



MODERN™



HEIDI RICE

One Night, So Pregnant!



Heidi Rice

One Night, So Pregnant!

Аннотация

What to expect when you're unexpectedly expecting: - Shock: Telling a gorgeous (almost) total stranger that he's going to be a dad is never easy! - Cravings: The instant chemistry that catapulted Tess Tremaine into the wildest night she's ever had isn't just going to go away – and no one says no to Nate Graystone when he's determined to be involved...- Hormones Gone Wild: Surely that's the only reason she's failing to keep Nate out of her bed, out of her mind...and why she keeps wanting more from the most unattainable man she's ever met?www.heidi-rice.com

Содержание

Praise for Heidi Rice	5
About the Author	6
One Night,	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	19
CHAPTER THREE	31
CHAPTER FOUR	37
CHAPTER FIVE	47
CHAPTER SIX	57
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	60



HEIDI RICE

One Night, So Pregnant!



Praise for Heidi Rice

‘Heidi Rice is simply brilliant when it comes to writing sharp, sassy and sexy romantic novels!’

—*www.cataromance.com*

‘The amusing opening spins into an emotional and heartfelt story.’

—*RT Book Reviews* on *Hot-Shot Tycoon*

‘I was actually breathless while reading this book... It’s a sensual ride you won’t want to lose the opportunity of reading.’

—*www.thePinkHeartSociety.com* on *Public Affair, Secretly Expecting*

About the Author

HEIDI RICE was born and bred and still lives in London. She has two boys who love to bicker, a wonderful husband who, luckily for everyone, has loads of patience, and a supportive and ever-growing British/French/Irish/American family. As much as Heidi adores ‘the Big Smoke’, she also loves America, and every two years or so she and her best friend leave hubby and kids behind and *Thelma and Louise* it across the States for a couple of weeks (although they always leave out the driving off a cliff bit). She’s been a film buff since her early teens, and a romance junkie for almost as long. She indulged her first love by being a film reviewer for ten years. Then a few years ago she decided to spice up her life by writing romance. Discovering the fantastic sisterhood of romance writers (both published and unpublished) in Britain and America made it a wild and wonderful journey to her first Mills & Boon® novel.

Heidi loves to hear from readers—you can e-mail her at heidi@heidi-rice.com, or visit her website: www.heidi-rice.com

Recent titles by the same author:

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE WILD

ON THE FIRST NIGHT OF CHRISTMAS...

CUPCAKES AND KILLER HEELS

UNFINISHED BUSINESS WITH THE DUKE

PUBLIC AFFAIR, SECRETLY EXPECTING

**Did you know these are also available as eBooks? Visit
www.millsandboon.co.uk**

One Night, So Pregnant! Heidi Rice



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Extra-special thanks to fellow author Libby Mercer,
who helped me make sure Nate sounded
like a proper Yank.

CHAPTER ONE

TESS TREMAINE tapped out the chorus of ‘Like a Virgin’ on the gleaming granite floor of Graystone Enterprises’s thirty-eighth-floor San Francisco reception area and focused on the opaque glass door to Nathaniel Graystone’s inner sanctum.

A lead weight the size of a football sat in the pit of her stomach. The exact same lead football that had sat there more than a decade ago, when she’d been fifteen, sporting gelled magenta hair and a nose ring, and had watched her father’s face go red with anger.

The good news was the purple spikes and the nose ring were gone. Her hair was now her natural honey blonde, currently twisted into a sophisticated chignon. The bad news was Tess Tremaine, wild child, wasn’t as dead and gone as her once dreadful fashion sense.

She might have lost the bad attitude and the bad hair, acquired a decent wardrobe and a whole new layer of sophistication, eventually crossing the Atlantic to pursue a career as one of the most sought-after freelance event planners, but underneath the poise, the professionalism and the designer clothes still lurked that attention-seeking little tart.

Tess crossed her legs, smoothed a shaky palm down the seam of her pencil skirt and started to tap her heel against the granite again—earning a flicker of a frown from Graystone’s perfectly

groomed PA.

The lead football turned into a block of cement as she gazed out of the glass wall to her right at the vertigo-inducing view of the Bay Bridge.

For the first time since that long-ago scene in her father's study, she didn't have a clue what to do next. No amount of tough talk, hard work or careful restyling would erase that one act of insanity at the Galloway after-party six weeks ago. Of course, at the time she'd been emotionally raw, or she never would have fallen for Graystone's focused attention so easily.

Under any normal circumstances she would have been flattered by his interest, but she would have remained dignified and aloof—and completely sober. But that night hadn't been normal circumstances.

Dan had dumped her, after thirteen months of dating, and she hadn't seen it coming. He'd accused her of being frigid. And while that might actually be true—because sex with Dan had been about as exciting as watching wood warp—she'd still been angry and hurt and confused. Surely their sex life wasn't the only thing that mattered? Didn't compatibility and companionship count for anything?

And Dan's timing had been impeccable, because no sooner had he dropped his bombshell, than she'd had to dash off to assist with one of the Bay Area's biggest events of the year.

So she could cut herself some slack there, but not nearly enough.

Maybe she'd been hurt and angry and out of kilter, but that still didn't excuse the two glasses of champagne she'd guzzled on an empty stomach as soon as she'd arrived or the way she'd so quickly become intoxicated with Graystone's industrial-strength testosterone once her hosting duties were over.

She should have kept her eyes and her hands to herself. She should never have flirted with him, she should never have encouraged him, because it had been obvious as soon as he had arrived in his imposing black tuxedo, with his little coterie of yes-men and women, exuding power and authority and a potent danger, that a man like Graystone could eat a frigid party planner like her for breakfast.

But then the reckless little tart of her youth had put in an appearance—and everything she'd worked so hard to bury since that day in her father's office had come fizzing back to life.

Her heel stopped in mid-air as she recalled Graystone hoisting her up against the door of the utility closet behind the Skyline's kitchens as if she weighed nothing at all, and thrusting heavily inside her, filling up places that Dan had never even come close to touching.

Heat welled up and washed through her.

Don't think about that now. You're in enough trouble already.

Yes, the experience had been short and sweaty and far too sexy. So sexy in fact she'd been limp and sated and virtually comatose before she'd come to her senses and shot out of the closet so fast she'd left her knickers behind.

Tess blinked as another residual hum of heat flashed through her memory.

Unfortunately, forgetting Graystone and their brief, but not-brief-enough encounter wasn't going to be that straightforward.

Sweat dampened the collar of her blouse at the thought of seeing Nathaniel Graystone again after the way she'd run out on him.

Don't think about that either.

She tapped harder on the tiles and ignored the pointed glance from the PA. What were the chances he'd even remember her? He'd no doubt been through a long list of easy conquests since they'd hooked up at the Galloway launch. The man had been a sexual dynamo that night.

Anyone with that much energy and enthusiasm—colour scorched her neck—not to mention that much in-depth knowledge of a clitoris, was no amateur.

The tapping cut off as an odd sense of calm and purpose settled over her.

She couldn't let that matter. And she could have all the panic attacks she wanted about seeing him again, but one thing she did know, because she'd learned it in her father's study the day he'd cut her out of his life.

You couldn't run from your mistakes, because they always caught up with you in the end. And whatever Graystone said, she'd deal with it. This wasn't about her. Or not just her. Not any more.

The intercom on the PA's desk buzzed, making the football of cement in Tess's stomach feel as if it were being sucked into a black supernova of guilt.

Switching off the light flashing on the high-tech communication system, the perfectly groomed older woman sent her a passive smile. 'I can ask Mr Graystone if he has time to see you now, Ms Tremaine,' she said, her voice carefully neutral. 'If you'd like to give me a few more details about the purpose of your visit.'

