get the ring on their finger?"

"Married guys who don't reciprocate." He slid his hands to her ass and kneaded her soft flesh. "Do unto others and all that." He frowned as Angie giggled. "What?" He lowered his gaze to her upturned face. Her eyes sparkled with laughter. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing." She gave him a mischievous smile. "Nothing at all."

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Three hours later, J.T. walked into his brother's hospital room and wasn't at all surprised to see the scowl on Justin's face. He was, however, surprised to see that his brother's dark hair was longer than Josh's and that he was sporting some seriously overgrown facial hair.

"How are you feeling?" J.T. flipped the straight backed visitor's chair around and straddled it. "Oh, and Tom Selleck called, he's looking for his mustache."

"Bite me." Justin reached up and smoothed his mustache. "I'm thinking of keeping it."

"Are you sure about that? You could probably braid that thing."

"And you'd know all about braids wouldn't you, pretty boy?"

"Don't be jealous." J.T. rested his forearms on the back of the chair and tried to ignore the cloying smell of the pine scented cleaner that every hospital he'd ever been in seemed to have. And what was up with all hospital rooms looking exactly the same? Now that his living room had been painted he was beginning to see the merit of color. "It's not my fault I inherited Dad's good looks and you didn't."

Under the bushy upper lip, Justin's mouth quirked. "It's good to see you, man."

"Same here. You had us worried."

"It's nothing," Justin said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "The bullet didn't hit the bone. I'll be up and around well before you report to spring training." Justin's gaze lasered in on J.T.'s wedding band. "I hear you knocked up some cleat-chaser and married her. Didn't you learn anything from that friend of yours?"

"Angie's not a groupie and she's not lying about the baby." Irritation sharpened J.T.'s tone. "I had a paternity test done and the baby is mine."

"What about your career?"

"What about it?"

“Do you think you can give it one hundred percent now that you’re tied down with a wife and a kid?”

“I’m not tied down. I’m still training.”

One of Justin’s brows lifted. “As hard as you were before?”

J.T. remained silent. The truth of the matter was that he’d been distracted ever since he’d found out about the baby. Yeah, he’d been working out and watching film, but not with the single-minded focus he’d planned on right after the season was over.

“I thought so.” Justin folded his arms over his chest.

Annoyed, J.T. frowned. “I didn’t come here to talk about me. Mom’s concerned that you won’t take it easy after you get out of here. Do you think you could cut her a break and at least take some time to recover and spend the holidays with the family?”

“So you and Jake are tag-teaming me now?” Justin glared at him. “He was just here with the same song and dance. I work undercover. While I’m on a case I can’t risk being seen.”

“We get that. We’re not stupid.” J.T. shook his head. “But let’s not pretend that this is all about your undercover work. You’ve been keeping your distance from us for a while now.”

A scowl darkened Justin’s face. “I don’t have three months off a year like you do, little brother. And when I do get time off I’m not in the mood to talk. I just want to be alone.”

“I guess you’ve seen some pretty serious shit.”

Justin averted his gaze. “You could say that.”

“At least you were able to shut down that meth organization.”

“Where’d you hear that?” Justin’s alert gaze snapped back to his.

“Your captain told Mom and Dad that you got injured during the raid. He said one guy was killed and the other ran off like a scared rabbit. Sounds like you shut them down to me.”

“That house was part of a much larger operation. They took a hit but they haven’t been shut down.”

“Do any of them know you’re a cop?”

“No.” Justin scrubbed a hand over his jaw. “But after last night, I’m off the case. I’ll be given a new assignment after this,” he gingerly rested his hand on his thigh, “leg heals.”

“How long are you going to do this undercover stuff?”

“I don’t know. I’m not ready to sit behind a desk filling out paperwork, which is the majority of what detectives do. I like being out in the field.”

“You could have been killed last night.”

“I could just as easily get killed crossing the street,” Justin countered with obvious annoyance. “Pedestrian deaths are up this year.”

“Point taken,” J.T. conceded, knowing it was useless to argue. “Look, even though Mom doesn’t talk about it a lot, I know she worries about you. And she misses you. It would mean the world to her if you spent the holidays with us. Would you just think about it?”

“I already told Jake I’d be there. I just wanted to hear your pitch.” Justin offered him a smug grin. “Besides, how can I pass up a chance to meet this new wife of yours?”

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Inside the women’s locker room at Jake’s gym, Angie had just shoved her purse into a locker when her cell phone rang. A glance at the clock that hung on the wall near the shower area indicated she had ten minutes before the low impact aerobics class was scheduled to begin so she dug into the side

pocket of her purse for the phone.

“Hi,” she said after seeing her mother-in-law’s name on the screen. “Did you manage to get some sleep last night?”

“Not much,” Sharon’s voice was strained. “When Joe and I got home from the hospital my supplier called with some bad news.”

“Your supplier?”

“Sorry, I guess we’ve never talked about my little business venture. About five years ago, I opened a small coffee café downtown in the business district. I’d been thinking about it for years and the location was too good to pass up. Anyway, besides coffee products, I also sell baked goods. The supplier I’ve been using for a while bakes out of her home. She called me last night to let me know that while she and her husband were away for the weekend some sort of electrical problem started a fire in their home. By the time the fire department got there and put it out, a good portion of the home was destroyed.”

Angie put a hand to her chest. “That’s awful. I hope no one was hurt.”

“Their dog was with them and they don’t have kids, but they’re devastated, as you can imagine.”

“What a shock to come home and find that,” Angie said, and thought of all the personal items and photographs that had probably been destroyed. Still, the couple and their dog were alive, that was the important thing.

“The reason why I’m calling is that I’m always getting requests from bakers who want me to sell their goods, but I don’t think I can get anyone lined up on such short notice. I’m going to take some of the scones and muffins you gave me yesterday over to the café tomorrow morning and I was wondering if you happened to have any in your freezer? I’ll pay you for them, of course.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’m happy to help out. And if you need me to bake anything until you find someone permanent just let me know.”

“Thank you, honey.” Sharon breathed a sigh of relief. “I was stressing out. The majority of my customers buy muffins along with their coffee. I’d hate to lose their business.”

“You won’t,” Angie assured her. “I’m at the gym with J.T. right now. Can I call you when we get home?”

“Sure. Take your time.”

After ending the call with Sharon, Angie stowed her phone in the locker, grabbed her water bottle and hurried out of the locker room. The aerobics room was directly to her right as she exited and she smiled as she saw Jake talking to a few of the members waiting outside the double doors to the room. A large glass window next to the door revealed that another class was still inside and by the looks of it they were cooling down with stretches.

“Angie.” Jake waved her over. “I’m glad you made it.”

Angie halted beside Jake and met the friendly eyes of the blonde standing next to him. “You must be Melissa.” Angie held out her hand. “Jake said you’re a newbie to this class too.”

“I’m new to all forms of exercise,” Melissa said with a wry smile as they shook hands. “It’s nice to meet you.”

J.T. had told her that he’d met Melissa and liked her immediately. So did Angie. Melissa exuded such warmth and friendliness it was hard to imagine anyone not liking her.

“Now that the introductions are out of the way, I’ll leave you two to the class while I go inflict some torture on my brother.” He put his hand on Melissa’s shoulder. “Stop by my office before you leave so we can discuss our training schedule for this week.”

“Will do.” Melissa’s gaze followed Jake as he headed back toward his office. “He’s a nice guy,”

she commented and then looked back at Angie and sighed. "Why can't all men be like him?"

"Some are," Angie said, and stepped aside as the double doors opened and several sweaty men and women left the aerobics room. "They look exhausted."

Melissa grinned. "That'll be us in about an hour." Her gaze lowered. "Jake said you're pregnant, but you're barely showing."

"It's this T-shirt." Angie tugged at the loose cotton shirt. "Trust me, I'm starting to show."

"Well, at least if someone congratulates you on the baby, you really are having one." A wry grimace crossed Melissa's lips. "A month ago someone came up to me in the grocery store and asked me when my baby was due. You should have seen her face when I told her I wasn't pregnant. That's when I realized it was time for me to get serious about losing weight."

"Then you're in good hands with Jake. My husband..." Angie paused, taken aback to realize that this was first time she'd ever referred to J.T. as her husband aloud. "My husband says Jake is a great trainer."

"So far, I can attest to that. He's tough and while he does push me to do more than I would do on my own, he knows that right now I have some limitations. But I already feel better than I did a few weeks ago, so I'm making progress."

Angie peered into the room as several members filed in and took their places on the hardwood floor. "I hope I don't embarrass myself. The only exercise I've done in years is play softball. I may trip over my feet in there."

Melissa laughed and patted Angie's back. "Then you're in good company. I'm a total klutz. It's all I can do to walk and chew gum at the same time. We'll make a fine pair."

Angie smiled and followed Melissa into the room.

Two hours later, Angie sat across from J.T. at a table at the gym's juice bar. "How was your visit with Justin?" she asked and then took a sip of her strawberry smoothie. "Did you talk to him about Christmas?"

"Yep. He'll be spending it with the family."

"Sharon will be relieved."

J.T. nodded and picked up his protein drink. "What about your mother and sister? Do you think they'd like to join all of us for Christmas?"

Angie bit her lower lip and shrugged. Her last conversation with her mother had been strained. She could only imagine her reaction when she found out that Angie planned to make a go of her marriage to J.T. "I'm not sure. I'll call my mom and invite her."

As much as she missed her mom and sister, the thought of her mother mingling with the Sawyers filled her with trepidation. Her mother's moods could be unpredictable, and if she decided to enlighten J.T.'s family about the marriage contract it could be disastrous.



## Chapter Sixteen

Late Monday morning, J.T. watched as the ultrasound technician used something that looked like a paddle to smear light blue gel over Angie's stomach. "You were right," Angie said. "It's cold."

Mia, the technician, chuckled. "The gel acts as a conductor for the sound waves. As I move the transducer over your stomach it'll produce sounds into your uterus. The sound waves bounce off the bones and tissue returning back to the transducer to generate images of the baby."

"Will we be able to find out the sex?" J.T. asked.

"That depends on the baby. If he or she isn't shy and the legs are open we should be able to determine the sex today. Do you want to know or do you want to be surprised?"

"We want to know." Both he and Angie spoke at the same time.

Mia pressed several buttons on the console in front of her. "Okay, let's take a look."

J.T. stared at the monitor. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting but it wasn't this. The black and white images were grainy but he could definitely make out the baby's head, legs and arms. Emotion welled in his throat at the sight of the small life inside Angie's stomach.

"It looks like she's sucking her thumb," Angie exclaimed with undisguised awe.

Mia moved the transducer a little lower on Angie's abdomen. "I think we got lucky. The baby's legs are open." She pressed a button and froze the picture. "See those three lines?" She leaned forward and pointed to the screen. "It's a girl."

"How can you tell?" J.T. squinted but he didn't see the lines she was referring to.

"If it was a boy we would see the penis. But clearly it's the labia."

There was nothing clear about it, but J.T. wasn't going to argue with her. After all, she was the professional.

"Our hunch was right." Angie looked from the monitor to him, her face glowing with happiness. "We're having a girl."

To J.T.'s surprise, his eyes grew moist. A daughter. His daughter with Angie. Sliding forward on the chair next to the examination table, he reached for Angie's hand and took a breath to collect himself. He hadn't expected such an emotional reaction to seeing the baby. But now that he'd seen the image of his daughter it only reinforced his belief that marrying Angie and being a major part of the baby's life had been the absolute right decision.

"Does everything look normal?" Angie asked, turning her attention back to Mia.

"So far, so good." Mia concentrated on moving the transducer while pressing buttons on the keyboard. "I'll be taking measurements and then we'll be done. After that you'll finish up with the doctor."

"Any chance we can get a shot of the ultrasound picture?" J.T. asked. "I'm sure my family will want to see it."

Angie's smile faltered and J.T. could have kicked himself. Angie's mother hadn't shown much interest in her daughter or the baby since before the wedding. Apparently, she still hadn't gotten over the fact that he was a ballplayer. He hoped she'd relent and join them for Christmas. All Mrs. DeMarco had to do was get to know him. Then she'd see that he was nothing at all like Angie's father, and that her daughter would never suffer the same betrayal she had.

All he needed was a chance.

The rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee enveloped Angie as she preceded J.T. into his mother's "little business venture" located in downtown Sacramento. Immediately Angie could see Sharon's unique stamp on the place. While there wasn't much square footage, the small dark wood tables placed along the brick wall gave the room a spacious and charming look. Each table was flanked with two black chairs, and a black chalkboard with a scalloped frame hung on the brick and listed the specialty coffees of the day. At the back of the store, a gleaming stainless steel counter held an espresso machine and a cash register, and next to the counter was a glass display case that contained what was left of the baked goods Angie had removed from the freezer and packed up this morning for Sharon to sell.

"Welcome to River City Coffee," Sharon said cheerily from behind the counter as they approached. Her hair was pulled back with a dark green headband and she had a green and white bib-apron tied around her neck and waist. "How did your appointment go?"

"It went well." Angie smiled. "I like my new doctor and from what she was saying, the Family Birth Center at Sutter Medical Center is excellent. They even have classes for new parents."

"And Angie wants us to sign up for all of them." Amusement tinged J.T.'s voice.

"I believe in being well prepared." Angie gave him a sideways look. "I'm scared to death I'm going to do something wrong when the baby gets here."

"That's common with all first-time moms." Sharon waved to a customer leaving the store. "But you'll be fine."

Despite Sharon's confidence, Angie wasn't so sure. She'd never even taken care of a pet and in five months she'd be caring for a baby who would depend on her for everything. Perhaps what she was feeling was normal for expectant mothers but that didn't do much to lessen her fears.

"Did you find out the sex of the baby?"

"We were right, it's a girl." Angie couldn't resist telling Sharon the exciting news.

"A granddaughter." Sharon put her hand to her heart and blinked back tears. "I was hoping your intuition was right. I'm finally going to have a little girl to spoil."

Sharon's heartfelt response caused a lump to form in Angie's throat. She'd give anything for her mother to have the same reaction.

"Angie, thanks for jumping in. I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't helped me out. Your berry muffins have been getting rave reviews." Sharon picked up a pencil from the counter and tucked it behind her ear. "It's just until I can find someone else." A sly smile tilted her lips. "Unless you'd like to make it permanent?"

"I told her she could make a fortune with those muffins." J.T. slipped his arm around Angie's shoulders, a casual yet intimate gesture that signaled the change in their relationship. "I could eat one of Angie's muffins every day."

Angie refused to look at J.T. After that day in the kitchen she'd probably never think of muffins the same way again.

"They are delicious," Sharon said with a smile. "Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea?"

"I'd love some herbal tea," Angie replied.

Sharon looked at J.T. with an indulgent gleam in her eyes. "And you. I suppose you want me to concoct one of those protein smoothies you like?"

"You know me too well."

Sharon laughed. "I should by now. Go find a table."

After they'd taken the table closest to the window that looked out to the street, Angie peeled off her jacket and hung it over the back of her chair. Brushing back her hair, she rested her forearms on

the table and noticed a woman at the table next to them blatantly staring at J.T. She was blonde, drop-dead gorgeous and dressed exactly like Angie used to dress when she was working—in a sophisticated yet feminine business suit that flattered her figure and showed off her long shapely legs.

Compared to the stylish woman, Angie felt like a first-class frump. Most of her clothes had become so snug she'd resorted to a pair of black leggings and an oversized sweater to wear to her doctor appointment this morning.

"We should stop by the Christmas tree lot on the way home and pick up a tree." J.T. pulled the sunglasses from the top of his head, folded them and set them on the table.

Angie smiled and forgot her clothing issues. "I haven't had a tree since I lived with my mom and Livvie. My place was so small that I just put out a few decorations."

"And I've never bothered because I always go over to my parents' house on Christmas." He tugged at the zipper of his Hunter green fleece pullover and then slid a finger under the collar of the cream colored mock turtleneck he wore underneath. "We'll have to buy ornaments and stuff like that, but since we have to pick out paint for the nursery we can get some at Home Depot."

"We're not getting Christmas ornaments at Home Depot." Angie shook her head. "You know I love that store, but for our first tree we need special ornaments."

"Ornaments are ornaments. And I thought you wanted to paint. Why go to two different stores?"

"We have plenty of time to fix up the nursery. Christmas is in two and half weeks. The tree takes priority and we're not getting just anything to hang on the branches."

"Whatever you say." J.T.'s mouth curved in a lazy smile. "You know, something tells me I'm going to be saying that a lot."

"That's right. Happy wife. Happy life."

"Did you just make that up?"

"No. My grandmother said that was my grandfather's favorite saying. I barely remember him so I can't vouch for it, but Grandma Sophia was a force to be reckoned when she was angry. I have no doubt he kept her as happy as humanly possible."

