

... *“Strange things happen under a full moon,” she whispered.*

*Anticipation trickled over him. What the hell was she saying? Her hushed tones would have him on his knees. Strangely though, they somehow held him up. He didn't dare risk looking at her.*

*A steady stream of air kept his voice sturdy if thick with need. “You mean the lunacy or erratic behavior psychics’ associate with such phenomenon?” Alex tried to smile. Really. It just seemed caught in his throat.*

*“Yes,” she agreed.*

*In his peripheral vision, her gaze anchored on something unseen through the paned glass. Her deep breaths were subtle. He remained motionless.*

*“If I were to kiss you that would be considered erratic behavior...for me. And could only be attributed to the moon...” Her voice trailed off in a whisper.*

*Though Alex knew exactly what she meant, shock filled him with her admission. His motions turned lethargic, surreal like some bizarre scene in a Lifetime movie. Because he could only rotate toward her, his movements leaden, slow—to avoid startling her like a skittish deer in the wild—he assured himself.*

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# **LIES THAT BIND**

**Kathy L Wheeler**



# ONE

ARE YOU GONNA BE my dad?"

"What! *Hell* no."

Caught by surprise, those were the first words that popped out of Alex Gentry's genius mouth.

The juvenile standing before him had wild dark, curly hair, and a mouth covered in bright red lipstick, almost neon in garishness. Colored outside the lines, no less. His gaze narrowed at the sight. The child appeared female based on her oversized, frilly pink dress. A dress that didn't quite match her bright purple pumps, which were three times too big on her tiny feet. Hands fisted at non-existent hips blocked his entrance.

Confusion, then dismay tugged at Alex before shifting to anger. Anger five years in the making. *Wait*. Hadn't the kid asked if *he* was going to be her dad? Alex glanced past her small form for indications of a male occupant, but there wasn't much to see from his position outside the threshold of the shabby apartment door.

The possibility that Kelly Mancer might have married hadn't occurred to him. And the thought punched his gut like a well-placed jab from a professional boxer, zapping the air from his lungs. But before him stood a child who could not have belonged to anyone but Kelly. The resemblance was too striking, from her upturned nose to the unusual shade of her green-gold eyes.

Stopping at Kelly's apartment may have been a grave mistake. But after five years of trying to track her down, Alex

couldn't have forced himself to stay away for all the money in the world. *Ten thousand dollars worth.*

"Umm, you said 'hell'."

He stared at the child, who appeared ready to tattle on him or burst out laughing, he couldn't quite tell which.

"I once said 'hell' and got a spanking," she confided.

Alex pushed a wary hand through his hair and peered at her through separated fingers. "Don't you have a dad?" His stomach turned at his blunt question. Resorting to the interrogation of a child really was the lowest of the low.

"No. He went away."

*Went away?* A sense of relief...or was it a glimmer of hope? "What do you mean?" Now he'd started down this path—

"I don't know. *She* won't tell me." She flicked a thumb over her shoulder, disgust coloring her tone. The little urchin's eyes flashed with a determined glitter.

Alex suppressed a slight shudder. The child couldn't possibly be female. A little bulldozer, that's what she was. The thought brought a quirk to his lips. "Won't tell you?"

She lowered her voice and leaned forward. "No. I think wherever he is must be someplace really bad." Her bottom lip poked out punctuating her words.

He thrust his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "Like, uh, where?"

"Hell," she said. The tone, matter-of-fact, succinct.

"How *old* are you?" Alex shook his head again. "Never mind."

This had to be the most bizarre conversation he'd had in years.

"I'm five," she informed him. A tiny defiant palm spread before him with all five fingers splayed, driving home her

point. Alex's gaze zeroed in on a discoloration of a perfectly shaped crescent-moon near the base of her thumb.

A bright smile lit the little bulldozer's face, turning her into an innocent looking she-princess, stunning him briefly. He covered his mouth with a small cough of discomfort. "Where is your mommy, by the way?"

"In the bathroom, and *I* don't call her mommy."

The determination squaring her jaw would have been outright laughable if he wasn't so sure she could weasel top secret information out of a hardened Central Intelligence Agent. Her dark, green-gold eyes pierced him with the precision of a laser pointer he used for boardroom presentations.

She dropped her hand and frowned, turning into a bulldozer once more. "Can you get me a puppy? I want a fluffy white one. It doesn't have to be big." She paused—for half a second. "Are you upset?"

He ignored the request for a dog. "No, I'm not upset," Alex said calmly. "I just need to talk to your...What do you call her?"

"Mom. What do you want to ask *her*?"

Blowing out a breath of frustration, Alex decided he'd had enough. "If she's going to have more kids." Apparently, sarcasm was lost on the tiny being.

"I already asked her that, and she said no."

"Great, a smart ass," he muttered under his breath.

"What's a smart ass?"

"Taylor?" The questioning lilt floated through the apartment, stripping away five and a half long years. Soft tones of silk prickled his skin.

The urchin leaned forward and whispered, "Are you going to spank me?"

Startled was the least of the multitude of reactions surging

through him. Though the bulldozer stood there blinking with wide and innocent eyes (once again the she-princess), something mischievous glittered in their depths.

“No one is spanking anyone.” The woman Alex spent years fantasizing about maneuvered herself between him and the kid.

The impact of seeing Kelly after so long was as effective as a physical blow. “Taylor, what have I told you about opening the doors to strangers?” Her sharp gaze sliced Alex to the quick. The child peered at him from behind her mother.

His eyes darted back to Kelly. God, she was as beautiful as he remembered. Even with her brows furrowed and lips compressed. He should have prepared himself for the instant blood rush to the head. Now that he’d located her, he found himself dumbstruck. Every furious word he’d vowed to utter when at last he laid eyes on her fled, his brain having turned into a mush of overcooked oatmeal. He cleared his throat.

From the corner of his eye, the urchin looked up at her mother and shrugged her barely discernable shoulders, masked as they were by that huge dress. “I heard a knock on the door and answered.”