'Right.' Tess paused, her gaze flicking to the frosted glass as she tried to think of what to say. Forcing a smile, she made herself look the woman in the eye. 'Could you tell him I'm one of the people who helped host the Galloway launch he attended on July twentieth?' Hopefully that would be enough of a hint to jog his memory. 'And I need to see him on a personal matter.'

Giving a curt nod, the PA relayed the information into the intercom.

The never-ending pause that followed had tiny beads of sweat popping out on Tess's upper lip. What if he refused to see her altogether? What would she do then?

But just as she started to feel a little giddy, panic colliding with the horrid feeling of vulnerability, a deep, laconic and painfully familiar American accent crackled round the room.

'Send her in, Jenny. And hold my calls.'

'Hi, Tess, this is a surprise.'

The slow smile that spread across Nathaniel Graystone's

features as he walked across the royal-blue carpeting towards her had Tess's heart beating into her throat—and several more intimate areas of her anatomy.

‘A great surprise,’ he added, gesturing towards one of the large leather armchairs arranged around a coffee table.

Tess perched on the soft leather, and tried to even her laboured breathing. She hadn't quite prepared herself for seeing him in the flesh again. Instead of the debonair tuxedo of their closet encounter, a pale blue shirt stretched over broad shoulders. Steel-grey trousers fell in pleats around a lean waist and then hung in razor-sharp creases down long legs. His cropped black hair, which she knew was deceptively soft beneath her clutching fingers, contrasted sharply with those striking sapphire-blue eyes—which twinkled with mischief, as if the two of them shared a naughty secret.

Probably because they did.

‘To what do I owe the pleasure?’ he asked, the frank assessing look he sent her reminding her of the first time his eyes had locked on hers across the crowded bar in the Skyline.

She'd been unable to tear her gaze away then. She was finding it equally tough now. ‘I needed to see you.’

He didn't look surprised by her answer, the easy smile only becoming more assured.

The fine hairs on her nape tingled. Of course he wasn't surprised. No doubt he was used to women chasing him, and flinging themselves at his feet. But the indignation quickly

passed, to be followed by humiliation.

Why wouldn't he think that?

His arrogance on their only night together had been one of the things she had found so irresistible about him, the moment of insight deeply unsettling. She, who had strived for ten years to be the driver of her own destiny, had succumbed far too easily to his dominant, take-charge masculinity, some sexy small talk and a few come-to-bed looks.

He'd made her feel desirable, in a way Dan never had. Dan had never shown anything like the same urgency or dedication when it came to getting into her knickers. No wonder she'd been so susceptible to Graystone that night. It had been a sop to her pathetically fragile ego.

The sensual smile curved into a rakish grin making his harsh features look almost boyish. She wasn't fooled. Her heartbeat careered up another notch.

He propped his tall frame against his desk and folded his arms over his chest, making her uncomfortably aware of pale blue cotton stretching at the seams around his impressive biceps. Then his gaze took a leisurely trip down to her kitten-heeled pumps and back again.

'Let me guess,' he said, his deep voice rumbling up her spine as the corners of his eyes crinkled with amusement. 'You came to get your panties back.'

Tess cleared her throat as her nipples squeezed into hard aching peaks, and hot blood coursed up her neck.

‘Not exactly,’ she said, her voice coming out on a distressingly breathy whisper.

‘Are you sure?’ he teased, sounding very sure.

She lurched out of the chair. ‘Yes... I...’ Panic skittered up her spine and the fog of arousal cleared as she recalled how her whole life had gone into freefall at precisely eight twenty-two a.m. that morning. ‘I didn’t come here for another quickie.’

The leisurely glance that swept down to her bullet-tipped breasts called her a liar. ‘Then how about we try slow and easy?’

Indignation flared, eating away at the supernova of guilt.

‘My apartment’s a few blocks away,’ he continued, without waiting for a reply. ‘While the janitor’s closet was memorable...’ his eyes met hers, the dark arousal in the translucent blue reminding her of the sexually charged moment when he’d grasped her hand and dragged her inside the closet ‘... a bed would work better.’

Temper burned up her throat and took hold of her tongue.

‘I didn’t come here to sleep with you, you arrogant jerk. I came to tell you I took three pregnancy tests this morning.’ The words flew out of her mouth gaining force and velocity. ‘And they were all positive.’

Tess’s tiny spark of satisfaction was very short-lived when instead of looking shocked, or even surprised, at the news, he simply said, ‘Well, that’s one hell of a passion killer.’

Nathaniel Graystone kept a tight rein on his temper, even though keeping the nonchalant smile on his face was making his

cheeks ache. ‘And I suppose now you’re going to tell me the baby’s mine.’

The pleasure at seeing her again had died a quick and painful death.

She’d driven him wild that night, with her light flirtatious touches, her fresh, funny, forthright manner—and a raw, naked passion that had just about blown his head off.

But then she’d left him standing in a closet, still dazed with afterglow, his pants round his ankles and nothing but a pair of torn silk panties and several sleepless nights filled with sweaty erotic dreams to remember her by. He’d been right to be suspicious of the insane chemistry between them. And right not to have called her—although it had taken every ounce of his will power not to pick up the phone in the last six weeks. The whole thing had been a set-up, from start to finish, just like Marlena, just as he’d suspected when she’d run out on him—without even the decency of a goodbye.

‘*Baby?*’ she yelped. ‘It’s not a baby yet—it’s a collection of cells.’

His gaze swept over her. The sheen of distress in her striking green eyes spoke of someone on an emotional knife-edge. Damn, she really was an accomplished little actress.

‘Whatever *it* is,’ he said, because she appeared to have missed the point, ‘I’m not the father.’

She didn’t say anything.

‘Look, sweetheart,’ he said, keeping the smile firmly in place,

‘I wore a condom that night. And we only did it once. And while my sperm might be Olympic swimmers, even they can’t swim through latex.’

‘I know you wore a condom,’ she said. ‘But you obviously didn’t put it on as efficiently as you did everything else that night.’ The tartness of the reply surprised him. He’d expected contrite by now, and maybe some wheedling. Instead, her slender frame stiffened, as if she were getting ready for battle. The flush of colour in her cheeks turned the pale skin a vibrant pink and the flash of temper in her eyes made the green sparkle. He forced himself to ignore the residual hum of arousal.

‘I put the condom on just fine,’ he stated easily as a slow-burning resentment settled low in his gut.

She gave a soft sigh, but the expression in her eyes when they met his again seemed more weary than calculating. He knew it all had to be part of her act, making the strange tightening in his gut kind of annoying.

‘If you say so,’ she said at last, the words barely audible. She gripped the strap of her purse and gave him a stiff little nod. ‘I guess this is goodbye, then, Nathaniel. It was certainly a memorable night.’ The wistful tone shocked him, but not as much as the sight of her slim shoulders rigid with tension as she crossed the room and walked out of the door without a backward glance.

CHAPTER TWO

TESS waited for her jerky breathing to even out as she gazed through the windshield of her ancient car at the kitsch Victorian splendour of her friend Eva's house in Haight Ashbury.

Eva and her husband Nick had taken over the whole building six months ago, after the birth of their son Carmine—or Carmageddon as Nick had renamed him when he'd started teething—and the scaffolding had only gone down this week. But already it looked like the wonderfully eccentric family home Eva and Nick had been aiming for. The wide bay windows glinted in the late August sunshine and seemed to spotlight the light blue trim of the pergola on the top floor. A shameful sense of envy mixed with the misery making Tess's stomach heave.