"No worries then." Angie's pulse heightened as J.T.'s gaze darkened and held hers. "I can think of many ways to keep you happy."

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While Angie used the restroom, J.T. pulled his phone from the pocket of his pullover and swore as he read a text from Jake.

Where R U? Training session this afternoon. Remember?

"Shit," he muttered and typed a quick response to his brother.

"Excuse me?" J.T. looked up to find a stunning blonde gazing down at him. "You're J.T. Sawyer."

"Since birth." He grinned and shoved his phone into his pocket. It still amazed him when fans approached him. Some were respectful and others weren't, but he'd learned early on that the best course of action was to always be polite. The one time he hadn't—on a road trip last season—he'd been lucky that Kelly Maxwell had stepped in and saved his ass from possible criminal charges.

"I'm sorry to bother you." She put a hand to her chest. "My name is Leah Porter and I work for Sacramento Life. We're an online magazine covering the arts, entertainment and sports. I'd love to interview you."

The gleam in her eyes was more hopeful than predatory. She appeared to be on the up and up, but still, he'd have to run the interview request through his agent, Nick Johnson, as well as Kelly, before

agreeing to it.

“Please consider it,” Leah said, with a hint of desperation as he remained silent. “I’ve been assigned to entertainment, but my goal is to cover sports full-time. Scoring an interview with you just might help my boss see that I’m more than just a celebrity reporter.”

J.T. cocked his head. “Do we get many celebrities in Sacramento?”

“Not many, but it doesn’t matter if they’re in town or not, our readers love celebrity gossip.” Leah wrinkled her nose. “Personally, I don’t give a rat’s ass about who’s wearing what but some people eat that up with a spoon.”

Amused, J.T. couldn’t help but laugh. “Rat’s ass?”

Leah’s fair skin colored becomingly. “Sorry. That slipped out.” She dug into the pocket of her suit jacket and pulled out a business card. “I don’t know if this makes a difference, but I promise to be fair and I’m willing to send you my questions before the interview. I don’t like blindsiding anyone.”

J.T. took the card and without looking at it, shoved it into his pocket. “Let me talk to my agent and I’ll get back to you.” He saw the disappointment in her eyes and continued, “I’m not just saying that. I know what it’s like to want to move up in your chosen field. One way or another, I’ll let you know.”

“I appreciate that,” Leah said, and then glanced at the counter. “By the way, if you like muffins, there’s a few left. I had one earlier and it was to die for.”

“Thanks. I’ll be sure to try one.”

J.T. couldn’t help but admire Leah as she left the cafe. He was married, not dead, and Leah Porter was an extremely attractive woman.

“Take a picture it’ll last longer.” Angie’s voice dripped with sarcasm as she slid into her chair across from him. “Who was that?”

“A reporter who wants to interview me.”

Angie’s eyes narrowed. “I’ll bet she wants more than that.”

“No. She just wanted an interview.”

“I saw her staring at you when we first sat down.”

“A lot of people stare at me. Especially people who follow baseball.”

“Then why did she wait until I left the table to talk to you?”

J.T. let loose a frustrated breath. “I have no idea. Maybe she didn’t want to interrupt our conversation.”

“Or maybe she wanted to hit on you.”

“She didn’t hit on me. She was all business.”

“For now.” Angie threw back her hair, then clasped her hands together on the table and stared at him, her eyes glacial.

J.T. leaned forward and covered her hands with his. “I’m not like your father,” he said in a low voice. Angie’s eyes softened and welled with tears. “Baby, I’m not going to cheat on you.”

“Did you see her? She’s freaking gorgeous.” She blinked as her chin trembled. “And I’m fat. I tried on three pairs of pants this morning and none of them fit. I had to wear stretch pants.”

J.T. didn’t understand why stretch pants were such a bad thing, but in Angie’s mind they obviously were. “You’re not fat, you’re pregnant. There’s a difference.”

“Easy for you to say,” Angie muttered. “You’re not the one getting stretch marks.”

“You don’t have stretch marks,” J.T. assured her and just having been up close and personal with her body, he should know.

“Not yet, but just wait. It’ll happen.”

At a loss, J.T. went with the first thing that came into his head. “She said your muffins were to die

for.”

Angie’s eyes widened. “She did?”

“Yes. That’s a direct quote.”

“She eats muffins and still looks like a supermodel.” Angie sighed. “That is so not fair.”

\* \* \*

Although the Christmas tree she and J.T. brought home was in the living room, the pungent aroma of pine had drifted into the kitchen. The fresh scent reminded her of Tahoe and its towering pine trees, snow-capped mountains and bluer-than-blue lake. Heaven on earth was an apt description, and now that it was no longer tainted by the memory of her father she wouldn’t mind spending a long weekend there with J.T. Maybe they could even stay in the honeymoon suite again and make good use of that romantic canopy bed.

After the last utensil had been washed and dried, Angie dug her phone out of her purse and moved to the kitchen table and pressed the speed-dial button for her mother. The phone rang three times before she answered.

“Hello, Angela.”

Angie grimaced and pressed a finger to her temple. So, she was still “Angela.” This was not starting off well.

“Hi, Mom. Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“No. I’m off tonight. I was just about to watch my soap.”

Angie smiled. Her mother was an avid viewer of A New Dawn and recorded it every day on the old VCR she refused to part with. “What’s going on with Jared and Shay?”

“The baby was kidnapped,” her mother replied. “Someone took it from the hospital nursery.”

“Maybe it was Stefan,” Angie ventured a guess. “The last time I watched he was pretty angry that Jared was going to raise his kid.”

“Too obvious. My money is on that wife of his. Cassie is jealous that Shay can have kids and she can’t.”

“You’re probably right. Cassie’s such a bitch. I wouldn’t put it past her.”

There was silence and then it was as if their familiar routine of discussing the soap opera hadn’t even happened. “Why are you calling?” Selena asked in cool voice.

“I’d like you and Livvie to come to Sacramento for Christmas.” Before her mother could protest, Angie continued. “I miss you guys, Mom. I know you don’t approve of what I’m doing, but it’s the holidays and we’ve never been apart on Christmas. Can’t we get past this?”

After a long silence, her mother finally spoke. “He’s going to hurt you, Angie. I can’t bear to see that happen.”

“Mom, J.T. isn’t anything like I thought. But you need to find that out for yourself. Please come, give him a chance.”

“You’re as blind as I was. He’s fooled you, just like your father fooled me,” Selena said in a voice laced with sadness. “But your sister misses you and I don’t want her to spend Christmas without you. We’ll come.”

“That’s great,” Angie said, forcing enthusiasm. But she wasn’t excited. As much as she missed her mother and sister, knowing that her mother harbored such ill will toward J.T. sent a tremor of apprehension down her spine. She could only hope that her mother kept her feelings to herself. It wasn’t until after the conversation was over that Angie realized her mother hadn’t asked her about the

baby. Her first grandchild mattered less than the bitterness she carried around like an anchor. “I’ll see you soon,” she said, and then realized she was talking to dead air. Her mother had hung up. Why wasn’t she surprised?

“Angie,” J.T. called from upstairs. “Can you come up here for a minute?”

Putting her mother out of her mind, she set the phone on the table and left the kitchen. As she passed through the living room, she glanced at the tree sitting in front of the window. It was still bare—they’d taken longer to select it than they’d planned and hadn’t shopped for ornaments. Decorating the tree was on the agenda for tomorrow though—after J.T. finished his training session with Jake.

J.T. had been upstairs for almost two hours and Angie had no idea what he’d been doing. She’d heard some noises, like he was moving furniture, or something, but she’d been too busy baking to investigate.

At the top of the stairs, she took a left and headed for J.T.’s room.

“Wait,” he said, emerging from his room before she got to the doorway. He’d changed out of the pullover and turtleneck and now wore a faded gray T-shirt with the Blaze logo on the front. “Close your eyes,” he said, reaching for her hand.

“Why? It’s not like I haven’t seen that disaster you call a bedroom before. You know, there’s this great invention you may have heard about. It’s called a closet.” She smiled as J.T. rolled his eyes. “It’s where you put all your clothes, shoes and other assorted junk.”

“Close your eyes,” he repeated firmly.

“Okay. Fine.” She dutifully closed her eyes and let J.T. lead her into the room. A familiar citrusy scent invaded her nostrils. “Have you been cleaning? It smells like…” She sniffed. “Like lemons.”

“Open your eyes.”

Angie opened her eyes and let out a shocked gasp as she took in the drastic change. The bed, usually unmade, was covered with a striped linen comforter in earthy sand and cream colors. At the headboard, matching shams were mixed with several throw pillows. The nightstands, both dark wood, that flanked the bed were no longer cluttered with baseball magazines and had been dusted. And there were no clothes, shoes or sport equipment to be seen anywhere. “I had no idea your bed linens were so nice.”

“That’s because I never make my bed.” J.T. let go of her hand. “I’m not the neatest guy on the block.”

“Really?” She smiled. “I hadn’t noticed.” Angie turned to her right and noted that he’d also cleared off the dresser that matched the nightstands. There was only one item on its gleaming surface—a framed photograph. “Is that…?” she said, moving to take a closer look. Her heart turned over. “It’s us,” she whispered, staring at the picture of them taken on their wedding day. “Where did you get it?” She turned around and met his solemn gaze.

“Josh. He brought his camera that day, remember?”

Angie shook her head. “I’d forgotten. How long have you had it?”

“A few days.” He moved to stand in front of her. “You looked so beautiful. When you walked down the aisle, my heart did the same thing it did the first day I saw you.” J.T. lifted his hand to her cheek and brushed his thumb over her skin. “It stopped, and for what seemed like minutes I couldn’t breathe.”

Angie’s heart tripped and then began to pound. I felt the same way, she wanted to say but the words wouldn’t come. They were lodged in her throat, blocked by something unlike anything she’d ever felt or imagined.

“We’ve spent the past two nights in your bedroom. I want you in mine. Permanently.” The

intimacy of his gaze warmed her like a soft caress. “Starting tonight.”

“Is that why you cleaned?”

“Yes, and I’ll try my best to not leave my clothes and other crap lying around.” He leaned forward and pressed his mouth to her hers. His kiss was light and gentle as a whisper, but filled with so much tenderness she felt her heart might burst. “I want you next to me every night,” he said in a low husky voice when he pulled back.

Myriad emotions swirled inside her, but the only one that mattered was the one she’d been unable or too afraid to acknowledge since that night in August. The one she’d been running from for most of her life. The one she could no longer deny.

Love. She was in love with J.T.

Tears blurred her vision until she blinked them away. “Do you promise not to hog the blanket?” she asked, and hoped J.T. wouldn’t notice her emotional reaction. He wanted her in his bed. That didn’t mean he felt the same way she did.

“I promise.”

“Then yes.” She smiled into his eyes. “I’ll move into your bedroom.”

## Chapter Seventeen

For a full week, Angie had been supplying her mother-in-law with a variety of baked goods to sell in her café and so far the arrangement had been an unqualified success. A small part of her hoped that Sharon's regular supplier would decide not to resume her baking business once her house was remodeled and Sharon would ask Angie to be her new supplier. She wasn't surprised that she found more satisfaction in the kitchen than she ever had sitting in a cubicle paying invoices and creating accounting spreadsheets.

Sharon had insisted on compensating her for her time, but as it was a temporary situation Angie refused to accept any money. The only thing she allowed her mother-in-law to do was pay for the ingredients, and only then because Sharon refused to take no for an answer.

J.T. joked that the kitchen was turning into a bakery and he wasn't far from wrong. Each evening after dinner she'd take over the kitchen while J.T. studied game film, and then when the baking was done, they'd watch television or go up to bed. Bed usually won out, but not because they were tired. She wasn't sure if it was her pregnancy hormones or if J.T. was irresistible, but she couldn't get enough of him. The past week had been the happiest of her life.

There were only two clouds on her horizon: her mother and Justin Sawyer.

She wouldn't have to deal with her mother for another week, but Justin was currently in the living room with J.T. and Jake, watching a basketball game on television.

Naively perhaps, Angie had assumed that despite his profession, Justin would be as friendly as the other Sawyers. No such luck. After their brief introduction earlier in the evening she had been acutely aware of his watchful gaze on her. She felt like she was being assessed and evaluated, much like a bug under a microscope. It was unsettling to say the least, and she'd been grateful to finally escape to the kitchen and bake.

"It smells good in here."

Angie looked up to find Justin watching her from the doorway. Of all the Sawyer brothers, he was the tallest. Angie pegged him to be about six-four. Although well-built, he didn't have the same powerful physique as J.T. Despite that, he was imposing and with his recently shorn hair and cleanly shaven face, he was the rugged-jawed poster boy for law enforcement officers everywhere. Alarm dinged in Angie's chest as he slowly entered the kitchen with the aid of a wooden crutch tucked under his right arm.

"I'm glad we have a minute alone. To talk." Justin leaned on his crutch and braced his palm on the counter. Although he'd claimed not to need the crutch he was, apparently, humoring his mother. His eyes, a deep blue like Sharon and Josh's, studied her, but she had no clue what he was thinking. His gaze gave nothing away and unnerved her. She smoothed her hands down the front of her apron and fought the urge to flee. The polite thing to do would be to invite him to sit at the table but she preferred to keep her distance with the island separating them. Call it intuition, but she was pretty sure Justin hadn't come to the kitchen for a friendly chat.

"My family has had the advantage of getting to know you over the past few weeks. They speak highly of you."

Okay, maybe she was wrong. "I think highly of them."

A wry smile twisted Justin's mouth. "Of course, they're not used to dealing with con artists."

Angie couldn't control the gasp that escaped her. "Excuse me?"

"Do you know the difference between me and my brothers?" he continued as if he hadn't just



insulted her.

“They’re friendly and your not?” Angie said, meeting his unreadable eyes. Her comment was rude, but he’d set the tone with the con artist remark.

A hint of amusement tugged at his mouth. “They trust people. You know, take them at face value, never believing they could be conned or swindled.”

“I’d say that’s a good quality,” Angie replied, holding his gaze even as her pulse raced. Not one Sawyer had ever questioned her character even if they had been suspicious about her marriage to J.T. But Justin didn’t seem to have any problem laying his cards on the table. What made it worse was that until recently she’d felt an awful lot like the con artist he suspected she might be. “Wouldn’t you?” she asked, forcing a tight smile.

“No. It makes them easy prey for people who might try to take advantage of them.”

Angie schooled her expression under Justin’s intense scrutiny. It was his job to look for a reaction. She wasn’t going to give him one. Thank God he couldn’t see her knees, he’d find them shaking. “You think I’m taking advantage of J.T.?”

Justin shrugged a shoulder. “You said it, I didn’t.”

“You implied it,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Are you?” Justin’s direct gaze was hard and unyielding. “Taking advantage of him?”

“No. I signed a pre-nuptial agreement. I’m the one who suggested it.”

“A pre-nup is bullshit when there’s a kid involved. If you two got divorced he’d pay child support and knowing J.T. he’d be more than generous. That’s the kind of man he is.”

“I know what kind of man he is.”

Justin narrowed his assessing gaze even more. “Did you get pregnant on purpose? To trap him?”

Angie silently counted to three before answering. She wouldn’t let him get to her. “No.”

“Then why did you marry him?”

“Because he asked and...and it was the right thing to do.”

Justin let out a half-snort. “This isn’t the old days, Angie. A man and a woman don’t have to get married because of a baby. But I know my brother well enough to know that his first instinct would be to marry you. He’s noble like that. Maybe you knew that too.

“You aren’t at all like your brothers or your parents,” she snapped.

“Is that your way of saying you’re insulted?” he asked with a sarcastic smile. “I’m a cop and therefore suspicious by nature. I also love my brothers and anyone who takes advantage of them, or hurts them, answers to me.” He paused for a beat. “Are we clear?”

“I don’t plan on hurting J.T.” Despite the thundering of her heart, Angie lifted her chin and held his gaze with a mutinous one of her own. “I care about him.”

Several tense seconds passed. Seconds that seemed to stretch forever. “I’ll hold you to that.”

\* \* \*

“It was about time you got some new furniture,” Justin said as he hobbled into the living room. “That green thing you called a couch was way past its expiration date.”

J.T. gave Jake a long stare as Jake shot him an “I told you so” look. “You’re one to talk. You live in a studio apartment with nothing more than a bed to sit on,” he said and watched Justin ease himself down on the light brown leather captain’s chair adjacent to the matching couch.

After seeing Angie’s apartment in San Francisco, J.T. thought she would go for something more feminine but she’d surprised him by agreeing with his choice. The set was on sale and available for

immediate delivery, just in time for the holidays. They'd also purchased a glass topped coffee table, two end tables and two lamps. According to Angie, the room still needed a few small touches and something on the walls, but it looked a damn sight better than it had. Especially with the brightly lit Christmas tree placed in front of the window.