Alex took a moment to study the woman he’d once believed was his future. Her dark hair had grown—satin and shine without an ounce of curl. All swept up in a ponytail on top of her head. Even without make-up she put European models to shame.

She carried herself as if she were six feet tall instead of her actual five foot five. Outside of the smudge of dark circles under her eyes, her olive skin looked smooth and translucent. Lips, full and soft.

Alex pushed away from the temptation to drop to his knees in adulation. A ridiculous thought, he chastised himself.

She'd walked...no ran from him. *Them*. He shoved down the rush of fury with a deep breath. A cool head would serve him best through this interview.

Kelly turned to the bulldozer. "Time for bed. Get your pajamas on," she commanded with an index finger pointing firmly down a dingy hall. "And wash that stuff off of your mouth."

To Alex's surprise the bulldozer marched down the hall, muttering something to the tune of "dammit, Mom" under her breath. The interchange allowed him a moment to catch his breath. Gather his defenses.

A full minute passed before Kelly turned on him with a guarded look, those hypnotic catlike eyes searing him. "What do you want, Alex?" Her wary tone didn't exactly invite confidences.

Alex gave himself an inward shake and reached for the indifference he'd constructed for his own preservation. His reasons for finding Kelly were not to continue what he'd dreamed of five years ago. Obviously, *she* hadn't harbored any lost feelings. The proof just stormed down the hallway spouting a curse word.

He squared his shoulders. Jesus, he was the CEO of a major mergers and acquisitions company. He wanted to breathe her name but he had his doubts in masking how husky it would come out and squashed the impulse. "I need your help," he said. Though tough, he smiled slowly and managed to keep his tone light.

"I haven't seen you in over five years. How could *I* possibly be of help?"

Convincing her he did need her help might be more difficult than he'd envisioned. Carefully striving for an even tone, he said, "Because you're the only one who can." Yep, there was

the husky edge.

An indelicate snort met his ears. “With what?”

“Research.” Alex hid a wince. He’d spoken too quickly.

Intelligent eyes zeroed in on him, their greenish-gold appearing almost indistinguishable from their darker rims. “I thought we agreed that my position had ended.” Her voice dropped.

“Interesting. I don’t remember anything of the sort,” he said. “In fact, from my recollection you disappeared before the acquisition’s final completion.”

“My time at Wildcat was finished,” Kelly said, flatly. She stood poised, ready to run. “You did what you set out to do. And I...I had family issues to attend to.” Her gaze shot to the space behind her.

Anger pierced him, again. She was doing her best to distract him, just like she’d managed that long ago Friday afternoon. Her sudden indifference when he’d returned from Chicago burned in his memory. A memory that still had the ability to infuriate him. All their teasing banter shared the weeks before, gone. Replaced with a quiet reticence. Nothing he said or did drew her from the steel shell she’d encased herself in.

Alex glanced to her left hand. Bare of any jewelry. With his relief came a surge of warmth that rippled through his entire body. He lifted his gaze and wondered how the dull lighting failed to dim the shine in her black hair. Made him wonder how he’d managed to contain his urge to consume her five years ago. And how now he still craved her.

Thankfully one couldn’t be convicted by just *thinking* someone luscious and desirable. Even pissed off, he wanted her spread and ready beneath him. He cleared his throat, shifted his stance lest she read the telltale signs swelling before her.

“I can’t help you, Alex.”

The cautious modulation in her voice succeeded in cooling his ardor—*some*. He searched her face, surprised at the strain around her mouth. “I have other responsibilities now,” she said. Her open palm gestured toward the darkened hallway. “You met my daughter, Taylor?”

“Ah, yes, Taylor.” Warmth crept up the back of his neck. He *had* forgotten the tiny warrior ensconced in the other room.

Damn it, Kelly had cheated him and her of an opportunity to see—*see* if they’d had something to build on. He repressed his antagonism and gave her a stoic glance, letting her statement hang in the air.

She bristled with irritation, fingers clenched into fists at her sides. His insensitivity certainly wasn’t making any points in softening her up. Well, why should he care? She was the one who’d disappeared without a word. She’d managed until now, hadn’t she?

Well, he had a sister to save hell bent on ruining her own life. And Kelly was his best option in nipping that problem. Samuel Eckert’s desire for Kelly had been common knowledge in the Wildcat days, and Alex had every intention of exploiting the bastard’s desire in rounding up his rebellious younger sibling.

“Your aunt lives in town? Maybe she can help you out. That’s why you moved to Bloomington, isn’t it?”

Her eyes widened. “Help me out how? What on earth are you talking about? And how do you know about my aunt?” She didn’t sound angry, he realized. More like—flustered and surprised.

“This is a small town. I have a brother here, remember?” Not to mention Kelly worked for his sister-in-law, Lorianne, at Renewed Interest Used Books.

Kelly brandished her head back and forth, and in a business, matter-of-fact projection from earlier years, she said, “As much as I appreciate your *graciousness* toward my situation, I’m afraid helping you at this time is not a possibility.”

“Situation?”

A shadow of smile touched her lips. “I am a single parent, Alex. I saw you looking for a ring.” She didn’t elaborate. Instead, she clasped the edge of the door shoving it closed, but he was quick. He placed his booted foot on the threshold, blocking the inevitable slam, his palm against the shoddy framework.

“Look, I know you need—”

The small smile disappeared and her mien turned fierce. “You have no idea what I need,” she hissed. “I have no intention of getting involved with *anyone* from that period in my life. Ever.”

Alex was at a loss at this turn in her demeanor. “I don’t understand, you knew the company was going under. You even helped.”

“And I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” Though she said this under her breath, her bitterness surprised him.

Alex gauged her carefully, noting the taut shoulders and clenched jaw. Neither flowed with the soft flowery scent surrounding her. He kept his hand on the door, conscious of resisting the impulse to brush back a stray strand of her black hair. He inhaled deeply. “I wouldn’t ask it if it wasn’t important.”