She flexed her fingers, forcing them to relinquish their death grip on the worn leather cover of the steering wheel and lifted the housewarming gift off the passenger seat. Tess held the package a little too tightly as she climbed out of the Chevy. She didn't bother locking the car. After all, who would steal it?

Tess had spent all her wages in the last year putting together a designer wardrobe any professional events planner could be proud of, but right now looking the part was the least of her worries. She worked on a freelance basis and had some lucrative contracts already for next year, but nothing spectacular. And she'd been living beyond her means. Along with her designer

wardrobe she had recently moved into a new duplex in Parnassus that she adored, but which cost over three thousand dollars a month. She'd known she was stretching her budget at the time, but who cared about a few extra credit-card bills when her career was coasting along nicely?

Her lungs clogged and her stomach churned all the harder. Well, now she cared.

She didn't have any real job security; she had fairly basic healthcare coverage and overheads that would sink her into serious debt if she took a break from work.

She'd have to start hunting for extra work and to do that she would need to look into more reliable transportation—and sell some of her precious clothes online. But even with a better car, what chance did she really have of finding enough work in the middle of a recession to provide for a career break and then two mouths to feed?

She blinked furiously, her eyes stinging.

Don't think about it. Not yet. You don't have to decide right away.

She walked up the front steps and pressed the bell, but the lump of anguish got stuck in her throat as despair overwhelmed her. She'd once thought she would never feel more alone than she had at fifteen, but after her disastrous encounter with Nate Graystone this morning she'd discovered she was wrong.

Please be in, Eva.

She squared her shoulders and tucked the present under her

arm to press the bell again.

Eva had to be in. She was the sweetest, most genuine person Tess had ever met. They'd been casual friends in uni, but since Eva had moved to San Francisco three years ago and married Nick Delisantro, they'd become much closer.

Eva wouldn't judge her, she would sympathise and comfort and help her figure out what to do. Eva ran a successful internet-based genealogy company. Eva was smart and analytical and sensible. It was how she had ended up with such a perfect life. A drop-dead gorgeous husband who adored her and a beautiful little baby boy...

Tess's rambling thoughts skidded to a stop. She didn't think she could stand to see Carmine, not right now. She glanced at her watch. No, no, it would be fine, Carmy would be having his afternoon nap. Eva was a complete stickler about her son's routine.

Tess pushed her shoulders back and let out a shaky sigh when she heard the thud of footsteps. The latch clicked, the door swung open and Tess's gaze landed on baby Carmine's moonlike face, his round cheeks flushed pink and the soft brown curls stuck down on one side of his head.

'Tess! Hi. Oh, my goodness, we didn't have a lunch date, did we? I must have forgotten.'

Tess heard her friend say the words. But all she could see was the perfect little person in Eva's arms. And then Carmine grinned, held up his chubby little arms towards Tess, as he always

did whenever he saw her, and let out a belly laugh.

And the black hole of guilt imploded inside her.

Tess placed the gift on the kitchen counter in a trance as Eva popped Carmine into his baby swing. Her friend wound a dial on the swing and a piped version of something vaguely reminiscent of ‘Lullaby Baby’ tinkled out.

‘Look at him!’ Eva exclaimed as the baby chortled and pumped his arms up and down like a sumo wrestler. ‘Wide awake again after a twenty-minute nap.’ She wagged a finger at him, which made him giggle. ‘Your father is going to have words with you, Buster.’

‘I came to drop this off. But I have to go...’ Tess paused, struggling to think of an excuse as the tears and the nausea welled up at the same time.

Get a grip. Please, get a grip. It's a bundle of cells. Not a baby. It can't be.

But she couldn't seem to feel anything but numb as Eva frowned. ‘Tess, what's the matter? You look shell-shocked.’

Tess dropped onto one of the stools at the kitchen counter, the urge to escape replaced by the desperate need for comfort. For understanding. For an answer that wasn't the one she most feared.

‘I'm pregnant.’ Her hands trembled so she clutched them in her lap.

Eva sat on the stool next to her and settled her hand over both of Tess's. ‘I'd say congratulations, but you don't look much like celebrating. When did this happen?’

‘Six weeks ago. Exactly. The night Dan dumped me.’

‘I see. I guess that’s not the best timing,’ Eva said gently, the sympathy in her voice and the stupid sound of the piped lullaby making emotion close Tess’s throat. ‘Have you told Dan yet? About the baby?’

‘It’s not a baby,’ Tess said automatically, although she already knew that desperate deception had stopped working the minute she’d laid eyes on Carmine. ‘And it’s not Dan’s.’

‘Ah,’ Eva said, but refrained from asking the obvious next question.

‘The afternoon he dumped me, Julie got the flu and asked me to help host an event she’d been organising for Galloway. It was a great opportunity to make some new contacts, so I couldn’t really refuse...’

Stop rambling. Stop justifying. You did what you did. Eva won’t hate you.

‘I was stressed out and I guess still in a state of shock about Dan. And when I got invited to the after-party, this guy hit on me. In a big way. And I hit on him right back.’ She shut her eyes, picturing Nathaniel Graystone’s focused gaze, the melting look that had made her pulse skip, and cursed the shaft of heat that washed through her, even now. ‘He was sexy and gorgeous and so focused on me, I was stupidly flattered.’ She opened her eyes to find Eva staring at her in disbelief. ‘And after two solid hours of flirting and touching and tempting each other—we just sort of went off like firecrackers.’ She paused, gulped in air to push

the last of the words out. 'In a utility cupboard.'

'I see,' Eva said.

'He used protection, but it was all so hot and mad and rushed and...' She threw her hands up. 'Basically, it must have failed. Somehow. Because I didn't get my period and I took three pregnancy tests this morning and they were all positive.' The frantic confession came to a babbled and humiliating halt.

'Okay,' Eva murmured. 'But how can you be absolutely sure it isn't Dan's? Your protection may have failed with him.'

Tess cocked her head to one side. 'Highly unlikely, seeing as the last time we made love was approximately three months ago.'

Eva's lips twisted. 'There's a surprise.'

'Sorry?' Tess said, a little taken aback by the sharp tone. Eva had always liked Dan. Hadn't she?

'Well, you and Dan generated about as much sizzle as a wet flannel.'

Tess didn't know what to say to the matter-of-fact statement. 'Was it that obvious?'

Eva sent her a level look. 'What on earth did you see in him anyway? He bored Nick and I to tears, but we figured he must be a wild man in the sack. Although apparently not.'

'I thought we were well suited,' she mumbled, realising how lame and ridiculous that sounded. What had she been thinking? Sticking with a guy for so long who did absolutely nothing for her, in bed, or out of it? Had she actually been that shallow? That obsessed with appearances? That desperate to have what

she considered a suitable boyfriend? No wonder she'd gone off like a firecracker with Graystone without any encouragement at all. She'd been sex-starved and desperate.

'Hmm.' Eva gave a low hum, her eyebrow lifting in a sceptical frown. 'But not all that well suited in one particular area.'

'Not in any area really,' Tess agreed, ashamed of herself. How could she have spent a whole year dating a guy who didn't mean that much to her?

'Enough about Dan.' Eva leaned forward. 'Tell me about Firecracker Guy? Who is he?'

Tess huffed. 'He's not Firecracker Guy. He's Complete and Utter Disaster Guy. His name's Nate Graystone. And I stupidly went to see him first thing this morning after taking the pregnancy tests, because I thought it was the logical next step...' Tess paused, gulped down the swell of nausea, and finally admitted to herself that was a big fat lie. She hadn't rearranged her appointments for today and hightailed it over to Graystone's offices to tell him about the baby because she thought he needed to know.