"I'm not home much." Justin laid his crutch next to the chair. He leaned back and grinned. "And when I'm there, I'm either sleeping or..."

"Entertaining your latest bimbo?" Jake, who was sitting on the end of the couch closest to Justin, said with a heavy dose of sarcasm. It was common knowledge that Justin's taste in women leaned toward the easy variety. Easy as in not quite suitable to bring home to meet their parents.

"What can I say? Chicks dig me." Justin pointed at Jake. "What about you, little brother? You're surrounded by hot women all day at the gym. Don't tell me you're not hitting some of that."

"I make it a rule not to date my members."

"Don't shit where you eat, right?" Justin nodded. "That's probably wise."

J.T. frowned. "Then why did you meet Melissa for coffee last night?"

Jake's brow lifted. "How'd you know about that?"

"She mentioned it to Angie."

"It wasn't a date," Jake said quickly. "We were going over her training schedule."

"Couldn't you do that at the gym?" Justin asked.

"Yes, but it worked better for Melissa's schedule to meet after I was off work."

J.T. inclined his head toward at Justin, who gave him a knowing grin, and then looked at Jake. "You could have done it over the phone."

"I prefer to discuss training issues in person." Jake scrubbed a hand over his chin. "It's not a big deal. I want Melissa to succeed. She's had a weight problem since she was a kid and since I struggled with it when I was younger, I can relate."

"You two are such fucking boy scouts." Justin stretched out his injured leg and grimaced. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm adopted."

"It would explain a lot," Jake shot back. "Hey, where's my beer?"

"What beer?"

"The beer you went into the kitchen for." Jake scowled and pushed up from the couch. "I'll be right back."

After Jake left the room, J.T. narrowed his gaze on Justin. "Did you go in there to interrogate Angie?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you think she had some sort of ulterior motive in marrying me. She didn't. You need to leave it alone."

"How much do you know about her?"

"Enough. She's my wife and I trust her, so back off."

Justin sighed. "Fine. I'll back off, but I hope you're right about her. Because if you're not, you'll be paying for it the rest of your life. Just like your buddy, Brett."

"That was a totally different situation. Lydia lied when she said he was the father of her baby. I know for a fact the baby Angie is carrying is mine. Yes, she was down on her luck when she agreed to marry me, but she voluntarily signed a pre-nup. The most important thing to both of us is to raise our child together."

"She's never asked you for money but you're giving it to her, aren't you?"

"I opened an account for her, but she only spends the money I deposit on groceries and stuff for

the house. She hasn't even shopped for maternity clothes, for Christ's sake. Quit trying to make her out as some sort of gold digger. She's in this marriage for real, just like I am."

Justin eyed him skeptically. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes. Now let's drop it," J.T. said crossly as he rose to his feet. "I need a beer." As he headed for the kitchen to make sure Angie wasn't upset over Justin's undoubtedly unsubtle interrogation, J.T. acknowledged that his brother's suspicion regarding Angie wasn't far off the mark. She had married him for financial reasons—but at least she'd been upfront about it.

Which, as it turned out, was a lot more than he could say for himself.

\* \* \*

As the couple on the television screen kissed and the credits began to roll, Angie reached for the remote sitting on the arm of the sofa. "You know the best thing about Christmas?" she asked, shifting slightly to look at J.T.

"Hmmm. Let's see." A frown creased his forehead as he considered the question. "The presents? The food? That Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer song?"

Angie laughed and turned off the television. "It's these darn Christmas movies. They're addictive. Last year, Livvie came over the weekend before Christmas and we had a Lifetime channel holiday movie marathon." She leaned forward to set the remote on the coffee table. "Every C and D list actor in Hollywood must love Christmas."

"I'm partial to what the sports channel does for the holidays."

"What do they do?" Angie asked, her gaze drifting to the Christmas tree she and J.T. had decorated together. Their first tree. One of many, she dared to hope.

"Absolutely nothing."

"Are you saying you watched that movie just to humor me?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying." J.T. grinned, slipped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her against him. Tucked in the crook of his arm, she rested her head on his chest and inhaled his clean masculine scent. "My favorite Christmas movie is Die Hard," he said as he stroked her hair.

"I can't knock that choice," Angie conceded. "It's a great movie. And it does take place at Christmastime, so I guess it qualifies."

"Are you sure Justin didn't say something to upset you tonight?"

Angie tensed at the abrupt change of subject. "What makes you think he said something?" she asked, staring at the flames dancing in the fireplace.

"Despite your denial earlier, the tension in the room when you joined us was a dead giveaway," J.T. said as he idly threaded his fingers through her hair. "I told him to lay off."

"He's just concerned about you. He thinks I tricked you into marrying me." She shifted and pulled back to look at him. "I told him he was wrong." It was the truth, marriage had been the last thing on her mind when she found out she was pregnant. But now the one thing she thought would never happen, actually had. She wanted a real marriage—one that would last a lifetime. And she wanted it with J.T.

"I know it bothered you that I asked for a paternity test. But a friend of mine from college, who plays for the Padres, was in a similar situation and it didn't end well. For that reason, I had to be absolutely sure."

"What happened?"

"Brett was dating this woman, Lydia, for a while. They met at some club and in the course of a

few months it got pretty serious—at least for him. When she told him she was pregnant, he was—well—let’s just say I’d never seen the guy happier.”

“Did they get married?”

“Yes. I went to their wedding, which was huge, by the way. Church, flowers, tons of guests, the whole nine yards. About six months into the marriage he found out that she’d been sleeping with her former boyfriend at the same time she was sleeping with him. The kid was the other guy’s, but her ex wasn’t making a few million a year so she decided to pass the kid off as Brett’s. He never had a paternity test done, never asked for a pre-nup. He trusted her completely.”

“He must have been devastated.”

J.T.’s expression darkened. “Completely blindsided is more like it. When it all came out she said that she’d only married him so she could get the payoff. The whole relationship had been a con. She never loved him at all.”

“Did they get divorced?”

“Yeah, and she got a huge settlement because he didn’t want the whole thing dragged out in court and in the media. She’s on a reality show now with some other ex-wives of athletes. The worst part is he would have done anything for her and the baby. It killed him when he found out the baby wasn’t his. And to add insult to injury, it affected his career. He hasn’t played the same since.”

“That’s so sad.”

“That’s why I asked for the paternity test even though I was pretty sure you were telling the truth. I never believed you were after my money since you weren’t exactly falling all over yourself to spend time with me.”

“That’s because I didn’t know what I know now.”

He cocked his head. “What’s that?”

She held his gaze and swallowed past the knot of emotion lodged in her throat. In one blinding moment it occurred to her that while she wanted their marriage to last forever, maybe he didn’t. “That you’re best man I’ve ever known,” she whispered, her voice catching at the sudden tenderness glowing in his eyes.

“I’m glad you took a chance on us, Angie. Even though you were scared, you put the baby’s needs ahead of your fears.”

“J.T., I need to ask you...”

He put a finger to her lips and silenced her. “You’re nothing like Lydia. My brother is suspicious of everything and everyone, and I understand why. He’s seen a lot of bad shit. Don’t let him ruin the holidays,” J.T. said adamantly, and then paused. “Thank you for helping my mom.” He brushed his thumb over her bottom lip before lowering his hand and reaching for hers. “I know it’s a lot of work.”

“I love baking.” Angie twined her fingers with his. “It’s not work when you love what you do, right? That’s how you feel about baseball.”

“True. I’m lucky to be doing what I love for a living.” J.T. hesitated before going on. “Maybe you should consider doing what you love for a living.”

“You mean bake?”

“Why not? You just said you love it, and everything you make is fucking amazing. You should talk to Mom about making the arrangement permanent.”

“I don’t know, J.T.,” Angie said with a shake of her head. “I’ve always done some type of accounting work.”

“But did you enjoy it?”

Angie bit her lower lip and shrugged. “Not really. I just had an aptitude for it.”

“You should think about it. It’s something you can do from home.”

“But I’m going to have my hands full with the baby. I might not have the time, or the energy.”

“A lot of women work after they have children.” J.T. squeezed her hand. “You don’t have to make a decision right now. Just know that it’s an option.” He grinned. “Who knows? Maybe you’ll become famous like that cookie lady, Mrs. Fields. Didn’t she start out by baking cookies in her home?”

“I’m not sure,” she said and then laughed. “I can’t believe we’re even talking about this. It’s crazy.”

J.T. lifted her hand and pressed his mouth to her palm. His lips were warm and sent a prickle of awareness through her body. “That’s what you said about us getting married,” he murmured against her skin as he held her gaze. “And look how that turned out.”

An hour later, Angie lay naked in J.T.’s king-size bed staring at the ceiling. She wasn’t sure if it was the Egyptian cotton sheets that brushed against her skin like the softest of silk, or the hypnotic sound of the water running in the master bathroom but either way, her entire being had been lulled into a state of complete and utter relaxation.

Just then, the baby decided it was an excellent time to go for a jog. Startled, Angie put a hand to her abdomen and didn’t move. Awe filled her as the baby continued to perform some sort of calisthenics in her stomach.

Seeing the image of the baby during the ultrasound had affected her more than she’d thought it would. She’d seen the pictures in her pregnancy book and had known what to expect, but still, seeing a picture of her baby for the first time had jump-started the maternal instincts she hadn’t known she possessed into high gear. From now until the day she died, she’d be a mother. Yes, she was still terrified out of her mind about the delivery and the responsibility of raising a child into a fully functioning adult, but for the first time since she found out she was pregnant she was truly looking forward to meeting her daughter.

By the time J.T. finished showering, the baby had settled down and Angie wasn’t quite so overwhelmed with emotion.

“You’re still awake?” J.T. said, as he emerged naked from the bathroom. Her avid gaze took in his hard male muscle in motion as he moved across the hardwood floor toward the bed and that’s all it took for her body to react. Warmth pooled low in her belly and her nipples became taut. “I thought you’d be asleep by the time I got out of the shower.”

“The baby just moved.” She lifted the sheet and blanket so he could climb in beside her. The scent of his soap surrounded her as he stretched out beside her, then turned to his side. Under the covers, he placed his hand on her stomach. His fingers were warm on her skin.

“I wonder when I’ll be able to feel her kick.”

“Soon.” Angie turned her head to meet his gaze. “You smell good,” she said, and shifted on to her side to face him. Over his shoulder, her gaze fell on several baseball related awards displayed modestly in a corner curio cabinet made of dark wood. What wasn’t inside the cabinet was what J.T. was chasing. An MVP award. That was his ultimate goal and why he’d dedicated his entire off-season to a grueling training regimen. Earlier, he’d encouraged her to chase her dreams, but what if marriage to her cost him his? Although he never complained, she was acutely aware that he’d missed a few training sessions with Jake because of his obligation to her and the baby.

J.T. slid his hand to the curve of her back and brushed his fingers along her spine. “What do you want for Christmas?” she asked, trying to ignore the little voice inside her that told her that she and the baby could stand in the way of J.T.’s career aspirations.

“Nothing,” he said, sliding his hand up her back and hooking his leg over both of hers. Her skin

sizzled where he pressed against her.

“Nothing?” She skimmed her hand over his shoulder, tracing a path to his neck where the still damp ends of his hair were cool to her touch. “Come on, there must be something you want.”

“I have everything I want right here,” J.T. said in a husky voice and then leaned forward and took possession of her mouth. And after a long, slow and thorough kiss that stole her breath, she pulled back and met his smoldering gaze.

“So do I,” she whispered, just before he reclaimed her mouth and kissed her senseless.

## Chapter Eighteen

A week later, on Christmas Eve morning, as Angie was putting the finishing touches on her make-up, J.T. appeared in the doorway to the bathroom and leaned against the doorframe. Instead of his normal attire of jeans and a T-shirt, he wore a burgundy sweater and a pair of tan khakis. The combination accentuated the breadth of his shoulders and his powerful legs. Unlike her, he didn't have to try to look hot—he just was. “What time are your mother and sister getting here?”

“In about twenty minutes or so.” She looked down and rifled through her cosmetics bag. “Of course, that depends on whether or not Livvie was ready on time.”

“I just got a call from Leah Porter. She's the reporter from Sacramento Life who asked me for an interview. I got the go-ahead from my agent and from Kelly, so Leah wanted to set it up ASAP.”

“But it's Christmas Eve,” Angie said, surprised the reporter wasn't waiting until after the holidays.

“Apparently she's on a deadline. She said it shouldn't take more than a couple of hours.” He glanced at his watch. “I told her I could meet her in thirty minutes for breakfast. That should get me back here in time to get acquainted with your mom and sister before we head over to my parents' house later this afternoon. But I can put her off if you want me to stick around.”

Angie pulled a blush compact and a brush from the satin bag and met his gaze in the mirror. “Actually, it's fine. Josh is dropping by to pick up Livvie at eleven. He offered to give her a brief tour of Davis while she's here. And I'm taking Mom out for brunch. It'll give me a chance to catch up with her.” Not to mention give her an opportunity to talk to her mother alone. She had to make it perfectly clear to her mother that things had changed and that her marriage to J.T. would be permanent. Or at least she hoped it would.

“Then I'll see you back here in a few hours.” J.T. came up behind her, slipped his arms around her waist and rested his hands on her belly. As he pressed a kiss to her cheek, his fresh soapy scent enveloped her and she relaxed against him. After growing up in a home where displays of affection were few and far between, Angie had—at first—been surprised by J.T.'s tendency to randomly touch or kiss her during the course of the day. But now she'd begun to crave the intimacies that came along with having a real relationship with her husband—intimacies that went beyond sex. “By the way, I heard from Matt. He and Kelly can't make it up here until after the first of the year. They're in L.A. for Kelly's sister's wedding.”

“I know. Kelly called last night. She asked me for help with her maid of honor toast.” Angie smiled, recalling Kelly's desperate plea for assistance. “My advice was to speak from the heart and not to use any swear words.”

“We're talking about Kelly. That might be difficult,” J.T. said with a sardonic grin as he kissed her cheek one more time and then relinquished his hold on her.

“She's gotten much better about that,” Angie called after him as he headed out of the bathroom. “She doesn't swear nearly half as much as she used to.”

Angie heard J.T. laugh as he left the bedroom. Still smiling, she applied blush to her cheeks and then selected her favorite rose colored lipstick from her bag and smoothed it on. After she finished, she surveyed her appearance and was somewhat satisfied with the result. She'd finally broken down and visited the mall, where she purchased a few maternity items. Today she wore a knee length navy blue dress with short sleeves and a scoop neck. Thanks to the knit jersey fabric, she no longer felt like a stuffed sausage ready to burst at the seams.

Forty minutes later, after an awkward hug from her mother and a more enthusiastic one from Livvie, Angie sat on the couch between them and found the tension in the room almost unbearable. From the moment she arrived, it was obvious by Selena's stony countenance that she still disapproved of Angie's marriage. Not once had she mentioned the baby, and to make matters worse, she'd eyed Angie's baby-bump as if the spawn of Satan had taken up residence in her womb.

Livvie, on the other hand, had asked if she could touch Angie's stomach and seemed excited at the prospect of being an aunt. She hadn't seen Livvie since Thanksgiving and her sister seemed more grown-up than ever. The changes were subtle, but they were there. She'd ditched her glasses and started wearing contacts, and she'd had her waist-length hair cut into an adorable pixie—a decision that Selena had vehemently opposed according to Livvie during one of her and Angie's text message exchanges. But Livvie was eighteen now and declared the decision to cut her hair was hers and hers alone. Selena hadn't approved, but there wasn't much she could do about it. As all teenagers eventually did, Livvie was asserting her independence and trying to form her own identity.

Despite Livvie's upbeat demeanor, the oppressive weight of her mother's ill-concealed disapproval surrounded Angie like a shroud. It was too late to retract her invitation but that's exactly what she wanted to do. Navigating the next twelve hours promised to be as tricky as walking through a minefield. She only hoped she could escape it without any emotional mines detonating and blowing her life to bits.

"Where's your...husband?" Selena said the word husband like she might catch something deadly by uttering it. In her black dress and severe bun, her mother looked like she was attending a funeral rather than celebrating Christmas. All she needed was a black veil and dark sunglasses to complete the look.

"J.T. had a business meeting. He'll be back a few hours." Angie turned to Livvie, who'd chosen a brighter color for the day. She'd paired an icicle blue sheath with the snow white bolero sweater Angie had given her for her birthday. "I love that dress. Did you make it?"

Livvie's face flushed with pleasure. "Yes. I saw the design online at one of those expensive stores and made up a pattern."