“You mean important to you,” she accused.

Impatience filled him. “Important, period,” he said.

The drop of her shoulders was slight, a softening. Alex took advantage by stepping through the door before she made good on that slam.

*The stroke of a confident man utilized his plan of action.*

Straight out of his rule book on *How To Behave Like A CEO*. *Rule number one: Know what you want. Keep it simple and straightforward.* Or at least pretend to, he amended. He closed the door for her with a decisive click.

With an unreadable expression she stared at him a long moment before relenting. “Fine. Have a seat. I need to check on Taylor.”

A sharp pain in his ribs, he hadn’t realized was there, eased.

Kelly spun on a heel and stormed from the room. The subtle sway of her slim hips in faded, form fitting jeans, hair drawn up, swinging in opposition, tantalized him beyond words. He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, striving for a calm spiraling out of reach. He willed his pulse to steady, because he desperately wanted to sate a revived and rising hunger. The room stifled him in its heat.

With a deep breath, he took in the drab living conditions. It was a dose of reality slapping him in the face. Her financial condition had deteriorated since those days at Wildcat. Standing just inside the useless door that might as well have been constructed of cardboard, Alex scrutinized the stained beige, threadbare carpeting, the dreary walls, and ratty furniture. A dark, wooden desk with one drawer clung to a corner with an organized stack of papers resting on top. His lips tipped at the sight. Definitely reminiscent of her days as the efficient executive assistant he’d known. The room otherwise appeared clean but depressing.

An old television sat perched on a makeshift stand of nothing more than wood boards propped up by bricks. An eyesore, but it served another purpose, creating a mini bookshelf beneath. He leaned forward and pulled out a paperback, flipped it over and read: *Rhea’s life in the new frontier shifted the level*

*of her parlor room skills from that of high society in the east to a small desert town's head Madame. Protecting her girls from the West's harsh realities became top priority. Especially when she finds her younger sister is the region's top draw.*

*Texas Ranger, Jesse Grubbs has one goal: to rid the west of prostitution. His own history proved how devastating the profession was, to not only the young women forced to endure the life, but to the children unfortunate enough born into a life they hadn't chosen. He's making excellent progress too—until he comes face to face with the beautiful yet formidable Rhea Gilbreath who shares her secrets with no man.*

Alex chuckled as he slid the book back into place. So the reticent Kelly Mancer was a closet romantic. Perhaps that might work in his favor. He ran a finger over the other titles as his thoughts drifted back to that day he'd left town for a meeting with the Board of Directors. On his return all her teasing manner had disappeared over the course of a weekend.

Hearing that she hadn't reciprocated his feelings had stung. He would have bet his life she harbored more attraction than she'd let on. Certainly the physical aspect had been genuine. On his side at least, he admitted grimly. Pride dictated the outcome of his future dealings with her. And once the merger had been completed, rather *almost* completed, she'd disappeared, *without a word*.

Anger and frustration filled him. He apparently hadn't made peace with the past. Alex pushed away the thoughts. Focused on the present. One thing he would not take in this current endeavor was "no" for an answer.

Eckert's desire for his young admin assistant had been company-wide knowledge. Maybe that's who's snagged Kelly interest almost six years ago. That was a bitter pill to swallow. No, Kelly hadn't been swayed by Eckert's charm. But Eckert's

attraction to Kelly was an edge for Alex that would bring Emily home.

The little spitfire was a bit of a bother, but surely two or three weeks wouldn't pose too much of a hardship. Alex glanced around again at the dire living conditions, a twinge of guilt niggling at him. The money he planned to offer Kelly would surely make up for any inconvenience.

Alex frowned. Only by a stroke of luck had he found Kelly through his brother Ash, and Ash's wife, Lorianne. Once Alex learned Kelly was working at the bookstore, he honed in on his own research and discovered Kelly did, in fact, have an aunt in town. Perhaps the kid's father was another option if she didn't like leaving her precious child with an elderly aunt. He cut the thought; it was up to Kelly to work out those details. He firmed his lips. His goal was simple—convince *her*. All he needed was the chance.

Funny, how he remembered every detail of that last week. Her slimming black skirt, shirt buttoned up to her neck. Not once had she met his eyes. Otherwise, competent and industrious; anything he asked for appearing like magic at the tip of her fingers...well, almost anything. Of course, he hadn't asked for...

Upon his return from Chicago that Monday morning, he'd found damning information against Eckert—

Soft bickering broke into his thoughts. The precocious little bulldozer was arguing with her mother. He didn't bother trying not to listen. Not that he could have anyway with tissue paper for walls.

"Because I said so," he heard Kelly tell *her*.

"But, *you're* not going to bed." The whine was high-pitched and annoying.

"That's because *I'm* the grown up." The humor radiating

from Kelly startled him with the change in her demeanor. Then the little imp pulled out all the stops and began to cry. “Here’s the deal.” Kelly’s voice sounded harsh in that matter-of-fact business tone Alex himself survived only moments ago. A tone that brooked no argument from a kid of five.

He rolled his eyes to the ceiling. He’d lay odds Kelly was about to let the imp off the hook.

“...if you so much as get out of this bed, young lady, the next two nights’ bedtime will convene at six-thirty p.m., got it? And no cartoons Saturday morning.”

Alex heard a tiny squeak of an answer he couldn’t make out, surprised by Kelly’s rigid stance. *That* didn’t sound very tender. Then, she said, “Go ahead. Make my day. I could use the break.”

Utter silence followed.

He frowned. The little kid wasn’t that bad. This was none of *his* business. He shook the ridiculous meanderings from his head, because that’s what they were. The light from the dingy walled-hall went dark and Kelly reappeared, full lips pressed together with uncompromising grimness.

“What’s so important?” she demanded in her flat tone, making him feel as if *he* were the five-year-old. Mesmerized by eyes a shade darker than the urchin’s flashed like a neon sign, screaming ‘danger.’