When those little blue crosses had appeared, she hadn't been thinking about logic or taking steps. She'd been in a state of shock, and so terrified all she'd really been thinking about was passing the buck—and making this pregnancy Graystone's problem as well as her own.

Eva grasped her hands again. 'Stop it, you're doing the shell-shocked thing again. What did this Nate Graystone say? When

you told him about the baby?’

The word baby echoed in Tess’s head, making her flinch.

‘It wasn’t what you’d call a roaring success.’ Tess lifted up shaking fingers and tried to sound flippant. ‘First he hit on me,’ she said, counting off the injuries she’d suffered that morning and praying for some fortifying anger to make the crippling feeling of inadequacy go away. ‘Then he said the bab...’ She paused. ‘He said it wasn’t his.’

If only she could have been mad at him, instead of simply terrified. The sudden realisation of how pathetic she’d been had the tears she’d been holding back flooding over her lids.

‘Oh, Tess.’ Without a pause, Eva placed an arm round her shoulders and gave her a hard hug. ‘Don’t cry. This is not that bad.’

‘How could it be any worse?’ Tess said, the choking sobs lodging in her throat. ‘I got dumped by the most boring man in the universe. I’m pregnant by a guy who I don’t know and who thinks I’m a liar. I don’t have a stable job. Or decent health insurance. I just moved into a flat that costs three thousand two hundred dollars a month.’ She took a deep breath and finally said the thing that she had feared the most. ‘All of which means I should have an abortion. But just the thought of it makes me feel...’ she gulped in air, the hideousness of her situation assailing her for the first time ‘... that I’ve failed. That I’m a stupid, terrible, selfish...’ The sobs finally burst out of her mouth, the warmth of Eva’s arms only making her feel like more of a fraud. She didn’t deserve

Eva's sympathy. She didn't deserve anyone's sympathy.

'Shh.'

At long last the sobs eased off, and Eva shifted back. The dampness in her friend's eyes almost set Tess off again, but she refused to give in to the pity party.

'The first thing you need to ask yourself is do you want to have an abortion?' Eva asked softly.

'I don't think so,' Tess answered instinctively. The tears spilled over again. 'I've been trying really hard to pretend it's not a baby. Not yet. But the minute I knew, I felt...' she paused, lifted tear-soaked eyes to her friend '... different somehow. Connected. But I'm not sure I have any other options,' she said dully. The one thing she couldn't be now was insane. She'd been insane enough already.

Eva glanced at her son, who was happily bouncing in his swing like a gymnast going for Olympic gold. And then looked back at her, the smile in her eyes oddly peaceful. 'If you want the baby, you should have it. Everything else is just logistics.'

Tess looked up at Eva, her heart shattering. If only it were that simple. 'I can't have it.' But even as she finally said the words, she knew that it wasn't an It any more, however hard she'd tried to make it one. It was a baby. It was her baby. And the fear of what she would have to do rose up her throat and wrapped its claws round her neck.

'Yes, you can, Tess,' said Eva gently. 'This is your panic talking. You need to stop and think. You're going to have to

change your life, but all we're talking about here is practicalities. You've got seven months to sort your life out before it arrives. And don't forget you happen to be a master at planning for special events.'

The seconds ticked by as Tess struggled not to hope. 'That is true.'

Eva took her hands, squeezed tight. 'You don't have to make the decision right away. But it is an option. One you should consider properly.'

Tess took a shuddering breath and placed her palm on her stomach, the feeling of connection that she'd tried to deny all morning surging back full force. 'I do want to have it.' Just being able to admit the truth out loud made the nausea settle. 'But it's not just the practicalities, the lifestyle changes I'll have to make.' That had just been a convenient excuse really, she could see that now. 'How do I know I'll be any good at it? Being a mother, I mean?'

Eva sighed. 'You don't. No one does. Not until they've had kids. Everyone has to learn parenthood on the job.' A smile lit up her features. 'It's exciting and terrifying and exhausting and never, ever easy, but that's what makes it the grandest adventure of your life.'

'B-but you're so good at it. Look at Carmy,' Tess stammered. 'You're a natural. I'm not sure I am.' Her own mother had died so long ago she could barely remember her. And her father had hardly filled the gap.

‘That’s sweet, Tess, but you have no idea how many mistakes Nick and I have made with Carmine. Luckily for us, he’s surprisingly forgiving of all our faults. All you can really promise a child is that you’ll love them. And that you’ll do the best you can. You’ll figure out the rest. You’re not stupid.’ Her pure blue eyes brightened with enthusiasm. ‘And we’ll help. You have friends. A support network and there’s always the possibility the father will want to help when he’s got used to the—’

‘He won’t,’ Tess interrupted. And no way would she ask him again.

Whatever silly fantasies she might have had about Graystone sharing some of the burden had been knocked out of her this morning. And she wasn’t going to resurrect them, not now she knew that the man lurking beneath that sexy and charismatic exterior was as cold and judgemental as her own father. She hardly needed another one of those in her life.

If she was going to have this baby, she would be doing it solo. ‘Okay, let’s put the question of the father aside for now,’ Eva said, carefully. ‘The important thing is that you do what feels right, or you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.’

A lone tear trickled down Tess’s cheek, her palm settling again on the belly she jogged eight miles every morning to keep flat and toned.

She let her head drop back and blinked at Eva’s newly painted ceiling, realising that her flat belly would be history soon. And it didn’t bother her a bit. Tears leaked out of the corners of her

eyes as the giddy swell of excitement thumped at her chest. ‘I’m actually going to be a mummy,’ she whispered.

Eva covered Tess’s hand and laughed. ‘Welcome to the grand adventure, Mummy.’

CHAPTER THREE

‘ZANE, thanks for coming.’ Nate got up from the booth and pressed his hand to his best friend’s shoulder. ‘How was the drive up?’

‘Sweet.’ Zane Montoya flashed his trademark grin and Nate was immediately thrown back in time to their childhood, when that grin had only ever meant one thing—trouble. ‘I opened the Sixty-Seven up on 101 and she took those curves like a pro.’ Zane relaxed into the booth, his long legs stretching under the table.

Nate signalled the waitress to bring two Mexican beers before joining his friend in the comforting darkness. He’d wanted privacy for this chat, and luckily Murphy’s, the small neighbourhood bar a block from his offices, offered just that.

‘The Sixty-Seven?’

‘My latest acquisition,’ Zane replied, the face that had seduced a thousand women taking on a boyish glow of enthusiasm. ‘Sixty-Seven Mustang, soft top, Cobra Jet V8 engine, reconditioned gearbox and white-wall tyres.’

Nate gave a low whistle. ‘Where did you pick that up?’

‘Little old lady in Pasadena.’ Settling into the booth, Zane rested one arm across the back of it. ‘Who drove a mighty hard bargain. It needed a heck of a lot of work after spending forty years gathering dust in her garage.’

Nate doubted Zane minded a bit, as fooling around with

cars and engines had been his passion since high school. That and chasing women—of every size, age, shape and religious persuasion.

The waitress arrived and placed their order on the table, gazing dreamily at Zane, then letting out a flirtatious giggle when he saluted her with his bottle.

Nate took a slow lug of the icy beer as the girl sauntered off, swinging her hips for all she was worth, and remembered that Zane had never had to chase any woman very far, because they all wanted to be caught. Usually sooner rather than later.

‘So what’s on your mind, Kemosabe?’ Zane asked, his gaze finally leaving the waitress’s butt as she disappeared into the crowd round the bar.

Nate cleared his throat and placed his beer bottle back on the table. ‘Remember that hook-up I told you about? A month or so ago?’