"You're so talented," Angie said, and surprised Livvie by putting her arm around her slim shoulders and giving her a hug. "Are you sure you don't want to study clothing design?"

"Olivia's decided to pursue medicine, isn't that right?" Selena cast a stern look toward her youngest daughter.

Livvie's smile faltered and the light faded from her blue eyes as she tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear. "Yes, Mom," she said in a flat dull tone just as the doorbell sounded.

"That must be Josh." Angie pushed up from the couch and crossed the room to open the door. "Hey," she greeted Josh with a smile and pulled the door open farther so he could enter. "Come on in." Josh brushed past her and politely waited until she closed the door.

"The tree looks good," Josh said, casting a quick glance at the Christmas tree. "And I see J.T. finally eighty-sixed that butt-ugly couch."

Angie laughed. "I hope you never said that to his face. He had a strange attachment to that thing." She put her hand on Josh's back and guided him toward the couch where Livvie gazed at him shyly, while Selena studied him with a frown.

Josh, with his long hair and baggy clothes would most definitely not be her mother's ideal candidate for chauffeuring Livvie to Davis, never mind that Josh probably looked like every other nineteen year old boy on campus. But she'd already agreed to it, and Angie prayed that her mother wouldn't insult the Sawyers by implying that Livvie wouldn't be safe with their son.



“Josh, this is my mother, Selena DeMarco, and my sister, Livvie,” Angie said with a sweep of her hand.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Josh replied directly to Angie’s mother before looking at Livvie. “If you haven’t had breakfast, there’s a great place near the campus where we all get coffee and grub. They make a sick breakfast burrito.”

Her mother frowned. “Sick?”

“That means it’s good, Mom,” Livvie said with an indulgent smile.

“Since when did the word sick ever become the equivalent of good?”

“Around the time totes became the equivalent of totally,” Angie said, and shared a grin with Livvie, who used the slang word when they texted.

Her mother sighed and narrowed her gaze on Josh. “Your hair is awfully long. Don’t they have barbers in Sacramento?”

As Livvie’s cheeks turned beet red, Josh just smiled. “Yes, but when I was a little kid I saw the movie Edward Scissor hands and it scared the crap out of me. As a result, I became deathly afraid of scissors.”

Selena tilted her head as if she didn’t quite understand. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. I have a fear of sharp objects. Aichmophobia is the official term, Mrs. DeMarco.” Angie bit back a smile as Josh shot her an earnest look before continuing, “I’m working on it, though. Just last week I was able to use a knife at dinner. It was a real breakthrough.”

“Uh...congratulations. I guess,” her mother said, as silence descended on the room.

“Thank you,” Josh said solemnly and then directed his attention back to Livvie who, judging from her expression, couldn’t quite decide if he was telling the truth or if he was putting one over on her mother. “We should get going if we want to get back to my parents’ house for dinner.”

Livvie sprung up from the couch like a jack-in-the box. “Well, considering that amazing breakthrough, I guess your mom won’t have to hide the knives tonight.”

Josh’s eyes widened and then he laughed as Livvie pulled on her coat.

“Drive safely.” Selena’s tone was sharp as Josh and Livvie headed for the door. “And don’t go over the speed limit.”

“I won’t, Mrs. DeMarco,” Josh said, before closing the door. “I’m an extremely safe driver. I’ve been to traffic school five times.”

“I don’t like that boy,” Selena grumbled once they were alone. “He looks like...like some sort of deviant with all that hair. Why, his hair is longer than Olivia’s.”

“And that makes him a deviant?” Angie put her hands on her hips. “When did you become so judgmental? Josh is a good kid.”

“More like a wise-ass,” her mother muttered with a shake of her head. “I deal with them every day at the restaurant.”

Angie heaved a sigh and moved to the chair where she’d laid her coat over the back of it. “Don’t worry about Josh. He’ll take good care of Livvie.”

“With my luck he’ll knock her up like his brother did to you,” Selena said as she reached for her purse and rose from the couch. “I just hope she’s able to do what you couldn’t.”

“And what’s that, Mom?” Angie said, almost afraid to ask.

“Keep her legs closed.”

\* \* \*

An hour and a half after he sat down at a secluded table at the Lido Café with Leah Porter, J.T. had come to the conclusion that Ms. Porter would make a damn fine sports reporter. He had no clue if her knowledge of other sports was as extensive as it was for baseball, but if it was, then she had a good shot of someday landing a job at one of the sports channel networks.

“On a personal note,” Leah said, after a cursory glance at his left hand. “I see you’re wearing a wedding ring. The last I heard, you were single.”

J.T. peered at Leah over his coffee cup and smiled. “I got married just after Thanksgiving.”

“That was sudden. I don’t recall you were ever reported to be dating anyone seriously.”

“I rarely discuss my personal life.” J.T. sipped his coffee. “It’s not all that interesting.”

Leah laughed and picked her small glass of orange juice. “A lot of women out there would disagree, however I’m not going to pry. My interest is in what athletes do on the field, not in their love lives.”

J.T. leaned back in his chair and gave a nod to the waitress as she inquired if she could take his plate. “When did you decide you wanted to cover sports?”

“In high school.” Leah took a sip of her juice then set the glass on the table. “Both of my parents were athletes in high school and college. My dad ran track and played tennis, and my mom was a competitive swimmer. We were the family always out doing something physical. I started working on the school newspaper when I was a freshman and when no one else volunteered to cover sports, I jumped on it.” She smiled and brushed an errant strand of blonde hair from her forehead. “I majored in journalism in college and I’ve been trying to get my foot in the door as a sports reporter ever since I graduated. It’s tough.”

“Do you have an agent?” J.T. asked.

Leah shook her head. “Not yet. I met with one, but she said that I needed more experience under my belt before she would agree to represent me.” A frown creased Leah’s smooth brow. “I’m just worried that now that I’m working at Sacramento Life I’ll be identified mainly as a lifestyle reporter.” She pointed at him. “This interview is the only thing I’ve had in months with any substance to it. Thank you so much for agreeing to it.”

“You’re welcome,” J.T. said, and thought of the tough questions she’d lobbed at him during the interview. She hadn’t avoided his back-up status and had pointed out that despite his lack of playing time, his stats proved that he was an asset to the Blaze and that he’d be a steal on the open market when his contract was up. She could have been kissing his ass, but he was ninety-nine percent sure she wasn’t. Despite the ego stroke, the facts backed her up and she’d done her homework—including a good amount of research on his high school and college efforts. For that reason, J.T. had a gut feeling that the agent who’d rejected Leah Porter was going to be regretting that decision one day very soon.

As Leah finished the breakfast she’d neglected while she was interviewing him, J.T. reached behind him and fished his phone from his jacket pocket. After sending off a quick text he set the phone on the table and looked up to catch the stare of an older woman sitting at a table across the room. The Lido Café was a popular breakfast spot and despite the fact that it was Christmas Eve, most of the tables were filled. From where he was sitting, J.T. had a good view of the entrance but he’d been so involved in the interview that he hadn’t been paying attention to his surroundings. But now he could practically feel the malevolence emanating from the woman at the far table. He craned his head to get a better look at her, but all he could see in the midst of the other diners was her pinched face. Whoever she was, she wasn’t a fan.

J.T. forgot the woman as his phone pinged. He picked it up, read the message and then met Leah’s

curious gaze. “Nick wants to meet with you after the holidays.”

“Does he want to see the interview before I submit it?”

“No. The meeting would be to discuss possible representation.”

Leah’s jaw dropped and her eyes widened with astonishment. “Representation?” She put a hand to her chest. “He’s interested in representing me?”

J.T. nodded.

“Oh, wow.” Leah’s eyes lit up. “Logan-Johnson is one of the best agencies in California.” Her shrewd eyes honed in on him. “You asked him to meet with me, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Why? You don’t even know me.”

“I wasn’t sure what to expect from this interview, but you impressed me. You know your stuff, you’re professional and whether or not anyone wants to admit it, looking good on camera is important. You’ve got all the bases covered. I’m not promising Nick or his partner will sign you, but you’ve got a foot in the door. Make the most of it.”

\* \* \*

Sitting across from her mother at The Lido Café, Angie felt sorry for whomever Selena had had in her cross-hairs for the past several minutes. She wouldn’t wish that hostile gaze on anyone.

As she feared, the brunch was not going well—her mother had been mostly silent on the drive over and since they’d sat down at the table, the only talking she’d done was to place her order.

“Mom, you can’t shut me out all day.” Angie unfolded her napkin and placed it on her lap. “We need to talk. There’s something I need to tell you.”

“If you’re going to tell me your husband isn’t anything like your father, you can save your breath,” Selena said, finally looking at her. “If I had any doubts, I’m sure about it now.”

“How? You haven’t even met him yet.” Angie brushed her hair from her shoulder and let out an exasperated breath as her mother shrugged and picked up her coffee cup. “Mom, J.T. isn’t like Dad. He’s not even close to being like Dad.”

“All ballplayers are like you’re father,” she said, cradling her cup with hands weathered from hard work. “Most just get away with it longer than he did.”

Angie wanted to scream in frustration at her mother’s stubborn bitterness. “I thought so too, but I was wrong. I was so caught up in the past and what Dad did that I almost didn’t give J.T. a chance. If I hadn’t gotten pregnant I never would have discovered the kind of man he is.”

“I knew this would happen.” Selena set her cup on the table with such force the coffee sloshed over the rim and wet the tablecloth. “You’re in love with him,” she said in a voice taut with controlled fury.

“Yes.” Angie stiffened her shoulders and met her mother’s angry gaze head on. “I love him. He’s the kindest man I’ve ever met.” She leaned forward. “And if you’d just give him a chance you’d see you’re wrong about him.”

Selena let out a snort. “I doubt that.”

“Can’t you try? For me,” Angie implored. “I appreciate that you don’t want me to get hurt, but can’t you have some faith in my judgment?”

“Where was your judgment the night you slept with him and didn’t use a condom? If you had any common sense at all you would have used protection. And now look at you.” Her mother raked her with a contemptuous gaze. “You’re about to go down the same road I did.”

“It’s not the same road. J.T. would never cheat on me,” Angie said, and then lowered her voice when the couple at the next table stopped talking and turned to stare at them.

“Then where is he this morning?”

Angie let out an exasperated breath. “I told you. He had a business meeting.”

Selena rolled her eyes. “On Christmas Eve day? It’s starting already and you’re too blind to see it.”

Angie rubbed her temples as her head began to pound. “Jesus, I knew you were bitter, but I never realized how much.”

“I guess you’ve forgotten about walking in on your father screwing one of his whores in our bed? How long will it be before you walk in on J.T. and some bimbo in your bedroom?”

“You know what, Mom? You need to stay out of this. This is my life and my marriage. I trust J.T. and I’m staying married to him. End of story.”

“You’re making a mistake, Angela,” Selena said, as the waitress delivered their order. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

About halfway through the meal Angie tried one more time. “I think you’ll like J.T.’s parents. Sharon and Joe are wonderful. Did I mention that I’m helping Sharon out at her coffee cafe? I’m providing her with baked goods until her regular baker rebuilds her house. It was destroyed in a fire.”

“I thought you’d given up baking. It’s a tough business to make a living in.”

“Like clothing design?” Angie asked, as old resentment flared inside her. Why hadn’t she seen what a dream killer her mother had been when she was younger? And now Selena was doing the same thing to Livvie. “Is that why you’ve convinced Livvie not to pursue the one thing she loves doing?”

“It’s just a hobby.” Selena picked up a knife and spread butter on her English muffin with precise strokes. “Just like baking was for you. Besides, Livvie has an aptitude for science. Medicine is the right direction for her.”

“I do with well with numbers, but I’ve never found any personal satisfaction from accounting work.”

“It paid the bills, didn’t it?”

Angie didn’t bother to answer and the rest of the meal was spent in virtual silence. Sharon had raved about the food at the Lido Café, but Angie could barely taste it, and the festive Christmas music that filled the room wasn’t improving her mood one bit. Joy to the world and peace on earth. There was no way that was happening. Not tonight.

## Chapter Nineteen

J.T. hadn't expected Angie's mother to greet him with open arms, but her hard and unyielding expression when they'd been introduced surprised him. Selena DeMarco didn't like him and she hadn't bothered to hide it. And now, as she sat in the back seat of his F-150, he could almost feel the heat of her disapproving eyes burning into the back of his neck.

He arrived home—after stopping at the jewelry store to pick up a gift he'd ordered for Angie—just before Angie and her mother returned from brunch. He'd placed the gift box under the tree with the other presents that he and Angie had picked out for his family, and hers, after a trip to the mall last week. Angie had wrapped them with colorful Christmas wrap and each package had a bow that was color coded for each family member. J.T. had to admit, her organizational skills were impressive and had even begun to rub off on him. He'd gotten exponentially better at putting his things away and not leaving his dirty clothes and other stuff lying around the bedroom.

As he stepped on the brake to stop the truck at a red light, he glanced in the rear-view mirror and found Mrs. DeMarco had taken a break from skewering him with her eyes to look out the window. Something about her face was vaguely familiar but he wasn't sure why. It wasn't a family resemblance to Angie, for if there had ever been one it was gone now. Selena's face was deeply lined and there were dark shadows underneath her eyes. Her dark hair was heavily streaked with gray and pulled back in a bun so tight he wondered if it could be hurting her head. Her expression seemed to be one of permanent constipation—she gave the appearance of a woman who'd never known a happy day in her life.

Angie's sudden gasp startled him. He looked over and saw her hand resting on her stomach. "Is she kicking?" he asked.

"It's like she doing back flips in there or something." Angie took his hand and placed it on her belly, just above where the seatbelt was tucked over her hips to avoid pressing on the baby. "Can you feel it?"

"No," he said, a little envious that Angie could feel their baby move inside her. It was the only thing he was envious of. The pain of childbirth sounded worse than a direct blow to the nuts.

"She?" Selena asked from the back seat. "You're having a girl?"

"Yes. I tried to show you the sonogram picture at brunch but you didn't want to see it." Angie's voice was strained. "You'll have a granddaughter in April."

Selena didn't reply and an uncomfortable silence filled the truck. J.T. cleared his throat. "April isn't that far away, we need to start thinking about painting the nursery and buying some furniture."

"We can do that after the holidays." Angie covered his hand with hers and as the last rays of daylight played upon her face, he could see a trace of sadness in her eyes. Her mother's visit had taken a toll and they weren't even done with the night.

"Have you heard from Olivia?" Selena asked as the light turned green and J.T. stepped on the gas.

"She texted me that she and Josh are at J.T.'s parents' house," Angie said, staring straight ahead. "Would you like me to text her back and ask her if she kept her legs closed?"

"That remark was uncalled for, Angela," Selena snapped as J.T.'s jaw dropped. This conversation was not going to end well. He could feel it.

"But not when you said it about me, right?"

"Angela Marie DeMarco, don't you dare talk back to me."

"It's Sawyer, Mom," Angie said tersely. "I'm married now. Get used to it."

It took J.T. only a matter of minutes to get to his parents' house, but each minute felt like an eternity after that short but tense exchange between Angie and her mother. He hoped things didn't go from bad to worse during dinner.

An hour and a half later, J.T. was no longer hopeful that the evening could be salvaged. Despite his family's best efforts, Selena DeMarco had barely spoken a word—to anyone. His parents had tried their best, but whatever the topic, Angie's mother remained aloof and non-committal. And it became evident very quickly that Selena wasn't at all excited about becoming a grandmother.

Most of the family was gathered in the living room, where his parents' large Christmas tree sat in front of the big picture window and filled the room with the scent of pine. Holiday music, tuned low, provided a backdrop to the usual goings on at a Sawyer gathering. At a table in one corner of the room, Jake, Josh and Livvie were engaged in a lively game of Scrabble, and Justin, no longer using his crutch, sat at the other end of the couch silently observing the dynamics in the room. Angie sat rigidly next to her mother on the love seat and looked miserable.

J.T. smiled as Josh groaned and Livvie cheered at getting a triple word score to take the lead in the game. Inasmuch as he didn't care for Angie's mother, he liked Livvie a lot. In the past hour it was easy to see her deep affection for her sister and although she bore a slight resemblance to Angie, she was an inch or two taller and her hair was much shorter and not as dark. She and Josh had apparently hit it off and it was nice to see Josh enjoying himself again. His parents had mentioned that Cindy was home from Boston for the holidays and J.T. had been worried how that news might affect Josh. At the moment, Josh didn't seem too concerned about his former girlfriend, but that didn't mean she wasn't on his mind. Or that he wasn't hoping to see her over the Christmas break.

Needing a breather from all the so-called holiday cheer, J.T. pushed himself to his feet and moved to the love seat. "Can you come with me for a few minutes?" He reached for Angie's hand and pulled her up. Selena side-eyed him and kept her lips pursed as she thumbed through one of the decorating magazines his mom kept in a wicker basket under the end table.