A quick burst of irritation rippled through him. But a sub-component of rule ten saved her his temper. *Win by applying “seek first to understand...then to be understood.”*

With that rule of wisdom, Alex strived for a benign tone. “Do you have any wine? We haven’t seen each other in...years.” In most cases, it worked like a charm.

“I have no intention of offering you wine, even if I had any.”

He brought his hand up to push through his hair, but caught himself. He needed to take charge of the moment, stifle any sign of weakness. He shot her with a direct mark. "Where did you go after the dissolution of the company?"

The question snapped her head up, startled. And surprisingly, not just hers. He just hadn't intended on asking it. Alex had resolved himself to indifference. But now he swallowed a groan remembering how long and hard he'd searched, after clinging to his fury for a full year. By then her trail had gone cold.

"Texas," she answered softly. "I wanted someplace warm."

"Warm! That was a little overkill, wasn't it?" he laughed, trying to lighten the heavy atmosphere. "Isn't that sort of like calling the Arctic cold?"

Kelly folded her arms over her chest. Didn't so much as crack a smile. Oh, to drag a smile from her. Hard work but worth every effort, he'd wager. Instead, he blew out a pursed breath. "Look, I need your help in tracking down Samuel Eckert."

"Samuel Eckert?" she repeated. Disbelief colored her expression. Quickly turning to...uncertainty, disgust, hate? Then blank. "Sorry, no can do."

A roil of emotion emanated from her, slicing through him like the edge of a razor blade. Not only were her sidestepping skills excellent, her ponytail was a weapon in and of itself.

He ignored the refusal. "Of course you can," he said sharply.

"No." She backed away, her ponytail swinging in a dangerous whiplash. "Absolutely not."

Alex snagged her balled up fist and tugged her to the shabby sofa. She landed with a soft thwack. Now that she didn't

work for the company he'd chewed up and spit out, perhaps things could be different this time around. The thoughts shook him, but once they took root, the decision refused to let go.

His glance rested on her compressed lips. A little suckle on the bottom one could open the world of possibilities...for both of them. He leaned forward.

She shook her head again almost smashing his nose, jolting his eyes back to hers. "No. I won't do it."

Alex's impatience flared and he sat back, still grasping her hands. "Look, this isn't just about you," he said through gritted teeth.

"What do you mean?" Her narrowed eyes locked on his. A dizzying sensation swept through him when that green-gold penetrating gaze pinned him. He should breathe. But he reveled in the silky texture of her hand, the tapered nails scraping his palm. Shock had to be the only reason she hadn't yanked it from his possession.

Obviously, enlightening her of his plan drawing Eckert out of hiding wouldn't suffice. He changed tactics. "Look, you're the only one who knows all his contacts, his habits, his idiosyncrasies," he leveled at her.

She seemed to have trouble breathing. Her cheeks paled, and she whispered. "You know him, too."

"Not like you."

Her glare remained fierce. "Forget it." He felt her shiver before she jerked her hand away and stood. She moved to the door clearly expecting him to follow.

He didn't. Instead, he leaned back into the uncomfortable couch. True, Samuel Eckert had just been released from prison, but the crimes were white-collar. There was no history of violence that Alex could remember.

"I-I have a child to consider," she stuttered, turning away.

Jaw clenched, he uttered the words. “He’s snared a young woman.”

She spun around at his simple statement. Her lips pressed in a stubborn line. He knew what she would say—that it was *not* her problem.

“That’s not my problem,” Kelly said. She opened the door.

Alex refused to be swayed. He leaped from the couch and shut the door with a soft click and faced her. Towered over her. Height was a handy form of intimidation and he didn’t hesitate to use it. “I’ll pay you.”

“There’s not enough money,” she bit out.

God, she was beautiful. Her soft flowery scent tickled his senses. A sudden urge to pull her into his arms had his biceps flexing, but with perseverance he managed to breathe through the temptation. “I’m worried.”

“Ask your brother.” Kelly stepped back.

He took the opportunity to suck in a breath. His attraction was not only not one-sided, but unwelcome. The realization hurt.

“I’ll even ask him for you,” she said. “I work for his wife.”

“Lorianne is pregnant, remember?”

“Ash isn’t,” she snapped. “Let him help.”

Alex let the *you’re-an-idiot* tone slide and waited. The silence grew. Victory seized his gut when she winced. He’d won. It was a crappy way to lure her in but he was past caring. Seeing Kelly again brought about all the torment he’d suffered at her hands. Anguish that had pushed him to the edge of his sanity. But examining those whisperings would have to wait.

“Who’s the girl?” she demanded. Suspicion colored each word she gritted out.

Alex paused. Maybe Kelly wasn’t as unaffected as she let

on. “Emily Ericson,” he answered, leaving it at that. He struggled to keep his tone even, not raspy. He also resisted the temptation of listing all the reasons she should help. Instead, hoping the deafening silence would sway her where words from him might not.

*Rule number eight: be secure in yourself. In control of your attitude...think before you talk...blah blah blah.* Alex moved back to the ugly sofa and eased down settling in, albeit, with a choreographed, simulated relaxed position. Leaning back, he folded his arms across his chest and waited with a strained uncertainty for another stubborn refusal.

“I don’t understand what you mean by research. That’s somewhat vague, isn’t it?” The suspicion in her eyes annoyed him, even if it was warranted.

“It’s not exactly die-hard research. More like travel,” he hedged. After her interminable silence, he finally said, “Look. There’s no chance he’ll even see you. You’ll be there strictly to assist me in...in a, uh, secretarial type position.”

“Where is *there*?” she asked, narrowing her eyes pointedly.

Heat crept up his neck and he cleared his throat. This would be the delicate part. Eying her aggressive stand feet slightly parted, chin jutting forward, he lifted a shoulder and said, “Colorado.”

“Colorado!”