‘The British girl?’ Zane supplied. ‘Who you did in a janitor’s closet.’ Zane gave a rough laugh as Nate felt the flush burn the back of his neck.

‘Yeah, that girl.’ What had he been thinking mentioning it to Zane? His friend would be getting mileage out of it for the rest of their natural days. But at the time he’d been feeling raw and confused at the way she’d disappeared so abruptly—and he’d covered up the need for his friend’s input by boasting about it. Right now, though, he needed a lot more than just Zane’s advice.

‘She came to see me, last week.’ He paused, the niggling

suspicion that had been digging away at the back of his mind ever since their meeting making him feel uneasy. 'She says she's pregnant.'

Zane's eyebrows rose a fraction and his smile died. 'That's a complication.'

'It's not mine,' Nate replied flatly, but the certainty he'd had a week ago failed to materialise. Why couldn't he get that look of anguish in her face out of his head? Why hadn't she argued? Why hadn't she even attempted to persuade him? It didn't add up.

'You sure about that?' Zane asked.

Nate thrust a hand through his hair, not liking the flat note in Zane's voice. 'I used a condom.'

'Condoms fail,' Zane replied, placing his beer down on the table with steely calm. 'If a woman I slept with got knocked up, I'd want to know for sure it wasn't mine.'

Nate realised he should have expected this response. Had probably wanted it on some level. The circumstances of Zane's birth and his childhood meant that he took a hard line when it came to fathering children without taking responsibility. And who could blame him?

'Which is where you come in,' Nate replied. 'I want you to get one of your guys to check it out. Find out if she's actually pregnant. And whether I'm the father or not. I'll pay the going rate.'

'I don't think so.'

'What? Why not?' Nate growled, annoyed. He might have

expected this reaction, but getting Zane involved was the obvious solution.

Zane owned and ran the most prestigious private detective agency on the West Coast. Based in a huge glass office overlooking Big Sur, Montoya Investigations had a well-earned reputation for being classy, efficient, discreet and painstakingly thorough. And Graystone Enterprises had helped with the start-up finance four years ago, right after Zane had quit the LAPD. They were friends. Surely that should stand for something?

He and Zane had a history. They had grown up together in the huge coastal mansion his great-grandfather had built. They were as good as brothers. The familiar agony flickered through his consciousness as he ruthlessly cut off the wayward thought. Right now, he needed a friend, damn it, not another critic.

Zane scowled, not looking very friendly. 'Montoya doesn't take that kind of domestic work if we can help it. And getting your girlfriend investigated is a bit cold, don't you think?'

Nate felt the headache that had been brewing most of the week pound against his temple. 'She's not my girlfriend,' he clarified. But the accusation still stung.

He wasn't cold. He was cautious. He'd been burned once before. No way in hell was he going to get burned again.

'And this isn't just dirty laundry,' he snapped back. 'This is about whether Tess Tremaine is telling the truth or not.'

He wanted a conclusive answer. Proof that she had been lying to him. Then he could stop thinking about the reproach in her

eyes. What was so wrong about that?

‘Damn it, Nate, if you want to know the truth, you need to get out of your ivory tower and go have a conversation with the woman, like any regular guy.’

Nate flinched, the accusation slicing right through his composure and his control. ‘I’m not my father.’ He rubbed a clammy palm on the denim of his jeans, acknowledged the vicious stab of guilt at the mention of the man they both despised.

Zane’s face hardened, his crystal blue eyes glittering with enmity in the shadowy booth. ‘Yeah?’ He ground out the single word, then reached into his back pocket, pulled out his wallet, and flicked a ten-dollar bill on the table.

Nate’s fingers fisted under the table. ‘What the hell makes you think she’d tell me the truth anyway?’ he said, still determined to get Zane on side. Tess Tremaine had an unpredictable effect on him that he wasn’t sure he could control. She’d proved that twice already. And until he knew he could control it, he didn’t want to go anywhere near the woman.

Zane stood, his eyes softening. ‘Look, man, not every woman’s Marlena.’

Nate stiffened.

Zane tucked his hands into his back pockets. ‘And you’re not your old man. I wouldn’t give a damn about you if you were.’ Zane’s voice sobered. ‘But that’s exactly why you’ve gotta clean up your own mess. You don’t need a private investigator. Go talk to her. It’s that simple.’ He cursed under his breath. ‘If you’re still

stuck after you've spoken to her, I'll make a few calls. But you'll need a DNA test to find out for sure if you're the father. I'm a detective, not a doctor.' A mocking smile edged the corners of his mouth. 'Then again, you could always find a convenient closet and seduce the truth out of her.'

'Good thinking, Batman,' Nate muttered, annoyed by the familiar surge of heat. 'That's what got me into this fix in the first place, remember.'

'Oh, yeah,' Zane drawled before taking one last slug of his beer. 'Good luck, Kemosabe—and stay the hell away from janitors' closets.'

Nate watched as his friend sauntered over to the waitress's station and whispered something into the young woman's ear. The girl laughed flirtatiously and gave Zane a playful punch on the arm, then gazed dreamily at his retreating back as he strolled out of the door.

The band around Nate's temples tightened into a vice.

Sure it was simple for Zane. Zane understood women as well as any mortal man could. He actually seemed to enjoy uncovering those dark secrets that most men couldn't even begin to fathom.

But even a guy like Zane would have trouble handling someone as unpredictable as Tess Tremaine.

CHAPTER FOUR

NATE clicked on his smart phone to double-check the address Zane had texted as he sat in his Jeep on the tree-lined street in Parnassus. Then stared at the duplex opposite.

Four-Five-Six Carl, Apartment Two. The address listed on a Miss Theresa Tremaine's driver's licence.

He contemplated the building's pale yellow frontage, the row of buzzers on the door panel, and the shutters covering the second-floor window. Then glanced down the street at the Japanese café on the corner.

This was nuts. How could he possibly have fathered a child with someone whose apartment he'd never even been inside of?

Because you've been inside her, you dumbass.

He shifted in his seat, disconcerted by the inevitable swell of heat that accompanied the thought. The possibility she had been telling the truth might be slight, but it was there.

She hadn't contacted him since that one brief meeting in his office, which kind of confirmed his suspicions. She'd been there to ask him for money and, when she'd realised he wasn't playing ball, she'd decided not to push her luck.

But that image of her face, the distress in her eyes, still refused to go away, so he'd speak to her one last time—to make sure.

He straightened, catching sight of the slim young woman who jogged round the corner and waved to someone in the

café. Baggy sweats hung low on her hips, allowing a strip of taut creamy skin to peak beneath the tank top that hugged her breasts. She moved with an easy comfortable grace as she leapt up the steps of the apartment block and then checked what he guessed had to be a pedometer on her wrist. Her dark blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail, her bangs covered by a wide purple sweatband, and her face cast into shadow by the branch of an overhanging maple tree, but recognition burned through his system and the swell of heat started to pound.

She went through a series of stretches as he recalled the feel of slender, sleekly muscled thighs wrapped round his waist. She stopped to key in a door code, then shouldered open the apartment door with a hard thud. The sound reminded him of the soft thud as her back had hit the locked door of the janitor's closet.

He gave his head a swift shake, forcing himself back to reality. Grabbing the keys from the ignition, he jumped out of the car and jogged across the street.

There were going to be no more closet interludes for him and Tess Tremaine. Letting his libido torpedo his common sense once had been enough. What he needed now was to concentrate on his goal. No matter how damn sexy she was.

‘Tess,’ he shouted. ‘Wait up.’

She swung round as he took the steps two at a time to join her on the stoop.