"Where are we going?" Angie asked as he led her out of the living room, through the dining room and into the kitchen where his mother was putting the finishing touches on a tossed salad and his father was slicing the ham. A freshly baked cherry pie—J.T.'s favorite—sat on the counter, its cinnamon and sugary aroma filled the kitchen and reminded him of Christmases past.

"I thought you could use a breather. It was pretty tense in there."

"That's an understatement," Angie said, and looked from him to his parents. "I'm sorry my mom is being difficult. She's angry at me and taking it out on everyone else."

Joe Sawyer rested the carving knife next to the ham and reached for a large platter. "You don't have to apologize, Angie. We Sawyers have our share of difficult relatives."

"Joe's right." Sharon nodded and gave Angie a sympathetic smile. "We got tired of dealing with the drama every year so we compromised by inviting all the other Sawyers over for Thanksgiving and then celebrating Christmas without them. It's much more relaxing."

"And don't forget, we still have tomorrow morning," J.T. said, slipping his arm around Angie's waist. "We'll get together again for a late breakfast and open presents."

"It's my favorite part of Christmas," his mother said as she moved to the refrigerator and opened it. "No matter how old my boys get, I love to fill their Christmas stockings with goodies." She pulled out a bottle of salad dressing and then closed the door with her hip. "And this year there's a new stocking on the mantle in the family room. Yours."

"And next year we'll add another for the baby," Joe chimed in. "We may need to get a longer mantle."

Angie didn't say a word. Instead she turned to him and buried her face in his chest. "What's wrong?" J.T. asked, looking at his parents and then down at Angie.

"Nothing," she mumbled against his shirt and then lifted her head and gaze up at him, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "It's just that I never thought..." Her lips curved in a tremulous smile. "I guess it's just these stupid hormones."

His father chuckled. "I can tell you a thing or two about hormones."

"Oh hush, Joe," his mother chided him good-naturedly. "I wasn't that hormonal."

"Really? When you were pregnant with J.T. you cried for a week after your favorite soap opera character was killed off."

"But it was Betsy on *A New Dawn*." Sharon sighed. "It was so sad. Avalanche. She never saw it coming."

His father rolled his eyes, then turned back to the ham and began to load up the platter.

"It'll be over soon," J.T. said, sifting his fingers through Angie's soft tousled curls. "Don't worry. Nothing bad is going to happen in the next three hours."

\* \* \*

Nothing bad is going to happen in the next three hours.

As Angie sat opposite her mother at the Sawyer's dining room table, she didn't share J.T.'s optimism. In hindsight, she should have thought twice about inviting her mother to the Sawyer's for Christmas. But hindsight didn't mean squat right now. Right now she had to cope with a mother who, by the look of things, wasn't about to go quietly into the night.

To anyone who didn't know her, Selena DeMarco might appear to be sullen, and maybe a bit rude. But Angie, and even Livvie, knew better. The iron jaw, the calculating eyes, and the barely restrained tension were all signs that things were going to get worse before they got better. Angie only hoped that her mother would save her tirade for when they were alone.

Next to her mother sat Justin—the other thorn in Angie's side. Despite his reserved demeanor for most of the evening, he'd been intently watching both her and her mother ever since they'd arrived. His assessing gaze unnerved her and solidified a decision she'd come to after that awful brunch this morning. She couldn't continue to live with J.T. without knowing if they'd be together after their two years were up. She only hoped that knowing she'd fallen in love with him would be enough for him to make a life with her and their daughter.

Fifteen minutes later, Angie had barely touched her food. Around her, the Sawyers were keeping the conversation flowing. Even Livvie, always shy in larger crowds, had come out of her shell as Josh regaled the group with a blow-by-blow of their tour of Davis. Angie's heart swelled at the sight of her sister so happy. Of the two of them, Livvie had been the one most hurt by their father's betrayal—too young at the time to understand why Dante DeMarco had abandoned his family and never looked back. To her credit, Selena had spared Livvie the sordid details of their father's womanizing ways and whenever Livvie had asked Angie why daddy left, she didn't have the heart to tarnish what little memory Livvie had of their father.

Angie flinched and her heart sped up when J.T., who was sitting next to her, put his hand on her thigh, leaned toward her and whispered, "Are you okay? You're not eating."

"I'm still a bit full from brunch," she lied, and forced a smile.

"Have you thought any more about names for the baby now that you know for sure it's a girl?" Jake asked, from the far end of the table.

Angie pushed her ham around her plate with her fork and shook her head. “We haven’t talked about it.”

“Maybe you should wait until you see her,” Livvie suggested. “I’ve read that some parents do that. To get a feel for the baby’s personality.”

“Babies have personalities?” Josh asked, and Angie couldn’t help but notice her mother staring with a narrowed gaze at the knife Josh held in his hand. So much for his phobia.

“Of course they do,” Jake said. “They’re human beings.”

“But how can their personalities be developed that young?” Josh asked.

“Babies are born with certain personality traits,” J.T. said, as he set his fork on his plate. “Some are mellow and laid back, others are hyperactive and some are shy.”

Josh’s expression turned skeptical. “How do you know that?”

“I read it in Angie’s pregnancy book.”

“It’s true,” Sharon said. “All of you boys had different personalities when you were babies.”

“Justin was probably hyperactive,” Jake said, with a sidelong glance at Justin.

“And you were mellow, little brother,” Justin finally spoke. “I was only three, but I remember you used to lie in your crib all day and stare up at the ceiling with the weirdest look on your face.”

“I was deep in thought.” Jake flashed a grin as he reached for a dinner roll from a wire basket in front of him.

“You wish. It was gas,” Justin retorted, and earned a laugh from everyone except her mother, who looked like she either had gas or tasted something sour.

Sharon took a sip of her wine and peered at Angie over her glass. “How’s the nursery coming along? I’m dying to see what color you’ve picked out.”

“We haven’t started on the nursery yet,” Angie replied. “We’ve got—”

“Angie’s not concerned about the nursery,” Selena interrupted. A tight knot of dread formed in Angie’s stomach as a glimmer of spite flashed in her mother’s eyes. “She doesn’t plan to stick around long enough to care what the nursery looks like.”

“Mom.” Angie shot her a pleading glance. “Please don’t do this,” she said, as a tense silence filled the room.

“Mrs. DeMarco.” Sharpness edged J.T.’s voice as he jerked forward. “This isn’t the time or the place.”

Angie looked from J.T.’s stony profile to her mother. The moment she’d dreaded had arrived, and like a runaway freight train careening toward disaster, there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“Oh, it’s definitely the time and the place for the truth,” Selena said, with a condescending lift of one brow as she looked around the table. “My daughter never wanted to marry J.T. But she was desperate. So desperate that she agreed to marry him so he could pay her medical bills and put a roof over her head until she’s able to support herself and her baby on her own.” She smiled coolly as her gaze returned to J.T. “If you don’t believe me, ask him. He agreed to the charade.”

“Is that true?” Justin’s eyes were as hard as granite and focused squarely on J.T. Angie tried to speak but no words would come. “Answer me.” His voice rose as J.T. remained silent.

“Shut up.” J.T.’s voice was dangerously low, and judging the muscle twitching in his jaw, it was a safe assumption that he wanted to reach across the table and strangle her mother. Not coincidentally, so did Angie.

“So it’s true? You’ve been conning us this whole time?” Justin demanded. “I can’t believe you’re letting her use you. What about your career? Are you going to let this bitch ruin it?”

Livvie gasped and dropped her fork. It clattered to her plate as she covered her mouth with her



hand.

“His career isn’t ruined.” Jake’s tone was measured. “J.T. has been training hard.”

“Wait,” Josh interjected, looking at Jake. “You told me just the other day that J.T.’s missed several training sessions.”

“Just three,” J.T. said, through a clenched jaw. His face was pure white now. Angie placed her hand on his arm. Without looking at her, he pulled away and pushed his chair back. And then, with a snap of wrist, he threw his napkin on top of his plate and stalked out of the dining room.

Angie’s cheeks burned as she looked around the table and saw the shocked expressions on everyone’s faces, everyone’s except for her mother and Justin, of course. Her mother’s eyes glittered with something that looked a lot like satisfaction, and Justin’s were narrowed with disdain. She met Jake’s compassionate gaze. At least one Sawyer didn’t hate her.

\* \* \*

J.T. sought refuge in the family room. Of all the rooms in the house, it was the one he felt the most comfortable in. It was a room filled with years of memories—good memories that could be seen in the many family photos displayed on the built-in shelving units on either side of the brick fireplace. The fireplace where his parents had hung one more stocking on the mantle—one for Angie, who along with him, had just been outed by the mother-in-law from hell.

It was pointless to blame Selena DeMarco. The scene in the dining room was entirely his fault. If he hadn’t been so concerned about his ego, he never would have forced Angie to lie about their arrangement. But he had, and now not only had she been humiliated in front of his family, his parents had looked at him like he was some stranger they’d never met.

“J.T.”

He swung around to find Angie closing the white double doors behind her. As it always did, her beautiful face took his breath away. That was the problem. From the first moment he’d laid eyes on her he’d wanted her. And the minute the opportunity to make her a part of his life had presented itself he’d taken it. Only a self-serving scumbag would use an innocent baby and a woman’s desperation as a bargaining chip. He couldn’t sink any lower if he tried.

She moved forward to stand in front of him. “I’m sorry for what my mother did.”

“It’s not your fault.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I never should have married you in the first place.”

Angie’s eyes shadowed with an indefinable emotion as she placed her hands protectively on her stomach. “You wanted to do the right thing.”

J.T. let out a mirthless laugh. “And instead I fucked everything up. Your life. Mine. My training schedule.” Damn it all. He wanted Angie and an MVP trophy, but having both seemed almost impossible. Yes, being with her had distracted him from his training regimen, yet he couldn’t deny that being with her was the best time he’d ever had. “Shit,” he muttered, unable to make sense of his conflicting emotions.

“I guess neither of us thought about the effect this arrangement would have on your career.” She paused. “Maybe that’s what you need to focus on right now.”

J.T.’s heart plummeted straight to his gut. Was that her polite way of saying they were over? If so, then he only had himself to blame. If she wanted to be free of him then he couldn’t use the baby to make her stay, he had to let her go. But a life without Angie in it? Unimaginable. He couldn’t face that decision right now.

“I need to get out of here,” he muttered, and brushed past her. Her soft floral scent almost halted him in his tracks and he had to forcibly shake off the desire to turn around and pull her into his arms. He couldn’t do that—not when he didn’t know what the hell he wanted. It wasn’t fair to either of them.

\* \* \*

The word coward was certainly applicable in this moment. Angie could have asked J.T. straight out if he cared about her—if he wanted to stay married and raise their daughter together. But fear that he’d tell her that his career was more important than her and the baby had kept her from asking.

A dry sob burned like a blowtorch in her throat as she whirled around and watched J.T. pull open the doors and leave the room. For several long seconds she couldn’t seem to breathe, and then finally she sucked in a gulp of air and fought back tears. If only J.T. had given her one clue as to how he felt about her. Then maybe she wouldn’t have a gaping hole in her heart the size of Texas.

The last thing she wanted was to be the reason he was unable to achieve his goals and if they stayed married he might grow to resent her and the baby. How could she live with that? But how could she live without J.T.—the man she fallen completely and irrevocably in love with?

Moving to the recliner, Angie sank down on its soft pliant cushion and buried her face in her hands. As her tears finally fell, all she could think about was something her grandmother had told her many times over the years. When faced with a difficult decision, follow your heart. It will never lead you astray.

Helpful advice if she was deciding on a new car or a career change—not so helpful when it came to living without J.T.

## Chapter Twenty

“Are you happy now?” Angie asked, and wrapped her arms around her midriff as her mother opened her car door. Livvie, who had been quiet and withdrawn on the drive back to the house, was already ensconced in the passenger seat of her mother’s seen-better-days Ford Escort.

Selena half-turned and in the faint light from a nearby street lamp Angie could see no sign of remorse on her mother’s face. Not that she expected any. Selena DeMarco didn’t do remorse, just cynicism and resentment. She did those things very well.

“Did you know your husband with having breakfast with an attractive blonde this morning? I saw them together when we were having brunch.”

“Was that who you were staring at?” Angie blew out an exasperated breath. “I know about the blonde, Mom. Her name is Leah Porter and she was interviewing J.T. for an online magazine article. If that’s what triggered your outburst at dinner then you embarrassed me and yourself for nothing.”

Selena lifted her chin and gave Angie an imperious stare. “I did what I thought was best. Someday you’ll thank me from saving you from certain heartache.”

“It wasn’t your decision to make.”

“Leave him,” Selena ordered in a hard voice. “Go inside and pack your bags. Come home with us. We’ll make room.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.” Angie pointed toward the house. “This is my home, and I’m staying right here.”

Her mother’s lips thinned. “Cut your losses, Angela. Get a divorce, a healthy child support payment and forget J.T. Sawyer.”

“The only person I want to forget right now is you,” Angie said stonily, then turned and stalked toward the house. She opened the front door and then stood in the doorway and watched her mother get into her car. The frigid air stinging her cheeks barely registered as she waited for the red tail-lights of the Escort to disappear. As Christmas Eves went, this one was memorable. But not for any of the right reasons.

“Close the door. You’ll catch your death.”

“After what happened tonight, that’s the least of my worries,” Angie muttered, as she closed the door and locked it. Taking a deep breath, she turned to face her mother-in-law. “Thank you for bringing us home,” she said, noting that Sharon had shed her coat and gloves and was watching her with a somber gaze from her seat on the edge of the couch. So much for wallowing alone in her misery. “You must hate me.”

Sharon shook her head. “I don’t hate you. But I am disappointed in you.” Sharon settled back against the leather cushion. “The Angie I’ve come to love isn’t someone who would deliberately deceive anyone. What am I missing?”

Angie blinked. “You love me?”

“You sound surprised.” Sharon’s lips tilted in a slight smile. “Do you think you’re unlovable?”

“I know my grandma loved me.” Angie moved toward the couch, unbuttoning her coat. “And when I was a kid, I thought my parents did too. But everything changed when the truth came out about my father.”

“Your mother is an unhappy woman.”

“She’s beyond bitter. My father cheated on her from almost the beginning of their marriage.” Angie shrugged out of her coat and draped it over the arm of the couch before sitting down. “He was

a ballplayer.”

Sharon nodded. “Like J.T.”

“J.T. isn’t anything like my father, but I didn’t know that at the time. Like my mom, I believed all ballplayers were cut from the same cloth.” Angie sighed. “But from the first moment I met J.T. I couldn’t think of anyone else. He asked me out several times but I kept saying no and then he gave up. The thought of getting involved with him and being betrayed like my mother scared me. To death.”

“Obviously, that changed. Or you wouldn’t be pregnant.”

Angie smiled at the unexpected sparkle in Sharon’s light eyes. “He came to my softball game in August. I was pitching. After the game he approached me and congratulated me on the win. I don’t know if it was the thrill of winning the championship, or what, but when he asked if he could tag along to our celebration party I didn’t tell him to get lost.”

“And that was the night your baby was conceived?”

“Yes. I used to think it was because I’d had a couple of beers and my defenses were lowered, but I know now that it was inevitable.” Angie plopped back against the couch and shoved her hair from her face. Her heart clenched at the sight of the twinkling lights on the Christmas tree she and J.T. had decorated together. Their first and probably last tree as a couple. “The next morning I ran away and tried to pretend like it didn’t happen.”

“Why?”

“Because I was scared of how J.T. made me feel, and afraid that if I kept seeing him that he would break my heart. I couldn’t risk it.”

“Did you really plan to leave him after two years?” Sharon asked, shifting to stretch her arm along the back of the couch.

“The first time J.T. offered to marry me, I turned him down. But then the reality of losing my job and not having an income or health insurance hit me and I freaked out. I’m not proud that I came up with the two-year marriage agreement, but at the time it seemed like my only option. And I didn’t intentionally set out to lie to you and Joe, J.T. asked me to keep the arrangement between us. And I agreed because...my mother was right...I was desperate.”

“How do you feel about my son now?”

“I love him,” Angie’s voice broke as tears pricked the back of her eyes. “And I regretted that stupid agreement almost immediately.”

Relief flickered in Sharon’s eyes. “Have you told J.T. that?”

“I tried, but he didn’t want to talk.” Angie wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand and then dried the tears on the fabric of her dress. “I don’t want to stand in the way of his career. I know he intended to devote his entire off-season to training and I’ve...” she broke off and put a hand to her stomach, “...we’ve been a huge distraction.”

Sharon leaned forward and pulled her into a hug. “Oh, Angie. Is that what you think the problem is?” Angie nodded and buried her face against Sharon’s shoulder. Of course, that was the problem. What else would it be?