“Mom, is everything okay?” The tiny voiced chimed softly from the hallway.

“Fine, Taylor. Go to sleep. Not another word,” she said, sharply. Her eyes never wavered from Alex. This was a Kelly he didn’t recognize. Fire blazed from her green-gold eyes, reflecting an inner glint of steel.

“It’s only for a couple of weeks,” he implored, lowering

his voice.

“Absolutely not,” she said again, her voice matching his. Her tense stance was not reassuring. Stubborn woman. Another trait he failed to recall.

“Three weeks at the most.”

“I *told* you I have other responsibilities now. I *can't* just pick up and go for two or three weeks.”

He winced at her strident tone. But before he could form a response she surprised him by asking, “How much?”

“What?”

“You said I would be paid—how much?”

“Twenty-five thousand,” he said. The sight of her living conditions had him increasing the amount on impulse.

Her scowl was a welcome sight. Now he had her for sure. He issued his most brilliant smile, and she flinched. *Rule number six: Be aware of your style—gutsy, humorous, and theatrical, without over doing it.* Okay, so he'd added that last part. Plus, added sex appeal didn't hurt.

Kelly's gaze swept the cramped room and settled back on him, eyes still narrowed and suspicious. “You're sure he won't see me?”

“Positive,” he promised, inclining his head.

“I'll do it for fifty. One more thing...”

*Fifty!* “I can hardly wait.”

“I'm strictly hands off to you. Otherwise, I walk.”

She moved to the door and opened it.

As he stepped over the threshold, the door slammed behind him. He had a feeling his scowl now matched hers.

## TWO

*One week later – Montrose, Colorado*

MOM, HE'S GONNA BE real mad."

"I know, darling. That's why you need to be on your best behavior."

"Well." Taylor scrunched her nose, prompting Kelly to bite back a smile.

The late October afternoon allowed weak sunlight to stream through a wall of glass windows on the small airport's west side. The light bounced off her daughter's head of unruly black curls.

"A-course, I'll do my best." Taylor lifted her shoulders in a slight shrug. "But we know how that goes."

"Yes, I'm well aware of how *that* goes, but we are going to try much harder for the next couple of weeks." Kelly sucked in a breath, adding to herself, *maybe three*.

"I hope it snows so we can play in it."

Taylor's excitement kept Kelly's over-observant child from picking up on her own apprehension. It was an advantage. Taylor usually saw way too much. "We'll probably see some snow while we're here. Late October means the weather's up for grabs," she said, absently.

Oh, Lord. What had she done? Two to three weeks closeted with Alexander Gentry? She was in way over her head. That man was trouble. All six feet two inches of him. Those storm-gray eyes had already played havoc with her insomnia of

five years plus. But since the day Alex strolled back into her well-ordered life she'd been plagued by dreams *or nightmares* of what might have been in what little sleep she did manage.

Hysteria traipsed through her veins. Her skin tingled from her fingertips to her toes. Nerves churned her stomach. How had she let him talk her into this? Her face felt hot. She fought the sickening sensations in her churning stomach. She slowed her breaths into long steady inhalations. The money. She had to focus on the money. Fifty-thousand dollars. It was a fortune. Sometimes desperation called for drastic measures. Besides, she chided herself, it was only two weeks, *or three*. She gripped Taylor's hand, glancing around for the nearest ladies room.

"I love riding on airplanes." Taylor swung her other hand, skipping lightly beside Kelly as they made their way from the gate to the baggage claim. "This 'port's a lot smaller than the other one."

"Denver was an international airport. Montrose is regional," she answered, looking around desperately.

"Huh?"

"Don't say 'huh' darling."

"But I don't know what you mean."

Kelly stopped and peered at her daughter. "It means you can't know everything, sweetie. You're only five." She glanced at her watch, her stomach nowhere near calm. Nearly three o'clock. Occupancy on the flight from Denver was sparse, meaning the small airport didn't have the mass of people Denver's international airport sported. No crowds to hide within. She started towards the ladies room. "Do you need to stop?"

"No, I told you I went on the plane," Taylor huffed.

*No more delays, no more excuses.* Kelly squared her shoulders. “Fine. I guess we should, uh, hurry then,” she said through gritted teeth.

She dreaded seeing Alex. Not that she was sorry things had worked out the way they had. Kelly wouldn’t trade her very precocious daughter for all the money in the world. The nerve, of him asking—no, *demanding* she leave Taylor behind for two weeks spurred her rebellion.

Shame touched her. Perhaps she should have warned Alex that she had traded in her first class ticket for two in coach. Although there really hadn’t been any other realistic alternative. Aunt Mabel was too old for a child as rambunctious as Taylor, and with Aunt Mildred down sick and needing help...errrg. She was so tired. And she needed all her wits about her. She had enough trouble sleeping. Any less would turn her into a stark-raving, mad lunatic.

Clearly, Alex was not a kid person. She steeled her spine. *Tough.* He needed her help? Where she went, Taylor went. They were a team.

“That was really cool flying so close to the mountains in that little plane, wasn’t it, Mom?” Taylor rattled on.

A shudder went through Kelly at that memory. She could have counted the needles on the trees branches.

“Look, Mom.” Taylor’s voice grew soft, her hand squeezing Kelly’s as Taylor pulled them to a stop.

Kelly didn’t need Taylor pointing out Alex. His presence drew her gaze like a magnificent caged animal. He looked as good as she remembered, adding more flutters to her unsettled stomach. Short burnished-gold hair indicated a recent haircut, and broad, muscled shoulders suddenly had her questioning her

decision in this bizarre undertaking. Her usual practicality had deserted her. She swallowed, raking in the lean hips wrapped in low-rise jeans. All male, exuding his over-powering masculinity. What she didn't need or want—a man. More specifically, *this man*.

Kelly lifted her chin. *Fifty thousand dollars. Remember the money. Money gave a person options.*

She glanced at him again. He stood with one strong, capable hand resting on his hip, appearing patient. Hah! That was doubtful.