The sheen of sweat glowing on her cleavage above the scooped

neck of her tank top drew his eyes and brought with it another hot jolt of memory.

‘What do *you* want?’ she snapped.

His gaze lifted to her face, and he had the uncomfortable thought that even without a lick of make-up on, and the wisps of hair framing her face matted with sweat from her morning run, she had to be the most extraordinarily beautiful woman he’d ever laid eyes on. Her impossibly high cheekbones and those sultry green eyes and full kissable lips were only accentuated by the rosy flush of exertion on her cheeks.

He cleared his throat. ‘I want to talk to you,’ he managed at last.

The sultry green flashed molten fire and her bee-stung lips pursed into a thin line. ‘Well, I don’t want to talk to you,’ she shot back, slapping a hand on her hip. The antagonistic stance made her full breasts flatten against the thin cotton of the tank top and his eyes nearly bugged right out of his head. Had her breasts got a size larger in the last ten days?

‘Now go away.’

The hurled words startled him and she was almost in the door before he managed to claw his mind back out of his pants. He wedged his palm against the door just in the nick of time.

She shoved her shoulder against it, so he leaned in harder. She was tall, the top of her head almost level with his chin as she struggled to close the door, but she couldn’t weigh more than a hundred pounds. He waited patiently, easily holding the door

ajar.

‘Either we talk out here, and let the whole neighbourhood know our business, or we talk in your apartment, and keep this private,’ he said, his voice hoarse as he kept his gaze riveted to her flushed angry face, and off that mind-boggling cleavage. ‘Your choice.’

‘Oh, for Pete’s sake!’ she muttered, but finally surrendered the door. ‘Fine. Come in.’ She stomped off up the stairs, pointedly turning her back on him. ‘You’ve already ruined my morning.’

He followed her up the stairs, and judiciously kept his gaze off her moist cleavage as she yanked on a thin gold chain round her neck, and lifted out a key. She opened the apartment door on the second floor, leaving him to grab it before it shut in his face as she waltzed inside. He took in the light, airy and compact apartment, glad that her attitude had changed since their last meeting. Hostility was a lot easier to handle than fake fragility.

Hardwood flooring complemented the plain white walls of the living room, but apart from a stack of boxes on the floor there wasn’t a single piece of furniture in the whole room. He heard the sound of running water, then looked across to see her walk out of the galley kitchen, which was also bare except for another large box resting on the countertop.

She took a deep swallow of the water, then lifted her tank top to wipe her face. He ignored the throb of heat at the quick glimpse of a white cotton sports bra, and the smooth translucent skin stretched taut across her narrow waist.

Strike one to him: there was no visible sign of a baby there. Her belly was as flat as he remembered it. Plus what sort of woman went jogging when they were pregnant? His spirits lifted a little.

‘What could we possibly have to talk about?’ she said as her tank dropped back into place covering up that incriminatingly flat belly. ‘I think we covered just about everything the last time we met, don’t you?’

Despite being hacked off by her snippy tone, and the instant effect she had on his libido, he held off launching into his newest suspicion about her condition. One of them was going to have to be a grown-up about this. And it looked as if that person would have to be him.

‘Where’s your furniture?’ he asked, keeping his tone admirably civil.

‘I’m just about to move out, not that it’s any of your business,’ she said in a sing-song voice that was obviously meant to be a dig. She straightened away from the door frame and rested a palm on her hip, the stance doing that weird optical illusion thing to her breasts again. ‘And by the way, how did you get my address?’

‘You can lose the hostility,’ he said, losing his own civility as the heat resolutely refused to die. ‘If you didn’t want to have anything to do with me, you wouldn’t have contacted me last week.’

Tess glared at the man standing in the centre of her empty living room—his imposing build filling up most of the available

space and taking up all the oxygen too. She'd hardly pushed herself this morning, settling on a very leisurely four-mile run, so why the heck couldn't she breathe?

'That was then.' She glared harder. 'This is now, and I don't want to have anything to do with you any more.'

'Tough,' he countered, actually having the gall to sound self-righteous. 'Because I want to talk to you.'

'Oh, really?' She placed a finger on her chin. 'I wonder why? Have you come to accuse me of lying again?'

The crease on his brow became a fissure. 'I never accused you of anything.' The statement was clear, precise and so smug it made her want to slap him. Men like him never even thought to apologise for their actions.

'Terrific, well, I'm glad we got that settled.' She waved her hand dismissively. 'You can go now.' She walked back into the kitchenette, and concentrated on keeping her glare in place.

She heard him step into the kitchenette behind her and turned, more than a little disconcerted to find him within a foot of her. She plopped the glass on the counter, the narrow space way too vivid a reminder of the close confines of a certain utility cupboard.

'If you insist on staying, why don't you tell me what you want to talk about?' she asked, annoyed that he was doing that oxygen-sucking thing again and all she could smell was the piney scent of his soap, which had to be the reason for her breathing difficulties. 'That way we can get it over with and never have to lay eyes on

each other again.'

Which was what she wanted. Fervently.

'*If* you were really pregnant with my child, what I want to talk about would be pretty damn obvious.' His gaze raked over her—and her sweaty running gear became a cast-iron corset, pressing into her breasts.

If.

The word was loaded with as much doubt and accusation as she remembered from his office over a week ago. But instead of leaving her feeling shocked and vulnerable, this time all his low opinion did was make her temper ignite. She concentrated on the flare of anger, and tried to ignore the tightening around her ribcage.

'All right, then.' She crossed her arms, annoyed when her swollen breasts began to throb under his gaze for no apparent reasons. '*If* you're so convinced I'm *not* pregnant with your child, what exactly are you doing here?'

Before she could react, she saw the sheen of lust dilate his pupils and his hand clasped the back of her neck. Her arms released instinctively as he pulled her flush against him, his lips millimetres from hers, her heavy breasts not just throbbing now, but aching. She arched into him instinctively, pressing the swollen tips against the solid wall of his chest like a hungry cat.

'You know what I'm doing here,' he growled, the words guttural with desperation. 'It's the same reason you let me into the apartment. I can't get you out of my head.'

And then his lips were on hers. And all pretence of sense, or even sensibility, burned away in a fireball of need.

Her fingers sank into the glossy strands of hair at the base of his skull, massaged his scalp as he devoured her mouth, bit into her lower lip. She thrust her tongue into the hot recesses of his mouth, kissing him back with an instinctive need to taste, to take, to torture him the way he was torturing her.

He dragged his mouth away. His harsh breathing rasping against her ear as he fumbled for her running vest, yanked it over her head, then pressed his palms against her sports bra, lifting the weight of her heavy breasts. Her thin cry of need reverberated in her ears.

‘How can I still want you this much?’ he groaned, his words echoing her thoughts.

He released the hook on her bra and scooped up her tender flesh with his rough palms. Then his mouth—hot and wet—closed over the straining nipple. He suckled hard then transferred to the other nipple, tugged on the newly sensitive peak and made a pistol shot of need explode inside her.

She sucked in a shuddering breath, sobbed as he continued to torment first one breast then the other, and the firestorm rushed towards her. She screamed, the clench and rush of fulfilment sudden and shockingly intense.

‘Did you just come?’

All she could manage was a weak nod, as stunned by the staggering speed and intensity of her orgasm as he was.

His brows rose up his forehead then he swore, grasping her hips and lifting her easily onto the countertop. She clung to him, her body limp, sated, despite the pressure now burning like an inferno between her thighs. The Formica felt cold on her bottom as he yanked down her sweats, pulled them off and ripped the purple silk of her knickers. She listened in a trance to the sound of clothing being struggled out of, ripping foil, the ragged pants of their breathing.