\* \* \*

J.T. sat alone at the bar, staring at the bottle of beer in front of him. Timbers Tavern wasn’t far from his parents’ house and catered to a clientele that preferred beer and pretzels to wine and cheese. Although it had been a non-smoking establishment for years, the stale smell of thousands of cigarettes still lingered, no doubt due to the smoke that had seeped into paneled walls covered with rustic farm

tools that were supposed to pass as art. It was the perfect place to drown sorrows, or struggle with demons. J.T. was engaged in the latter, not the former.

He wasn't alone. Christmas Eve wasn't quite so cheery for everyone, it seemed. The three other patrons in the bar sat alone, and appeared to prefer it that way. No one had approached him except the bartender, who seemed to know better than to try to engage him in conversation.

As the heavy wooden door behind him creaked open and he was hit with a blast of cold air, J.T. didn't turn around. And when the newcomer slid on the stool next to him, he still didn't turn. Why bother when he knew who it was?

"I thought I'd find you here," Jake said, as he motioned for the bartender and then pointed to J.T.'s beer. "I'll have the same."

"You have the nose of a bloodhound." J.T. picked up his bottle and took a long swig.

"And you're nothing if not predictable," Jake retorted.

"I'd like to be alone."

"And I'd like to win the lottery, but that's never going to happen."

"Can't win if you don't play."

"And you can't fix things with Angie sitting here getting drunk," Jake said, and thanked the bartender as he deposited an icy bottle of beer in front of him.

"I'm not drunk and I...I don't know if I want to fix things with Angie." J.T. set his beer on the nicked surface of the bar and turned to scowl at his brother. "Where's Justin when I need him? He called this, you know. He suspected Angie was using me and he was right."

"There's more to the story than that and you know it," Jake said, then took a long pull of his beer.

"You're right. I let her use me." J.T. grabbed his bottle and took another chug. "Not that it matters now. Everything is fucked up." He swallowed and set his bottle on the bar. "Everything," he repeated and quickly averted his gaze. He didn't need Jake's pity. "I had it all planned." He stared at the color liquor bottles lined up on shelves behind the bar. "I was going to train like a motherfucker this off-season."

Jake waved a dismissive hand. "Save it for someone who doesn't know you like I do. The only reason you wanted to train so hard was to forget Angie."

J.T. swiveled on his stool. "And you would know that how?"

"Because you never could hold your liquor and the last time I found you in here you couldn't stop talking about her."

J.T. frowned. "I don't remember that."

"It was during the All-Star break, in July."

"What did I say?"

Jake shrugged. "I don't want to embarrass you. But it was obvious you had it bad for her. You never mentioned her by name, but now it's obvious that she's the woman you were all tore up about."

"You're full of shit," J.T. said, even though he vaguely recalled getting drunk off his ass after he'd inadvertently learned Angie was dating that stupid accountant. "I'm training hard because I'm sick of being back-up. I want to start."

"You will, just not for the Blaze." Jake waved the bartender off as he headed their way. "Look, as long as Scanlon is healthy he's the starter. Your contract is up after this season and with your stats, you're guaranteed to get picked up by another team."

J.T. couldn't help but roll his eyes. "When did you become the great baseball prognosticator?"

"You're not the only person in this family who loves baseball, bonehead. There are several teams with aging catchers that'll be looking for new blood next year. Your name is on everyone's short list."

You might even get to stay in California. The Padres and the Angels are two of the teams who will be on the look-out for a starting catcher next season.”

J.T. reached for his beer and shifted on his stool. “I’m partial to the Padres,” he said, lifting the bottle to his mouth.

Jake shook his head and chuckled. “Then just keep doing what you started doing last season. Make the most of your starts and contribute as much as you can.” A long but not uncomfortable silence stretched between them. “What are you going to do about Angie?”

J.T. slammed his bottle on the bar and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “It’s my own fault for being so fucking stupid. I thought I could make her love me,” he said in low tones as the bartender shot them a concerned glance. “I practically twisted her arm to get her to marry me.”

Jake put his hand on J.T.’s shoulder. “You need to talk to her. For what it’s worth, I like her and I think you two are good together.”

“We are good together. But what I did was wrong. I didn’t see it before, but I do now. And I can’t expect her to stay with me, not anymore. I love her, Jake. I can’t force her to continue on with this... this arrangement.”

“That’s why you need to talk to her.” Jake patted his shoulder. “From my observation, she hasn’t been acting like a woman with leaving on her mind.”

\* \* \*

After a hot shower that did nothing to relax her, Angie sat at the kitchen table with a cup of herbal tea. Except for the occasional hum from the refrigerator, the room was quiet. Too quiet.

For the past couple of weeks, Angie had gotten used to a house filled with life, and with family. It wasn’t unusual for Jake to come by to catch a basketball game with J.T., or for Sharon to pop in for a visit during the day when she wasn’t working at her café. For years she’d lived alone, content in her solitude, but now she couldn’t imagine living that way ever again. She wanted a family, and a home filled with love and laughter. And she wanted all of that with J.T.

Shoving her cup aside, Angie folded her arms on the table and rested her head on her forearms. She was tired, but too keyed up to sleep. And the thought of sleeping without J.T. beside her seemed unnatural.

For what seemed like an hour, she wallowed in self-pity until the sound of the garage door opening jolted her out of her depressed stupor. Jerking her head up, she listened as J.T. killed the engine of his truck. Her heart pounded as she heard the garage door close and then seconds later, the door to the laundry room open. She brushed her hair back and tried to stop her knees from shaking as J.T. entered the kitchen. He stopped short when he saw her at the table and then closed the door behind him.

Angie wanted to cry when she saw the coolness in his eyes.

“You’re home,” she stated the obvious and fidgeted with the lapels of her robe. “I didn’t expect to see you tonight.”

“I’m here to pack a few things.” J.T. moved to the center island and dropped his keys on the countertop. “I’m moving in with Jake.”

Angie’s heart sank. “For how long?”

“I don’t know,” he said, in a weary voice as he lifted a hand to rub his eyes with his fingers.

“Can we at least talk before you leave?”

“I’m not ready to talk.”

“Will you listen while I do?” she asked. “It won’t take long.”

He studied her for several seconds and then nodded. “Okay.”

Taking a deep breath, Angie clasped her hands in front of her on the table as J.T. leaned his hip against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. Tension oozed between them like quicksand. She swallowed hard and tried to keep her voice steady.

“Before I came to your condo to tell you I was pregnant, I sat in a coffee shop for several hours and rehearsed what I was going to say. But when I was face to face with you I could barely get the words out.” She paused and couldn’t help but smile. “You’ve always done that to me, you know.”

J.T.’s brows knitted. “Done what?”

“Made me forget everything and everyone. The first time I saw you my whole world tilted off its axis. It threw me because I’d never felt anything like that before. My life was all planned out and it didn’t include long-term commitment. Especially with a ballplayer.

“But no matter how hard I tried to forget about you, I couldn’t. I started dating Scott in hopes of getting you out of my system, but it didn’t work. And when you came to my softball game that night and we ended up at Kamu’s, I thought that maybe if I slept with you one time it would satisfy my lust and I’d never have to think about you again.”

“Well, that’s flattering.” J.T.’s expression was as icy as his voice.

Angie took another deep breath to calm her erratic pulse. This was so not going like she’d planned but then, what else was new?

“But it wasn’t just lust. I felt a connection with you that night that went beyond amazing sex. And after I got pregnant I knew we would be bound together forever and it terrified me. I didn’t want to end up like my mother.”

“Yeah. I can see why you wouldn’t want to end up like her,” J.T. said, with a sarcastic edge to his voice.

“It didn’t take long for me to realize that you were nothing like my father. And for the first time in years I felt like I was a part of a real family again. By the time we made love I wasn’t even thinking about that agreement we signed. I don’t want to leave. I want to make this marriage work.”

J.T.’s gaze narrowed with suspicion. “Why?”

“I love you, J.T.”

After a heart-stopping silence, J.T. finally spoke, “I can’t do this right now. I have to go.”

Angie braced her palms on the table and pushed herself up. “Doesn’t knowing I’m in love with you matter?”

“You don’t know me, Angie. Or what I’m capable of,” he said in a thick voice. “And how do I know you mean it?” His solemn gaze rested on her face. “I don’t know you either,” he said, and then walked around the island and left the kitchen.

Angie stared at the empty doorway for several seconds and then picked up her cup and moved to the sink. Blinking back tears, she rinsed the cup out and set it on the counter. Gripping the edge of the sink, she breathed in a deep gulp of air and then turned around and stalked out of the kitchen. By the time she got to the bedroom, she’d left self-pity behind and was in full-on take-no-prisoners-mode.

“You don’t know me?” she demanded as she strode into the bedroom to find J.T. sitting on the end of the bed. He looked up, his eyes widening as she halted in front of him. “Well, know this.” She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “I’m not giving up on this marriage. Not now, not ever.”

J.T. pushed himself up and stared down at her. Suddenly, every nerve ending in her body kicked into high alert. Their eyes locked and held, the electricity between them too potent to ignore.

“Don’t go,” she whispered, aching for him to take her in his arms.

But he didn't. Instead he lifted his hand and brushed a rogue ringlet of hair from her face and then gently caressed her cheek. "I can't stay," he said huskily. "I need some space, and some time to sort all this out."

"How much time do you need?"

"I don't know." He pulled open the top drawer and pulled out several pairs of briefs and set them atop the dresser. "If you don't mind, I'd like to be alone," he said as he stared at their wedding photo. "I should never have asked you to marry me."

"I don't regret it," she said softly.

He turned from the dresser and met her gaze. "I do."



## Chapter Twenty-One

Christmas at the Sawyer house was unusually quiet. The events of the previous evening had cast a pall over the traditional gift exchange, and although no one had yet to mention her name, Angie's presence had been sorely missed all morning. In the relatively short time they'd been married she'd seamlessly become a part of his family. And now, sitting at the dining room table next to her empty chair, J.T. closed his eyes and tried to ignore the ache that had settled in his chest. He'd thought worshipping Angie from afar for two years was painful, but what he was feeling now was worse. Way worse.

There had been days when he'd wished he could be like many of his teammates—in particular, the ones who had a different woman in their bed every night and never let anyone get too close. But for whatever reason, he wasn't wired that way. Before meeting Angie he'd dated a few women—nice women with whom he enjoyed spending time. During these relationships he never cheated, or even thought of cheating. And when he was sure a relationship wasn't going to lead to a long-term commitment he'd end it as decently as he could. Deep down he knew he wanted what his parents had, but until the moment he'd been introduced to Angie he'd begun to believe he would never find it. Why Angie, of all women, had affected him this way he didn't know. He didn't necessarily believe in reincarnation or the like, but he was beginning to wonder if maybe they had met in a past life and were predestined to meet again. How else could he explain what he'd felt the second he'd laid eyes on her?

“J.T., are you okay?”

J.T. opened his eyes and met his mother's concerned gaze from across the table. He nodded and picked up his fork. Sharon Sawyer's bacon-cheese frittata was a Sawyer staple on Christmas Day, but today it didn't taste much better than shoe leather. He choked several bites down and then chased them with a sip of his father's favorite Christmas morning beverage—mimosa. Maybe the champagne in it would dull the headache that was beginning to throb in his temples. Or he'd get drunk. That was also an option. And not a bad one.

His mother cleared her throat and reached for a biscuit. “I called Angie and told her she was still welcome to come over this morning.”

“Why would you do that after last night?” Justin, who sat next to Sharon, asked, a scowl darkening his face.

“She's still a member of this family.” Joe Sawyer sent a reproofing look toward his eldest son. “And no one should be alone on Christmas.”

“Well, since she's not here, I assume she declined,” Jake said as he helped himself to another serving of country potatoes.

“She said she wasn't feeling well.”

“Yeah. Right. The real reason is she's too ashamed to face us,” Justin muttered, and looked at J.T. “I knew she was using you.” J.T. squeezed his fork and tamped down the urge to hurl it, prongs first, at Justin's smirking face. Maybe Justin had been adopted. He was the only Sawyer brother who was an asshole.

“Lighten up,” Jake warned his brother with a hard stare. “Don't judge her. You don't know the whole story.”

J.T. leaned back in his chair and wished he was somewhere else. Like in bed with the covers pulled up over his head. Then maybe he would wake up and find this was all a bad dream. “Can we

change the subject, please?” He swung his gaze to the other end of the table where Josh sat. “Is Livvie excited about UCD?”

Josh nodded emphatically. “She told me she can’t wait to get out of the house.”

“With a mother like that, who can blame her,” Jake said, and then looked at Sharon with a wide grin on his face. “Have I told you lately that you’re the best mom ever?”

As his family laughed and then moved onto another subject, J.T. tuned them out and tried to finish his breakfast. Sleeping in Jake’s guest room wasn’t how he’d intended to spend Christmas Eve. Instead of giving Angie the special present he picked out for her, he’d tossed and turned on the hardest mattress known to mankind. Between the bed made of concrete and his all-consuming thoughts of Angie, he hadn’t gotten much sleep.

An hour later, he was sprawled on the couch in the family room, watching the annual NBA Christmas Day game but not paying attention to it. His gaze strayed to the mantle and the red and green stocking his mother had hung for Angie. What is she doing right now? A part of him felt bad that she was alone, but another part of him was relieved she hadn’t shown up at his parents’ house. He needed distance to process everything that had happened in the last eighteen hours. Something he couldn’t do if he was anywhere near her.

The sound of the back door opening startled him. He looked over as Justin stepped inside the family room and closed the door behind him. Although the sun was out, J.T. shivered as a burst of cold air hit him. He marveled at his brother’s imperviousness to winter. Only Justin would go outside without a coat in forty degree weather.

“What were you doing in the back yard?”

Justin limped across the room, his sneakers squeaking on the hardwood floor, and gingerly eased himself onto the leather recliner. “Nothing. I just needed some fresh air.”

J.T. took note of the tightness of Justin’s jaw and his evasive gaze, but didn’t press him. Knowing his brother, he was probably antsy that he was still officially on medical leave. It had to be killing him that he had a couple more weeks of recuperation before he could return to work.

“How are doing?” Justin asked.

“Better than you. Does it still hurt?”

Justin winced as he stretched out his leg. “I might have given up the crutch too soon.”

J.T. feigned a jaw drop. “Are you admitting the almighty Justin Sawyer might actually be human?”

His brother shot him a wry grin as he settled back against the recliner. “I’m flesh and blood like anyone else, bro.”

“Don’t worry,” J.T. assured him. “I won’t tell anyone.”

Justin studied him with enigmatic eyes. “I’m sorry for the crack I made at breakfast. You know, about Angie.”

“All right. Where’s my brother, and what have you done with him?” J.T. asked, and then chuckled as amusement quirked Justin’s mouth.

“Jake said you’re staying with him for a while,” Justin said as he pushed the recliner back into a lounging position.

“I need some time to think.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re going to do?”

“Nope.”

“For the record, I wish I’d been wrong about her.” J.T. was surprised at the sincerity in Justin’s voice. It wasn’t a common occurrence.

“You are wrong about her,” J.T. said, and then looked at the television. The last thing he wanted

to do was explain to Justin how he'd manipulated Angie into marrying him. If anyone's motives had been questionable, it was his.

Later in the afternoon, the drive back to Jake's house was a quiet one. J.T. sat in the passenger seat of Jake's Land Rover unable to contain his curiosity any longer.

"What did I say about Angie?"

Jake shot him a quick glance. "What?"

"Last night you said you found me drunk at Timbers back in July and that I was talking about Angie. What did I say?"

"You were wasted, most of it was gibberish."

"If it was gibberish then why'd you bring it up last night?" J.T. shifted in his seat to turn down the radio Jake had set to his favorite classic rock station. "C'mon, man. What'd I say?"

"Something along the lines that the love of your life and the future mother of your children didn't even know you were alive. And that somehow you were going to find a way to get her to go out with you."

"Shit." J.T. shook his head. Drinking over his limit never failed to produce some sort of embarrassing situation. "That sounds pathetic and stalkerish at the same time."

"Tell me about it. You also said that you were going to knock some accountant's block off."

J.T. couldn't contain a grin. "That would be Scott. I'd just found out from one of the guys in the clubhouse that Angie was dating him," he said as he adjusted the strap of his seatbelt.

"I'm beginning to think you subconsciously forgot to use a condom the night you slept with her."

"Why would I do that?"

Jake shrugged as he idly tapped his index finger on the steering wheel. "Have you ever not used one before?"

"No."

"Then why take the chance with Angie?"