Funny how it seemed people should look different, even after a week. She'd always thought him attractive, but then so had every woman within a hundred mile radius.

Kelly grimaced as a twenty-something lingered nearby giving Alex an appreciative once-over. Someone should register his appeal as a lethal weapon.

Back in the Wildcat Financial days, the accounting manager was not the only female who'd not been very subtle. Once Gentry's Mergers and Acquisitions had moved in to take over the company, she'd seen more of the short buxom blonde in that last two months than the whole previous four years Kelly had worked there. Not to mention the Operations Administrative Assistant, the Marketing Manager, the Human Resources Director—the list was never ending. She shook her head, determined to push away the past. Irritated his allure hadn't changed one smidge.

He stood looking out at the mountainous landscape twenty feet or so from the baggage claim, his back to her and Taylor. Of course, he wasn't expecting an average mom tugging along an adorable fluffy-haired child either. Kelly had donned armor

that included every ounce of cosmetic skill she possessed, leaving her long black hair hanging down her back and thickly applied coats of mascara. "Come on," she urged Taylor, picking up their pace. "Might as well get the niceties out of the way. And don't let me walk off without your car seat."

"I won't, Mom," Taylor said softly.

The luggage carousel was already spinning and Kelly located their bags in a matter of minutes, but had to wait on Taylor's booster chair. She gathered their belongings then spun around. Her stomach dropped as he spotted them. Impatience? Then some other emotion radiated off of him in waves. Annoyance? She flinched, then drew herself up to her full five foot-five inch height to meet trouble head on. She'd gone through hell the last five years. This was nothing. She could handle Alex Gentry.

When Taylor hesitated, Kelly's temper flared. Trying to intimidate her was one thing, but terrorizing a child was crossing the line. She strolled forward tugging Taylor along. Kelly could play amiable.

"You remember Taylor?" she said sweetly. Saccharine sweet. Taylor's wary gaze burned Kelly's cheeks, but she kept her focus on Alex. He lifted a sardonic brow. Satisfaction filled her at the clenched, yet clean shaven, strong jaw. Her attempt to swallow stuck in her throat when his gaze shifted to her daughter.

"Hello, Taylor. I wasn't expecting you." His return smile resembled a snarl. "I thought you'd be staying with your aunt in Bloomington."

Kelly followed his eyes, surprised by a scowl on Taylor pert features, but her daughter answered congenially enough.

“No. My great-great Aunt Mildred got sick, so my great-great Aunt Mabel had to go visit her.”

Taylor grumbled something else under her breath but let Kelly the mom-inquiry go for the moment.

“Ah, I see.” With a disdainful glance at their bags, Alex snagged the booster seat and strode through the terminal which wasn’t any larger than a Walmart. He, at least, kept his pace short.

*That went well.*

“Where are we going?” Taylor asked. Her fear vanished as quickly as it had materialized. Taylor started skipping at his side. Kelly wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d grabbed his hand.

Kelly covered her laugh with a small cough. It garnered a searing glance from Mr. High-and-Mighty. Kelly was suddenly grateful for those little wheels and handles on bags she could drag rather than haul. *He* was certainly no help.

Alex stopped just inside glass doors and snatched the rest of the bags from Kelly’s possession. Without a word he stalked to a white Jeep parked fairly close by. Both humor and a grimace touched her. Taylor might be good for the over-confident, hard-assed Alex Gentry.

By the time Kelly and Taylor caught up to Alex, he’d tossed their luggage in and slammed down the hatch.

“Well?” Taylor demanded.

His jaw twitched but he addressed her. “We’re staying in a little place called Log Hill House.”

Alex opened the back door of the SUV, set the booster down, and swept Taylor up like she was another piece of luggage, depositing her in the back seat. “Do you know how to

work that thing?” he asked Kelly’s daughter.

“A-course,” she said, giggling.

“Then buckle up,” he told her.

Kelly scrambled into the passenger side, in the event Alex’s temper prompted him to drive off, leaving her standing in the Jeep’s dust. But he waited with a patience that surprised her. Moments later they were pulling out of the small airport onto a semi-rural highway, turning south.

Montrose was located on the Western Slopes of Colorado. Kelly found a book on the region in *Renewed Interest* before she and Taylor left Bloomington, and studied the area. Grand Junction was approximately fifty miles to the north, and weather on this side of the Rockies resembled something more desert-like with less frequent snowfall than on the eastern side near Denver—somewhat of a relief.

Alex was in for a treat, Kelly decided, biting back another grin watching Taylor turn on her charm. “Is it far? Is it little? Is it made of logs?” Thank God for her child’s natural curiosity.

“Close to thirty miles,” he resigned to answering.

“Wow, thirty miles?” Taylor squealed. Her excitement bounded off the windows.

Alex cracked a smile. Small, but there all the same. Kelly felt a slight aperture around her heart. A physical chink. She kept her eyes on the road ahead certain the fracture echoed through the confined space of the vehicle.

“So,” Alex ventured, addressing Kelly for the first time, startling her. “How was first class?”

Kelly’s face grew warm but Taylor took up the question. “Oh, we didn’t ride first class.”

“You didn’t? I could have sworn I left a first class ticket

for your mom.”

Kelly didn't know whether to scream or laugh. He'd asked deliberately, of course.

“I traded it so Taylor could come too. With Aunt Mabel...” Kelly trailed off.

“Ah, yes. The sick aunt,” Alex murmured. The challenge was there, she heard it as distinctly as if he'd said “choose your weapons.”

ALEX BACKTRACKED east out of Montrose toward Gunnison. Kelly ran a hand under her hair along the nape of her neck fanning at the gathered moisture. Where was a hair-tie when you needed one? A sense of uneasiness dipped low in her belly as Taylor's incessant chatter entertained them through what could have been a most awkward silence. Strained silences had never bothered her cheeky daughter.