And then he was there, huge and solid, the blunt head of his erection probing her entrance.

He stopped abruptly, his chest heaving as the deep blue gaze connected with hers. 'I want to be inside you.'

She watched his jaw clench, rigid with the effort to hold back, and somewhere her dazed mind registered that he was asking her for permission before he took that final plunge. She lifted her arms around his neck, wrapped her legs around his hips and pressed her burning centre against the brutal pressure, letting instinct take over and damning the consequences.

'Don't stop,' she demanded.

He groaned, gripped her bottom and impaled her in one glorious, all-consuming stroke. He pulled out briefly, then thrust back, harder, faster and further—filling every part of her. His fingers dug into her buttocks, anchoring her for the brutal possession, his movements not smooth or controlled, but basic, elemental, just like their first time. He adjusted her hips, his pelvis caressing her swollen clitoris with each powerful inward

thrust, and the pleasure built in an unstoppable rush, rolling through her. Forcing her up, dragging her back, and hurling her over again.

She sobbed through that last brutal release and crashed past the final barrier as his feral shout of fulfilment followed her over the edge.

CHAPTER FIVE

PLEASE let it have been an erotic dream...

TESS squeezed her eyes shut and prayed as she walked down the hallway of her apartment, drying her damp hair after a desperate attempt to rinse off the scent of sex and insanity in the apartment's power shower.

'I made coffee. All I could find was decaff.'

Her gaze darted to the kitchenette at the husky comment, and the towel flopped onto her shoulders. The muscles in her spine tensed at the sight of the man standing by the counter with a mug of coffee at his lips.

Fabulous.

This was no dream. It was a nightmare. She really had made love to Nate Graystone like a sex-starved rabbit, twenty minutes ago.

Apart from the two undone buttons at the top of his pristine white shirt, and the furrows in his thick black hair, he didn't look like a man who had recently been ravaged by a nymphomaniac.

Unfortunately, she knew better.

She resisted the urge to groan. And let go of the fervent prayer that he might have taken the hint when she shot off to the shower, and miraculously vanished.

'Decaff is all I have.' She avoided his eyes, deciding that the post-coital politeness was as unbearable as the antagonism that

had preceded it.

‘I hope black works, because I couldn’t find cream either,’ he said, handing her a cup.

‘Black’s fine.’ She leant over the counter to take the mug he must have pulled out of her packing case, careful not to step back into the kitchenette with him.

Best not to get too close to him again. The man had some weird chemical effect on her self-control that appeared to be exacerbated by her pregnancy—how else could she have allowed this to happen? Again.

‘I’m moving out this afternoon. Hence the empty fridge,’ she said, ignoring his steady, concentrated gaze as she skirted round the countertop and retreated back into the living area.

She heard his footsteps on the wooden flooring as he took the hint this time and followed her into the larger space.

‘Listen, Tess.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Despite how it looks, I didn’t come here to...’ She turned when he hesitated, surprised to see the dull flush on his cheeks beneath his tan.

Some of the tension in her shoulder blades eased at the thought that he was as confused by their insane behaviour as she was.

‘To boff me senseless on my kitchen counter,’ she finished for him.

He looked taken aback for a moment, then huffed out a laugh. ‘That’s one way of putting it.’

He sipped his coffee, watching her intently over the rim as if he were trying to gauge her mood. ‘I seem to have serious control

problems when it comes to you and confined spaces.'

Despite the flutter of panic still buzzing about in her belly, she smiled. 'Ditto.'

'You're not angry?' he asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

'Why would I be angry? You gave me the choice and I distinctly remember giving you my whole-hearted permission.'

He chuckled, his eyes glittering with amusement.

'Although I think next time you give a girl a choice,' she added playfully, hoping humour would skim over the awkwardness, 'don't wait until the moment of penetration. It might make your offer seem a little disingenuous.'

He stepped forward. 'Point taken.'

'And knicker-ripping is sort of frowned on too. Those happened to be Indian silk.'

'I ripped your panties?'

'Yes, you did, I have the torn shreds to prove it. By the way that's two pairs you owe me now.'

The lazy smile softened his features and reminded her painfully of the reckless, devil-may-care charmer who had seduced her so easily nearly two months before. 'Don't worry, I'm good for them.' Then he reached out and touched her cheek.

Tess jerked her head away from the tender stroke, disturbed by the clutch in her heart and the awareness shimmering across her cheekbone.

'No touching, Nate,' she said, holding onto the shiver of longing when his hand dropped to his side. 'Twice was enough,

don't you think?"

Even for a raving nymphomaniac.

The smile died on his lips—but she refused to regret it.

Their latest chemical explosion was only going to complicate an already untenable situation. She'd made a commitment to have her baby.

She'd signed up with Eva's obstetrician and had her first appointment four days ago. She'd bought a stack of books on pregnancy and childbirth, and had been on the phone every morning to Eva to debate her ballooning bust size and the slight queasiness that contrary to everyone else she'd ever heard of only affected her in the afternoon. And she'd been to the pharmacy to stock up on enough pregnancy vitamins to fell a rhinoceros. She'd even lined up interviews with a series of hospitality firms and started putting together a killer portfolio of her recent events to wow their socks off if she got an interview.

And after a week of careful planning, and getting her life—her new life—into some semblance of order, she was convinced that she'd made the right decision. But it was her choice, and her baby, and she wanted to keep it that way. She wasn't going to make the mistake of trying to drag Nate Graystone into that equation again, just because he had some spurious biological connection to her child.

Clearly, spending over a year dating a man who had the sex drive of a sloth had made her uniquely susceptible to a man with the libido of a rampant tiger, but she wasn't going to give in to

her hormones—or him—again.

She folded her arms over her waist and dampened the silly little blip in her heart rate as his gaze intensified. Let him think what he wanted. She needed to get over her reaction to this man. And fast. And flirting with him probably wasn't the best way to go about it.

‘So what exactly did you come here for?’ she murmured when he didn't say anything.

Suspicion shadowed his eyes.

‘I came to find out if you are really pregnant and if the child's definitely mine.’

There was that *if* again, she thought resentfully. But she held onto her temper this time, determined not to say anything she would probably end up regretting.

She'd foolishly had monkey sex with Nate Graystone twice now, but a chemical reaction was not a relationship. He'd rejected her once and he'd rejected her child too—she wasn't going to leave herself open to more of the same.

‘Why the sudden change of heart?’ she asked evasively. ‘You seemed fairly convinced I was a lying tart the last time we met.’

His brow creased, and the familiar cynicism flickered across his face. ‘I never said that.’

She put the coffee mug down. ‘I told you I was pregnant. You told me it wasn't yours. What part of that didn't I understand?’

‘I overreacted,’ he replied curtly.

‘That's quite an understatement,’ she said. ‘But it still doesn't

answer my question. What made you change your mind and decide I might not be lying after all?"

'I never said you were lying.' The crease on his brow became a fissure. 'Are you pregnant or not? And if you are, how sure are you the child is mine?'

Tess pushed her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. Did he really believe that the truth was all that mattered? That whether or not he was the father made up for the flippant response, the cold dismissal?

'How would you react? If I told you that I am pregnant and the child's definitely yours?'

'I don't know. Is that what you are telling me?' he asked, his voice rising.

It was her turn to frown. 'What do you mean, you don't know?'

'I mean, I don't know. I haven't thought that far ahead. Now give me a straight answer, damn it.'

Her heart sank at his curt, frustrated tone and what it meant. He didn't feel anything for this child. He was simply here out of some warped sense of duty. She'd given him a straight answer ten days ago and he hadn't wanted to hear it then. And she doubted he wanted to hear it now.