J.T. stared out the windshield. There wasn't another soul on the road. The holiday and the unseasonably cold weather had turned Jake's neighborhood—not too far from J.T.'s—into a ghost town. "I wasn't thinking clearly. After months of avoiding me, there she was, in my bedroom. I swear, a fucking bomb could have gone off outside the building and I wouldn't have noticed. But it's a stretch to say I had some sort of hidden agenda to get her pregnant. Kids weren't even on my radar."

Jake pulled to a stop at a red light. "But Angie was. Look, whether you intended for her to get pregnant or not is moot. You were into her even back then. Just be honest with her and tell her you love her."

J.T. raked a hand through his hair. "The trouble is as much as I love her, I don't want to give up my dreams, and I'm not sure I can successfully manage both a family and baseball."

Jake turned and looked at him, his expression somber. "Maybe you need to dig a little deeper to resolve this conflict."

"Who are you? Dr. Phil?"

"Do I look bald to you?" Jake shot him a grin.

"Give it a couple of years," J.T. said, and was rewarded with a punch in the arm.

\* \* \*

To keep her mind off the fact that she was alone on Christmas Day, Angie had spent most of the day in the kitchen, baking. She started with Grandma Sophia's cinnamon-apple coffee cake and ended with

black and white cookies. In between, she whipped up a few batches of muffins and scones and planned to take them over to Sharon's café early the next morning.

She'd just dried the last baking pan when her cell phone rang. Her heartbeat accelerated as she picked it up off the counter and checked the caller ID. Her hopes were dashed when instead of J.T.'s name, it was her sister's she saw on the small screen.

"Merry Christmas," she said as she moved to the kitchen table and sat down. "Was Santa good to you?"

"I don't know about Santa," Livvie said, with a tinkling laugh. "But I loved the charm bracelet a certain sister gave me. Thank you so much. It's beautiful."

Angie smiled, pleased that Livvie liked the gift. She'd picked out a few special charms that reminded her of her sister, but there was still plenty of space on the bracelet for Livvie to make it uniquely hers by adding her own. "You're welcome."

"Did you like your present?"

Biting her lip, Angie hesitated. She didn't want Livvie to know that she could barely look at the Christmas tree let alone open gifts. "Not yet," she said, with false brightness. "I've been baking all day. But just as soon as I finish up in the kitchen I'm going to open it."

"I'm really sorry about last night."

"It wasn't your fault, sweetie."

"Angie, I'm worried about Mom," Livvie said in a low voice. Probably because the walls of her bedroom were paper thin and their mother had excellent hearing.

"Why?"

"She never used to be this bad, or maybe I just wasn't old enough to notice. What she did last night was rude times twenty. I was so embarrassed."

"Me too."

"Is it true that J.T. is cheating on you?"

Angie's grip tightened on the phone. Damn her mother. "Why would you think that?"

"Mom told me ballplayers have groupies in every city."

"Some of them do, but J.T. isn't like that."

"You mean he's not like Daddy?" An awkward pause ensued before Livvie continued, "You don't have to protect me anymore, Angie. I overheard you and Mom talking a few months ago. It wasn't hard to figure out what was going on. And I'd suspected for a while that Daddy was seeing another woman and that's why they split up."

More like seeing dozens of other women. But Livvie didn't need to know all the gory details. "He hurt her badly."

"She could have left him."

"That's true. I'm not sure why she didn't."

"But it's wrong to assume all men are like he was. I mean, J.T. is super nice, and Josh is too. Do you know if he has a girlfriend?"

"He just broke up with his high school girlfriend. Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Livvie replied quickly. "He just seems like the kind of guy who would have a girlfriend." After a short silence, Livvie continued in a pensive tone, "Are you and J.T. getting a divorce?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"So, it's not true then? You didn't plan to leave him after the baby's born?"

"No. That part is true, but that was before I discovered what a wonderful man he is. I love him,

Livvie, and I'm going to do my best to make our marriage work.”

“If anyone can do it, you can.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Angie said, absently twining a lock of hair around her finger. “I hope you know you can do anything too. Even become a fashion designer, if that’s what you really want to do.”

“Mom says that’s a tough business to make a living in.”

“She’s right, but that doesn’t mean you couldn’t be successful at it. If it’s what you love to do and you’re passionate about it, then you should go for it. Don’t give up on your dreams.”

\* \* \*

Not long after her conversation with Livvie, Angie left the kitchen and headed for the living room to turn off the lights on the Christmas tree before going up to bed. J.T. had set them up so that they could be turned on or off by tapping a device placed near the base of the tree with her foot. She was about to tap the button when she noticed a small gift box nestled between two of the several presents that she and J.T. had wrapped and intended to take over to the Sawyer house this morning. She assumed that J.T. had gone to his parents’ house for breakfast as they’d planned, but he hadn’t stopped by to pick up the gifts. And since she didn’t have the nerve to face J.T.’s family, here they sat, a sad reminder that the lovely Christmas she’d anticipated had been ruined.

Bending slightly, she retrieved the mystery gift and studied it. The silver foil wrapping paper was different than what she’d purchased and the blue ribbon and small bow didn’t match any of the bows she’d fashioned by hand for each gift under the tree. Years ago, Grandma Sophia had shown her how to make the perfect bow, and to this day. Angie remembered her grandmother’s infinite patience as she tried over and over again to make hers just as beautiful as the woman she adored and looked up to. So many of the things she loved to do were a direct result of her grandmother’s influence. The only thing Grandma Sophia hadn’t been able to do was prevent Angie from becoming almost as bitter as her mother. Sadly, it turned out their shared distrust of men had been the only thing that Angie had in common with her mother. Without that to bond them, could they ever have a relationship again? And more importantly, did she want one?

Moving to the couch, Angie sank to the cushion and turned the present over to find a small envelope—the size that usually came with flowers—tucked snugly under the ribbon. She pulled it out and her pulse heightened as she saw her name written on the envelope in J.T.’s handwriting. She set the gift on her lap and lifted the flap to pull out the card.

Angie,

What’s inside this box reminds me of your eyes. Clear, blue and sparkling.

Merry Christmas to my beautiful wife, and the mother of my child.

J.T.

Tears filled her eyes until the words in front of her blurred. She blinked to keep them from spilling down her cheeks and exchanged the card and envelope for the small box on her lap. As she slipped off the bow, it occurred to her that J.T. might have changed his mind about giving her the gift, but that didn’t stop her from tearing off the paper and lifting the lid—emblazoned with the name of a well-known Sacramento jeweler—from the box.

She gasped at the sight of the pendent nestled inside. The white gold swirl filigree resembled a backward S and in each curve there was an oval aquamarine gemstone set inside. Attached to the pendent was a chain. Angie tucked her finger underneath it and lifted the necklace from the box. Holding it up, her heart swelled with happiness at J.T.'s thoughtfulness.

With shaky fingers she undid the clasp and after pushing aside her mass of hair, she managed to put it on. Lifting her hand to her upper chest, she caressed the pendent and wished with all of her heart that just like her wedding ring, she'd never have to take it off.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

The day after Christmas, Angie pulled her Jetta into an unoccupied parking space directly in front of River City Coffee and turned off the engine. A few minutes later, she'd retrieved the two plastic containers from the trunk and entered the café to find her mother-in-law behind the counter helping a customer.

"I told you the muffins would be here shortly," Sharon said to the woman bundled up one of those puffy parkas that made whoever wore them look five times bigger than they actually were.

The woman turned and smiled at Angie. "Are you the baker?" she asked as she drew off her gloves.

"Yes." Angie moved to stand beside the customer and slid the containers onto the counter.

"I love everything you make."

"Thank you." Angie returned the woman's smile, unexpectedly pleased by her sincere compliment. "That's wonderful to hear."

"What did you bring me today?" Sharon asked.

"Mixed berry muffins, apple-cinnamon coffee cake and chocolate chip scones."

"I'll have a muffin. I'd love to have one of each." The woman's smile turned sheepish. "But my hips don't need it."

Angie laughed and looked toward the door as it opened and a gust of cold air blew in. Her smile faded as Justin entered and closed the door behind him. As evidenced by his sullen expression, he was just as displeased to see her as she was to see him.

Sharon nodded at her son then gave her customer her full attention. "Would you like your usual coffee, Terri?"

"Yes. I'm early today. I think I'll drink my coffee and eat my muffin here rather than go to the office." Terri opened her purse, pulled out a ten-dollar bill and handed it to Sharon.

"Why don't you grab a table? I'll bring your order over. Shall I warm the muffin for you?" Sharon asked as she rang up the coffee and muffin on the cash register and then gave Terri her change.

"I'd love that." Terri dropped her change into her purse and turned toward Angie as Justin moved to stand behind them. "Do you do special orders?"

"Oh, I'm not in business for myself. I'm just helping out for a while."

Terri frowned. "That's too bad. I arrange a lot of meetings where I work and your stuff would be a big hit. If you ever set up shop let me know." Terri reached back into her purse and pulled out a business card.

"Thanks. I'll do that." Angie took the card and slipped it into her coat pocket. Terri cast a smile at Justin before moving to a table near the window. Another customer, a woman sitting nearby, looked up from her laptop and gave Terri a friendly nod before lowering her gaze to the screen in front of her.

"Looks like you'll have a profession to fall back on when J.T. divorces you," Justin said, with a smirk.

"Justin." Sharon's tone held a warning. She popped a muffin in the microwave, pressed a button and then picked up a to-go cup and began to fill it with coffee from a pot next to the microwave.

"Sorry. I couldn't resist." He turned as the door opened and as two young men wearing black knit caps and baggy gray sweatshirts entered the café. They stopped near the entrance and looked up at the chalk board that listed the menu selections. Justin's gaze narrowed and lingered on them for several

seconds before he returned his attention to her. "How was your Christmas?"

"I think you know how my Christmas was." Angie shot him a death stare. Justin didn't seem particularly bothered. He glanced at the two men again and then moved to stand in front of her, blocking her view of the two new customers.

"Mom! Get down!" Startled by Justin's urgent command, Angie let out a yelp of surprise as his strong fingers wrapped around her forearm and he hauled her around the counter. "Damn it, get down," he yelled again. Angie saw the two men draw guns from the pockets of their sweatshirts and point them toward the back of the store. Icy fear gripped her body as a hail of bullets shattered the glass of the display counter and the shards flew everywhere. Something hot and sharp stung her upper arm as Justin pushed her down and she fell to the floor in a heap. The noise was deafening. She heard feminine screams and shook with fear as the two gunmen continued firing. With Justin's solid weight shielding her, she buried her face to the floor and prayed for the shooting to stop.

\* \* \*

Usually when he ran, J.T. was able to clear his mind and focus on getting his miles in. Unlike Matt, he wasn't a fan of distance running, but in his profession it was a necessary evil. Although he preferred to do his miles outdoors, today the freezing temperature had kept him inside and he was one of only a handful of people at Jake's gym who were exercising the day after Christmas.

As he sprinted on his favorite treadmill in the back of the cardio room, J.T. stared straight ahead, ignoring the bank of flat panel televisions mounted high on the wall at the front of the room. According to Jake, the televisions were a big hit with his members. Each one was tuned to a different channel. If a member wanted to watch and listen to one of the channels all they had to do was plug their earphones into a remote device attached to whatever piece of equipment they were using and press a numbered button for the corresponding television.

J.T. preferred to listen to music when he ran, but not the classic rock that Jake had piped in to the entire gym. Instead, J.T. had attached his audio player to the waistband of his sweats and was listening to Metallica. There was nothing like heavy metal to drive everything else from his mind. And that's exactly what he needed—a blank mind. He didn't want to think about Angie, or that he still had three miles to go before he was done.

But even the driving beat of Enter Sandman couldn't stop him from thinking about his marriage. He wanted to believe that Angie loved him and that she was committed to their marriage. But he didn't want to wake up one morning, months from now, and find that she resented him. He wasn't a normal husband with a predictable nine to five job. His schedule during the season was erratic, which made it tough to have a relationship, let alone a family. It would kill him if he came back from training camp, or a long lonely road trip, only to find she'd taken their daughter and left him.

Could he find another, more stable job? Did he even want to? He'd never been in love before. Was this love? This crazy, mixed up feeling like he was splitting in multiple directions?

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jake striding toward him. As his brother reached the treadmill, J.T. could immediately see that something was wrong. Jake's face was pale and there was a grim set to his mouth. He pressed the speed button on the treadmill's console to slow his pace.

"What's going on?" he asked as he wrapped his fingers around the handle on the console and adjusted his stride to a fast walk.

Jake hit the stop button and the belt slowed to a stop. J.T. straddled the sides of the treadmill and grabbed his towel.



“Come with me,” Jake said, and turned headed for his office.

J.T. mopped his sweaty brow with his towel, turned off Metallica and followed his brother.

“Close the door,” Jake instructed as J.T. entered his office. J.T. closed the door as Jake pointed to the small flat panel television mounted in the upper corner of his room. “I was doing paperwork when the local news interrupted the basketball game with a breaking story. It’s a shooting.”

“Where?” J.T. asked, and then read the caption at the bottom of the screen. “That’s downtown,” he said, as he recognized the cross streets.

“The news guy said shots were fired inside Mom’s café.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Jake turned off the television. “We need to get to the hospital right now. They’ve reported that several customers were shot. A woman is dead.”

J.T.’s gut twisted as felt the blood drain from his face. “Is it Mom?” he asked hoarsely.

“They’re not saying.” Jake faced him calmly. Jake was always calm in a crisis. “I talked to Mom a little while ago. She opened the café today because she’d given her staff the day off.” He paused. “She told me Angie was going to stop by and drop off some baked goods.” Sick fear coiled in the pit of J.T.’s stomach as Jake opened his desk drawer and pulled out his keys. “My assistant manager is going to take over for me.” Jake shoved the drawer closed. “I’ll drive.”

By the time he and Jake burst into the emergency room at Sutter Hospital, several scenarios had played through J.T.’s mind and none of them were good. One of two women he loved could be dead and the thought of living without either of them was like a knife in his heart.

Before he and Jake made it to the front desk, J.T. heard his name and turned to find Justin limping toward them. Both he and Jake quickly crossed the distance between them.

“Is Mom okay?” Jake asked as they halted in front of their brother.

“Was Angie there?” J.T. demanded, and then noticed the blood on Justin’s fleece jacket. “Were you shot?” he asked, then realized it was a stupid question. If his brother had been shot he wouldn’t be standing in the waiting room talking to them.

“No.” Justin looked at Jake. “And other than some cuts from the broken glass, Mom is fine. A doctor is with her right now. She’ll be able to go home soon. Dad is on his way to the hospital.”

“They said a woman was killed.” J.T. gulped in some air and tried to calm the pounding of his heart. “Was it Angie?”

Justin put his hand on his arm and looked him in the eyes. A wave of sheer black fright ripped through J.T.’s body and for a moment he thought he might collapse. Not Angie. Please, God. Not Angie.

“Angie was shot,” Justin said in a low controlled voice.

Tears blurred J.T.’s vision as Jake put a steadying hand on J.T.’s shoulder. “No,” he whispered, and closed his eyes as anguish threatened to overtake him.

“She’s not the woman who died,” Justin said quickly. “It was one of Mom’s customers.”

J.T. exhaled. Someone had died today and her family and friends would be devastated. But he couldn’t deny that he was overjoyed it wasn’t Angie. “I want to see her. I have to see with my own eyes that she’s all right.”

“You can’t,” Justin said, in a voice that brooked no argument. “They’re still treating her.” His implacable gaze softened a bit. “One of the bullets grazed her upper arm. I’m pretty sure it’s just a flesh wound, but they have to check to make sure the baby’s okay. When the shooting started, I was pretty rough with her. I pushed her to the floor behind the counter.”

“She was lucky you were there,” Jake said. “You saved her life.”

“Actually, I may have almost gotten her and Mom killed.” A muscled ticked in Justin’s jaw. “The shooters might have been after me. I think they were part of that auto-theft ring I investigated a while back. One of them looked familiar.”

“Are you saying they made you as a cop?” J.T. asked.

“I don’t know for sure.” Justin released J.T.’s arm and took a step back. By the steely look in his eyes it was obvious he had transitioned into cop mode. “Now that you two are here I’m going back to the crime scene. I need to talk to the lead detective and give him a detailed description of the shooters. I’ll check in with you later.”

Forty minutes later, J.T.’s patience was stretched to the max. Jake and his father noticed and had gone to the cafeteria to get him some coffee.

“They said it wouldn’t be much longer,” he muttered, and leaned back in the chair he’d been occupying ever since the E.R. nurse had updated him on Angie’s condition. Did she think that telling him that Angie was in stable condition made him any less anxious? He wouldn’t feel better until he could see her, touch her and talk to her. Nothing was more important—not even baseball. If he had to choose between his career and Angie, he no longer had any doubt what that choice would be. Not after what had happened today.