They edged closer to a small town called Cimarron; Taylor had Alex confessing. The terrain was prairie-like in spots, giving way to the tallest evergreens interspersed with white trunk aspens. Hills sloped in graceful mounds that didn't seem so high until measured with the hills behind, until they rose in magnificent heights against a gray sky leaden with dark threatening clouds. Not so different from their home in Bloomington, South Dakota.

Alex let the Jeep coast, obviously searching for something in particular when he flipped the turn signal. The town was so small Kelly would have missed it if she'd blinked. She never noticed as much as a post office.

She made note of the weathered road sign indicating they'd veered onto Little Cimarron Road from the highway.

Another abrupt left and a hundred yards later, they crossed a rickety bridge guarded by a leaning mailbox. The bridge did not appear near strong enough to walk a horse over, let alone a four-wheeled Jeep with four wide tires.

Kelly squeezed her eyes and her fists shut, waiting for the plunge into the rushing water below. It hadn't occurred to her that Colorado might be the one place to cure her acrophobia—or perhaps escalate it. She'd never quite understood where her irrational fear of heights came from. Thirty seconds later her held breath let go in a whoosh when Alex switched off the ignition.

Kelly opened her eyes slowly. Before her stood a quaint three story, Victorian styled home, freshly painted in a soft cream. The house starkly reminded her of her late grandmother's home in the historic portion of Dallas off Greenville Avenue—the house she'd grown up in. Granted, Grandma's house was always in need of paint and other repairs but the structure was similar. This house didn't appear in need of any repairs.

“Log Hill House,” Alex announced. His deep voice vibrated through the truck.

Kelly couldn't spot a single log.

“I thought you said small,” Taylor said.

The house rested atop a base of rounded rocks close to two feet in height. Wooden rails framed a set of wide steps, leading to a large covered porch. A worn swing mounted to the ceiling swayed in rhythm to a light wind. Evergreens towered over one corner of the porch creating an eerie shadow. A shudder touched her spine, despite the house's blatant charm.

A protruding bay window appeared from the second level,

its edges and shutters trimmed in a dark shade of red.

“Wow.” Taylor’s mesmerized tones floated from the backseat.

Wow was right. Kelly’s gaze spanned the grounds. A small lake lay nestled in a lower valley. A picture-perfect setting. *Almost too perfect*. She pushed away the negative intrusion. “It’s beautiful,” she said.

The area closest to the house had been cleared, abutting heavily wooded terrain. A snake-like creek twisted through a line of trees as effectively as razor wire along the top of a prison fence.

A chill of concern swept through Kelly at her odd analogy, the utter isolation. She was a city girl, through and through, despite her self-imposed exile in the small town of Bloomington. What kind of research required this sort of remoteness? Wildcat Financial had been located in a well-populated metropolis, not in the middle of nowhere.

True, her life had changed during that time, horrifyingly so, but that was years ago. Despite her efforts to stifle the niggling doubts, they loomed like a dangling branch laden with heavy snow. She glanced at Alex as he strode to the hatch of the jeep. Had he lied to her about seeing Samuel Eckert? She expelled a breath through pursed lips. Surely not. She’d been explicit regarding her conditions.

Kelly pulled in a deep breath. She could do anything for fifty-thousand dollars. Well, *almost* anything. Yet her hand trembled as she reached for the Jeep’s door latch.

She climbed out with Taylor interrupting her self-absorbed thoughts. “Get your bag, Mom. Hand me mine. I want to carry my own.”

Alex swung Taylor's bag down before Kelly had time to register what her sprightly daughter had even said. He tugged the handle out, handing it to Taylor, who beamed a bright smile his way. Kelly definitely caught the smidge of approval this time. Resisting a smile of her own, she turned and followed Alex around the corner to a screened back door. Another brief glance revealed his clenched jaw, face hewn in stone. Any smile touching those firm lips had now dissipated.

Stifling a cringe, Kelly stepped through a door into an ultra-contemporary kitchen and gasped. A luxurious inside had been concealed by the home's unassuming exterior. The room was complete with updated appliances of stainless steel, including a dishwasher and microwave. To her right, the Jeep was visible through a paned window covered with sheer lace curtains over the sink. A wood-paneled refrigerator matched the expert cabinetry of dark rich mahogany. All of this in the middle of nowhere. She shook her head, awed. Oh, the luxury.

Warmth resonated throughout the room with its soft recessed lighting. Lighting that spotlighted a Persian throw over distressed hardwood floors. A round antique dinner table in the center of the room was littered with paperwork. She quelled an urge to straighten the papers into organized stacks. She wasn't the office assistant anymore.

Kelly looked at Alex, who was busy setting bags of groceries on shiny granite countertops. Well-defined muscles flexed with his mundane task. She swallowed. She tore her eyes from him and glanced to her left. An entryway to the living-family room? She spotted a worn, leather sofa she wouldn't mind sinking into after all the stress of flying above trees so close she could have touched the branches through an open

window. She strolled by an old roll-top desk in the entry way. How on earth had he found this place? No expense had been spared. There was no denying Alex had taste and the means to indulge it. Did it belong to Gentry's Mergers?

"The bedrooms are up the stairs." Alex's voice sounded closely behind. Too close, and she spun, facing him. He'd followed her and was gesturing to a lovely staircase of richly waxed wood.

Kelly followed the direction of his pointed finger. Taylor rushed past Kelly, pounding her way up the stairs. Kelly followed more slowly. She reached the top of the first flight to see another leading upward still, but not before poking her head into one of the closed doors.

The first room to her right sported rich dark greens and the mussed sheets of an unmade bed. *That* room was obviously occupied, and it didn't take a leap of logic to know whose room she'd stumbled upon. A couple of shirts were carelessly draped over a wing-backed chair near the window. Muted green paper dotted with burgundy and threaded gold covered the walls. So her new partner had already been in residence for a few days. She ducked out quickly and opened the door across the hall.