If her child asked one day about its biological father, she could contact Nate again. But right here, right now, he didn't want to be involved. And she didn't want him there, if he didn't want to be there, it was as simple as that, because a child could always tell if its father didn't want it. She ought to know.

‘There isn’t a baby any more—is that straight enough for you?’

She’d expected him to look relieved, but instead he looked momentarily stunned. ‘Any more? Did you have an abortion?’

‘No,’ she said instinctively, and a little too hastily. ‘No, I...’ She struggled to regroup and get the lie back on track. ‘The test was faulty.’

‘But you took three tests? How could they all be faulty?’

When had she told him that? She swallowed, keeping her face as blank as possible—lying had never been one of her strong suits. ‘They weren’t faulty exactly. It’s called a false positive.’

‘I see,’ he said, the words loaded with scepticism. ‘So you’re definitely not pregnant? And you never were?’

‘No, I’m...’ The lie got stuck somewhere around her larynx, she gave a little cough, to force it out. ‘No, I’m definitely not pregnant. So you can leave now, and forget about me.’

He held her gaze, studying her with an intensity that made her want to squirm, then his focus dipped deliberately and zeroed in on her cleavage. Her breasts chose that precise moment to strain against the fabric of her T-shirt. She pulled her hands out of her pockets and tightened her arms across her chest, wishing she’d put on something looser, and a lot less revealing.

But as the seconds ticked past the irony of the situation hit her. First he didn’t believe her when she told him she *was* pregnant. And now he didn’t believe her when she said she *wasn’t*.

She might not know much about this guy, but one thing was for sure: he had some serious trust issues with women. He sure

as hell had a trust issue with her.

And all right, he'd be correct in assuming she was lying now. But she was only doing it for the benefit of her baby. And for goodness' sake, she was doing him a favour, letting him off a hook he'd made it abundantly clear he didn't relish being caught on.

At long last he lifted his head. 'Whatever happens, I won't forget you, Tess.' A flush climbed up her neck at his gruff words. 'You're kind of unforgettable.'

She tried to ignore the inappropriate pulse of heat, but then he cradled her cheek and brushed his thumb over her bottom lip and she had to force herself to shift away from his tantalising touch.

He walked to the door, and sent her one last penetrating look over his shoulder. As the door closed behind him she covered her belly with her palms, surprised to feel her knees shaking slightly.

Don't be idiotic—you've done the only smart thing.

She had tons to concentrate on in the next few months, like having a healthy pregnancy, finding secure employment with better healthcare benefits and locating a much cheaper apartment before she outstayed her welcome with Nick and Eva.

A man who had her turning into an insatiable sex maniac every time she so much as caught a whiff of his scent would only help concentrate her into an emotional and physical wreck.

Nate settled in the driver's seat of the Jeep, tugged the smart phone out of the back pocket of his trousers and keyed the words 'false positive pregnancy test' into the Internet browser.

After scouring the relevant web pages, he then typed the words ‘pregnancy early signs’ into the search engine. Five minutes later, he switched the app off and tilted his head back against the seat, frustration making the sinews in his neck hurt.

What the hell had he been thinking having sex with her again?

He’d known it was a mistake, the second he’d touched the soft skin of her nape and slanted his lips across hers, but her gasp of surrender had sent the arrow of need soaring straight into his groin.

Tess Tremaine did something to him, something that sliced through all his self-control, until he was acting on autopilot, feeling instead of thinking, wanting instead of weighing up. And running solely on the endorphin rush of spectacular sex.

He adjusted his pants, discomfited by the memory of how his control had snapped so suddenly. One minute they’d been sniping at each other and the next they’d been going for it on her kitchen counter.

He rubbed his hands down his face, the frustration now warring with embarrassment and disbelief.

Get over it, Graystone.

He eased his head off the seat and stared down the street. Getting worked up about what an ass he’d been was getting him nowhere. This wasn’t about him, it wasn’t even about the sex they’d had, this was about Tess and her complete inability to give him a straight answer about anything. She’d lied about not being pregnant, he was sure of it. Because however volatile

and contradictory and confusing and downright intoxicating the woman was, one thing was for absolute sure: unlike Marlena, she couldn't lie worth a damn.

And he had a bad feeling he already knew the reason why she'd lied.

He glanced up at her block, curious now at the thought of the empty apartment and all those packing boxes. Where exactly was she moving to? Didn't he have a right to know that? If he was the father of her child?

The picture of a child—his child—rose unbidden in his mind. He rubbed his palm against the tightening in his chest, swallowed down the tightening in his throat. What if she was planning to head back to Britain?

Picking his phone up, he stabbed in Walter Jensen's office number.

He didn't want to think about the baby. And he wasn't going to, not until he absolutely had to. But he was through playing nice with Tess Tremaine. She was going to give him the truth and if that meant getting his attorney involved—and staying the hell away from confined spaces—so be it.

CHAPTER SIX

‘NATHANIEL, do you have any idea how complex the laws governing fathers’ rights are?’ Walter Jensen rested his forearms on his large maple-wood desk and sent Nate a look he’d hated ever since he had been twelve years old, and the family lawyer had explained to him in calm, measured tones that taking his father’s car for a joyride and getting picked up by the cops was not the smartest thing he’d ever done.

‘Any kind of court action could potentially take years.’ Walter paused to take a breath, his gruff paternal tone pulling Nate back into one of the lowest periods of his life. ‘And you don’t even know for sure that this baby is yours. Or even if it actually exists.’

Nate stood, the anger that had built overnight coursing back up his spine.

‘She lied to me about the pregnancy. And I don’t know where she’s living. I don’t care what my rights are, but I want the truth. I can’t just let this go. You know I can’t.’

Knowledge flashed in Walter’s pale eyes, the knowledge that had always remained unspoken between the two of them. The bitter taste of regret curdled Nate’s insides. Even in his sixties, Walter had a brilliant legal mind, sharp, insightful and analytical, and more importantly he was a good man. But Nate had never been able to trust him completely, because, like most of the adults he had known growing up, Walter had made a living

keeping his father's dirty little secrets safe.

‘Okay, calm down,’ Walter said, lifting his hands in a quelling motion.

Nate dropped back into his chair, embarrassed to realise he’d raised his voice.

‘This is what I suggest,’ Walter continued in the cool, dispassionate tones of a man well used to talking people down off an emotional ledge. ‘We ask Miss Tremaine in here, and we negotiate. If you’re willing to offer her a generous subsidy to take care of all her living expenses until the baby’s born—’

‘I am...’ Nate cut in. He wanted this settled once and for all. He wanted Tess to cooperate, to be straight with him and he’d pay whatever he had to to achieve that. But most of all he wanted the hideous suspicion that had been torturing him most of the night—that he had always been his father’s son after all—to go the hell away.

Walter glanced up from the papers on his desk, sending him a level look. ‘Then I’m sure she’ll listen to reason.’

Knowing how contrary Tess Tremaine had been already, Nate wasn’t betting on it, but he nodded anyway. ‘Great, when can we do it? I don’t want this messing with my head any longer.’

He still hadn’t quite figured out what he was going to do when he knew the truth for sure, but once he had the ‘Tess Factor’ under some semblance of control, he would take the necessary steps to ensure he did what he had to do. If the child was his, he would provide for it. And acknowledge it. That much was non-

negotiable.

Walter flicked through the large leatherbound planner on his desk. 'I'll have my office contact her and see if we can set something up this week. If the baby does turn out to be yours, one thing you'll want to do is start establishing a quantifiable interest in it as its biological father. Most courts so far have determined that a father's rights are directly related to how involved he has been in the nurturing of a child.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.