“Be patient.” His mother reached for his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “There was a bad car accident around the time we were brought in. It’s busy back there.”

“Were you scared?” J.T. turned his head and met her solemn gaze.

“Petrified,” she admitted with a nod.

J.T. was thankful that the small bandages on his mother’s cheeks and forehead were the only visible signs of what had happened to her today. But he couldn’t help but wonder how it would affect her emotionally. She was a strong woman, but this morning one of her customers had died and her business had been demolished by bullets. Would she ever feel safe again?

“I know I don’t say it nearly enough, but I love you, Mom.”

Her eyes filled with moisture and her chin trembled. “I love you too, son.” She lifted her other hand to wipe her eyes and then smiled through her tears. “You know, there’s someone else who needs to hear those words from you.”

J.T. nodded. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Do you really believe in love at first sight?”

“Yes.” She squeezed his hand again. “And I think you do too.”

\* \* \*

“The baby’s heartbeat is strong.”

Angie looked at the monitor and then at the emergency room doctor who been assigned to her when she was brought in. “Are you absolutely sure there’s nothing wrong with the baby?” she asked, and winced as she put a hand to her stomach. It turned out gunshot wounds, even flesh wounds, hurt like the devil. Who knew?

“The baby is fine. I’ve notified your ob-gyn. She’s in the hospital doing rounds and will come by and see you before you’re released.” The bespectacled brunette doctor, who didn’t look much older than Angie, made a note in the chart and then clasped it to her chest. “Your husband is in the waiting room and he’s anxious to see you. I’m going to send him in if you’re up to it.”

“I’m up to it.” Angie managed a smile and then stared at the fetal monitor after the doctor left the

room. The baby's heartbeat was strong and steady—a miracle after what had happened this morning. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head against the pillow and said a silent prayer for the family of the woman who had died today. Angie didn't know her name, but unlike Terri, the sweet woman Angie spoke to just before all hell broke loose, she hadn't been lucky enough to survive.

How many times in the past few years had she seen this exact scenario play out on the news? Some mentally ill individual or someone with an ax to grind, somehow managed to get their hands on a gun or an assault rifle, and then they'd walk into a store, a classroom or onto a college campus with apparent ease and cold-bloodedly kill innocent men, women and children. Never in her wildest imagination had Angie believed it would happen to her, but it had. And it was terrifying.

Lost in thought, Angie wasn't aware J.T. had entered the small cubicle until he touched her hand. Startled, she opened her eyes and found him gazing down at her with such tenderness that her heart constricted. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Lucky to be alive," she said, and then bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling. "How's your mom?"

He looked around for a chair, but there wasn't one—only a low stool with wheels on it. He rolled it close to the bed and sat down beside her. "Physically, she's fine. Just a few cuts and bruises." He took her hand and twined his fingers with hers. "Mentally, I'm not sure yet."

"I feel like I'm in shock," Angie admitted. "I'm sure she must feel that way too."

J.T. looked at the fetal monitor and then back at her. "The doctor told me that the baby is fine. And that once your arm heals, you will be too."

"I want to go home," she whispered as her eyes filled with moisture and then, to her mortification, tears rolled down her cheeks. She didn't bother to brush them away. Sure, he'd take her home. But would he stay? She didn't think she could bear spending one more night without him by her side.

"You wouldn't be in here if it wasn't for me. This—what happened to you today—is my fault and I'm sorry, Angie." The faint tremor in his voice was echoed by the genuine remorse she saw in his eyes. Her heart clenched. "I'm so sorry."

Angie frowned. "It's not your fault those two guys—whoever they were—decided to carry out their lunatic plan at your mom's café. You had nothing to do with it."

"But it was my fault that I left you alone. Not only today. But on Christmas." He blew out a breath. "If I'd stayed when you asked me to, none of this would have happened," He broke off and shook his head in disgust. "The truth is I was a selfish jerk. I was thinking of myself when I should have been thinking of you."

J.T. lifted her hand. His mouth was warm against her skin as he tenderly kissed her palm. "Today took nearly ten years off my life. I didn't know whether you were dead or alive, and the thought that the last words I spoke to you were so cold gutted me. You told me you loved me and I brushed it off like it didn't matter." His eyes softened as he searched her face. "But it does matter. Because I love you, Angie. I love you so damn much, and I can't live without you." He gently squeezed her hand. "I want to make this marriage work. Please tell me you still want that too."

Fresh tears filled Angie's eyes as happiness overflowed her soul. They spilled down her cheeks unchecked until J.T. used his other hand to wipe them away. "I was so scared," she said in a choked voice. "I thought I was going to die and...and in that moment I knew that the only thing that mattered to me was you and our daughter. I love you, J.T., and all I want is to spend the rest of my life with you. We can find a way to make our marriage and your career work. I know we can."

"My career isn't important." J.T. brushed his thumb over one still-damp cheek. "I found that out today. The most important thing is family. I lost sight of that on Christmas Eve. Can you forgive me?"

She sniffed and nodded. "Yes. Other than Christmas Eve, you've never been a jerk."

J.T.'s eyes widened and then he laughed. "So I've built up some good will. Is that what you're telling me?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you," she replied with a grin.

"There's one more thing." He moved his hand to her forehead to brush her hair from her temple. "My motives for marrying you weren't as altruistic as I initially led you to believe. It wasn't just about the baby. I saw a way to keep you in my life and I took it. I couldn't even admit it to myself until a few days ago." He gave her a rueful smile. "I've always scoffed at my mother's belief in love at first sight. I didn't think it was possible, but then you came along and proved her right."

"And you proved that all my assumptions about ballplayers were wrong." She grimaced as she remembered how that belief had kept her from acknowledging her feelings for him. "And even though I didn't want to admit it at the time, I knew you would have helped me whether or not we'd gotten married. That's the kind of man you are. One of the good ones."

He cocked his head and grinned. "Jake has this off-the-wall theory that I subconsciously forgot the condom so I would get you pregnant."

Angie burst out laughing. "That's ridiculous."

"Isn't it?" J.T. said, and then narrowed his eyes. "Wait a minute. If you knew I would help you whether or not we got married, why did you come up with that counteroffer?"

"I don't know." She cast him a sly smile. "Maybe I had some subconscious motives of my own going on. Or maybe we should just ask Jake. He seems to know more about our feelings than we do."

J.T. returned her smile and lowered his gaze to her neck. "I see you opened your Christmas present."

Angie's cheeks warmed as he let go of her hand to touch the aquamarine pendent nestled at the hollow of her throat.

"Busted," she said with a grin. "It's beautiful and I love it. When we get home I'll give you your present."

"You already have," he said huskily, and slid his hand to her stomach. The love shining in his eyes caused Angie's heart to soar with happiness. "And it's the greatest gift of all." He leaned forward to kiss her and just then the baby kicked. Hard. As she gasped, J.T. pulled back and stared at her stomach with undisguised awe. "She kicked. I felt it this time."

Angie smiled and lifted her hand to cup his neck. His soft hair tickled her fingers as she caressed his nape. "It's amazing, isn't it? We made a baby."

J.T. lifted his gaze to hers and then inched closer so that his lips were almost touching hers. "We made more than that," he whispered against her mouth. "We made a family."

# Epilogue

Early April

Angie folded her arms atop her protruding belly and watched as the World Series Championship banner was hoisted to the top of a flagpole deep in centerfield. On the Blaze diamond, under a clear blue sky, each and every Blaze player who had been on the team last season had just received their World Series ring. It was opening day against their arch-rivals, the Los Angeles Dodgers, but before the new season officially began, homage was happily, and reverently, being paid to the previous one.

Around her, jubilant fans were standing and cheering loudly. Angie would have been standing with them—if it wasn't two weeks before her due date. Everyone, including Kelly, who was sitting beside her in a show of solidarity, thought she was crazy to attend a baseball game when there was a possibility she could give birth at any time. But there was no way she was going to miss seeing the team raise their first championship flag.

She held no ill-will toward the Blaze organization. Being laid off had turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to her. Okay, maybe the second best thing. From her seat in the first row just behind the Blaze dugout, Angie's gaze rested on J.T., who stood next to Matt along the baseline between third base and home plate.

The past three months had been hectic. With J.T. reporting to training camp in mid-February, they'd spent as much time together as they could until he left. During their emotional goodbye, they'd agreed that next season—when she could fly again—they'd find an apartment nearby so they could be together during spring training.

Before J.T. left for Scottsdale, they'd transformed the bedroom she'd occupied when she first moved into his house into a nursery. With its soft lilac colored walls and white furniture, all it needed was for their daughter to arrive to make it complete.

Baby girl Sawyer still didn't have a name. Angie and J.T. had narrowed it down to two and then decided that they'd choose the name when they saw her for the first time. Of course, both names started with a J. How could she go against generations of Sawyer tradition? Her only request was that she got to choose their daughter's middle name. That name had never been in question.

"Please don't go into labor during the next three hours," Kelly said, as the players trotted off the field and into the dugout. "I don't know nothin' about birthin' no babies," she added in a fake Southern accent.

Angie laughed. "I'll try, but it's not my decision." She rubbed her huge belly. "It's hers."

"We've always got a paramedic team on-call during games, so if you need to get to a hospital we can get you there pretty quickly."

"Good to know," Angie said, and smiled when she saw the hot dog vendor a few rows up. "I'm starving. Can you flag him over?"

An inning later, Angie felt the familiar pressure on her bladder and began to regret her insistence on attending the game. Lately she had to go to the bathroom at least once an hour. Why hadn't she thought of that before now?

"I need to use the restroom," she said, and put her hands on the armrests to hoist herself out of her seat.

"I'll help you," Kelly said quickly, and put her beer into the cup holder before standing up.

With Kelly's assistance, Angie got to her feet and then felt a weird popping sensation between her

legs. She gasped as warm fluid wet her underwear. "What?" Kelly stared at her with concerned eyes.

"I'm not sure, but I think my water just broke," Angie said in a low voice. Either that or she had just peed her pants. But who wanted to say that aloud?

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Kelly exclaimed so loudly that nearby fans turned to look at them. Kelly's penchant for swearing usually took people by surprise. "The baby's coming now?"

"I don't think so. In my book it says that sometimes the baby doesn't come for hours after the water breaks. And I'm not absolutely sure that it did."

"We're not taking any chances," Kelly said as she pulled her cell phone from the pocket of her blazer.

"Do you need some help?" a man decked out in a Blaze sweatshirt and hat sitting in the row behind them, asked.

"Yes," Kelly said, before Angie could speak. "Can you help me get her up the stairs?"

"I can walk," Angie protested, giving the older man a smile. "I don't want to inconvenience you."

"It's no bother." The man rose from his seat as Kelly instructed someone on the Blaze staff to have the paramedic team meet them at the top of the stairs.

"Kel, this could be nothing," Angie said, aware of the fans in the vicinity watching them instead of the game.

Kelly shoved her phone into her pocket and moved to the aisle which was right next to her seat. "Better safe, than sorry." She grinned and pointed to the huge electronic screen in centerfield.

"Besides, if you have the baby right here the whole ballpark will be watching. Do you want that?"

"Good God. No," Angie replied vehemently. "Get me out of here."

Six and a half hours later, exhausted but deliriously happy, Angie held her baby girl in her arms and watched her sleep. The poor little thing had cried her lungs out when she'd first come into the world, and tired herself out. As Angie's gaze roamed over her daughter's scrunched, but beautiful face, she recalled Sharon telling her that the pain of childbirth would be more than worth it when she held her child for the first time. Her mother-in-law was right. Still, nothing she'd read or been told about delivering the baby had prepared her for the overwhelming love that filled her entire being when the doctor placed her daughter into her arms.

"She's so small."

Angie turned her head to look at J.T., who sat in a chair next to the bed. In the ambulance, on the way to the hospital, Kelly had gotten a message to J.T. in the dugout and Blaze manager, Tom Morgan, had allowed him to leave. When he'd walked into her hospital room, Angie finally relaxed—as much as any woman could relax when labor pains were coming about eight minutes apart.

After that, everything had been a bit of a blur. The only thing she remembered besides the pain was how calm J.T. had been during the delivery. Even when she was in agony, he held her hand, breathed her through it and didn't take offense when she uttered swear words that would have made even Kelly blush. Childbirth was not for the faint of heart.

"She has your lips," Angie said, gazing at her daughter's perfectly shaped mouth.

"And your dark hair." J.T. said. "It's already curling, just like yours."

Angie grinned as she looked at him. "I can't believe you're still wearing your uniform."

"I didn't want to take a chance on getting here after the baby was born so I didn't stop to change clothes. Besides, it's not dirty. I didn't start today."

"Did the Blaze win?"

"I have no clue," J.T. said with a shrug. "The family is en route from Sacramento and I called Livvie. She said she'd stop by later and told me to thank you for going into labor while you were in

the city.”

“I aim to please,” Angie said, with a half-hearted smile as she thought of her mother. The rift between mother and daughter hadn’t yet been repaired. They’d talked a few times on the phone after the still unsolved shooting incident, but their conversations had been awkward and strained.

One of Grandma Sophia’s favorite quotes was “Other things may change us, but we start and end with family.” And because even after her death, Angie couldn’t bear to let her beloved grandmother down, she would try to repair her relationship with her mother. No matter how long it took.

“I think it’s time we give our daughter a name. So will it be name number one or name number two?” J.T. asked as he scooted forward on his chair to gently caress the baby’s cheek with his finger.

“Which one do you think fits her?”

“Number one,” he said without hesitation.

“I agree.” Angie’s heart overflowed with joy as J.T. leaned forward to gently kiss her. “I love you,” she whispered as he pulled back and gazed into her eyes. “Our daughter is so lucky to have you for a father.”

“And you for a mother. I know you’re still worried, but you’re going to be just fine. Don’t forget, we’re in this together.”

Angie smiled and lowered her gaze to her precious baby girl. “Welcome to the world, Jordan Sophia Sawyer. Mommy and Daddy love you.”

Pick up more riveting reads from Alison Packard, including **Love in the Afternoon** and **The Winning Season**, available now!



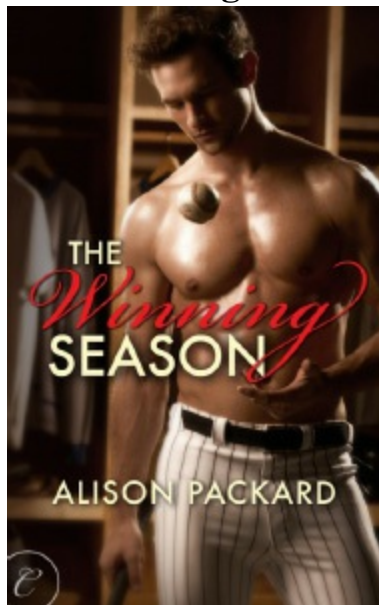
## Love in the Afternoon



Kayla Maxwell is eager to shed her slasher-flick bimbo image—and she plans to do just that in her new role on daytime’s most popular soap. With a chance to showcase her dramatic range, Kayla will be able to wash away the lingering betrayal and public humiliation left by her controlling, philandering ex-boyfriend.

Sean Barrett, the son of an influential, award-winning actor, is the hottest soap star in the country. Paired on-screen with the talented and beautiful Kayla Maxwell, Sean is determined to keep her at arm’s length, burned before by fame-seeking actresses who had no qualms about using him to get to his famous father. Succumbing to an attraction neither one of them can deny, Sean and Kayla must face down her stalker and their own personal demons before trusting what they both feel—a love that lasts long after the cameras stop rolling.

## The Winning Season



Kelly Maxwell has finally landed her dream job as publicist for the San Francisco Blaze. But the team's newest member, handsome bad boy catcher Matt Scanlon, is refusing every interview. She's got to get him to open up before the season ends, or she may not be back next year. And after everything she overcame to achieve her dream, Kelly's not about to let that happen.

Butting heads is getting Kelly and Matt nowhere but annoyed, and with the team's schedule on the road, they can't avoid close quarters—or their surprising attraction to one another. As the season winds down, Matt finds his growing feelings for Kelly have brought his numbed emotions back to life. But when betrayal shatters their fragile trust, winning it all seems more impossible than ever.

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## About the Author

Alison fell in love with reading at a very early age. Her favorite grandmother worked for Scholastic Books and every Friday she would bring home a box filled with books. In her early teens, Alison discovered Harlequin Presents romance novels at the library and read them voraciously. What she liked most about them? The exotic locales and happy endings, of course!

When Alison isn't working at the day job that pays the bills, keeps a roof over her head, and supports her book and chocolate habits, she spends her free time writing heartwarming contemporary romance with a dash of spice. But when she takes a break, she enjoys reading and spending time with her family and friends.



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CATCHING HEAT

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