"Oh, my," Kelly gasped. The centerpiece of the room was a canopied wrought iron queen-sized bed. The duvet in a soft cream and gold matched the striped wallpaper. It couldn't be more perfect. She'd died and gone to heaven.

The bay window wrapped around a quaint built-in settee stacked with pillows of teal, navy and cream. Gold threading tied the theme, similar to Alex's room. Kelly strolled to the windows and peered out. She loved it. Alex had generously given her the view of the valley and lake, taking the front of the

house for himself.

“Mom. Come see this. I wanna stay up here,” Taylor called out.

Kelly dragged herself from the window and followed Taylor’s voice up the next flight, where the stairs ended in a small alcove, complete with sitting area and rich mahogany bookcases. Classics and, luckily, picture books filled the shelves—that should keep Taylor busy for hours—very handy. “Where are you?” Kelly called out.

“In here.” Her daughter’s heart-shaped face appeared around a doorjamb. “I’m a fairy princess.” Her uncontained excitement drew a smile.

Kelly moved through the doorway of a room covered in pastel blue and ivory. The touch of gold she’d seen in hers and Alex’s rooms also decorated these walls on the cream paper. Kelly cringed. Any variation of white was a dangerous hue for her daughter’s natural propensity for collecting dirt. “I don’t know, Taylor.”

“Please, Mom?” Taylor begged. Tears filled her eyes.

“Don’t you want to sleep with me? You always want to at home,” Kelly offered desperately. It was low to coerce Taylor, but to sleep with Alex just across the hall? Oh, who was she kidding, she *never* slept. Which made things worse.

“I’m too big to be sleeping with you.” Mutiny colored Taylor’s features. “*You* always say so.”

Kelly swallowed a groan.

“Why can’t she stay in here?”

Kelly jumped at Alex’s deep voice ringing too close. *Again*. More than that, his breath stirred the hair on the back of her neck. He dropped Taylor’s bag just inside the door. Alex

brushed past Kelly going to the windows. She followed. This room was just above hers with the same painted scene of the lake and valley.

Kelly shot him a lethal glance. “It’s white,” she said, shocked he could be so dense.

“I’ll keep my feet off the bed. I promise.” Taylor’s negotiation skills were growing. But Kelly was determined to stand firm. The room was too white. “Taylor—”

Alex turned from the window and faced the two of them. “I see no reason why she can’t have this room,” he said leveling his look on Kelly. His storm-gray, penetrating gaze seemed to see right through her. She wanted—no, needed Taylor with her.

*Not for protection*, she assured herself. Alex’s grin said otherwise.

Taylor darted through the room and pounced on a chair, similar to one in Alex’s room, acting just like a five-year-old. The normalcy of it jarred Kelly into action.

Fisting her hands at her hips, Kelly fixed Taylor with her sternest mom-face. “This is what I’m talking about, young lady.” Not so much the words but the underlying tone brought Taylor to an abrupt halt, just as Kelly had intended, complete with Taylor’s contrite expression.

Kelly wasn’t fooled. She jammed her hands into the front pockets of her jeans, contemplating Taylor’s folded arms across her chest, dropped chin, and fierce gaze. Alex replicated the posture.

“I say she stays.” Alex said.

A stirring in Kelly’s gut twisted—something familiar, yet terrifying. Her attraction to Alex...before Taylor. Before...lots of things. Kelly took a deep breath. She’d have to build up her

defenses going up against these two. Something it would be wise to remember over the next couple of weeks. She moved her glance from one to the other and blew out that small breath. Some days you just had to pick your battles. “This bed will be made up every morning,” she relented to Taylor.

“I promise,” Taylor nodded. Her enthusiasm ricocheted off the walls.

Kelly sighed. “Let’s get your clothes put away.”

“Yay.” Taylor ran for her bag.

Kelly looked at Alex, shaking her head in disbelief. “Where on earth did you find this place?” He’d discarded his jacket. His olive green t-shirt stretched snug across a sculpted chest. She took a step back from his overbearing presence. “I’m guessing we have some logistics to work out regarding the cooking and cleaning chores?” Her voice sounded too husky, cheeks felt too warm.

“I’ll help with chores, Mom.”

“Excellent,” Alex said.

ALEX PRESSED HIS LIPS together, taking the stairs down two at a time. The kid showing up changed everything. It was one thing using an adult for his plans to draw out Eckert. An adult who could help take care of herself. Quite another for a defenseless child of five. Although, *defenseless* was not a term he would use to label that particular child.

The idea of Kelly as bait suddenly sickened him. When he’d spotted her at the airport he thought his knees wouldn’t support him. The subtle smudges of applied eye and lip color had not gone unnoticed. His mouth watered. An exotic flower, that’s what she was. Any chance of having her alone flew out

the window doused by a miniature bulldozer slash urchin slash she-princess. Sternly he reminded himself, seduction was not the plan. Who was he kidding, he thought, remorse settling over him. He'd planned on seducing Kelly the second he realized she wasn't wearing a ring. He wanted to bang his head against the wall. And if he started, he'd never stop.

Eckert had just been released from prison. Alex had flat out lied to Kelly, and it shredded him with guilt. He let out a disgruntled sigh. The plan had been flawed to begin with. Mentioning his suspicions that Samuel Eckert was expected in the area sometime over the next two weeks would have Kelly taking his head off.

Now with Taylor in the mix...well, that changed things exponentially. No way was he willing to risk a small child. Yeah, he'd stretched the truth a bit. *Lied*, his conscience slammed him over the head. After setting eyes on Kelly for the first time in over five years, he would have told her damn near anything to get her alone. Any semblance of common sense he'd possessed, whisked away with slightest breeze. Alex knew she didn't like Eckert, not many people did. Except for Alex's air-headed younger sister, Emily.

Alex considered his options. Hopefully, the kid had a decent bedtime. He smiled. Of course, she did. He'd heard evidence of it firsthand a week ago, hadn't he? He could extract as much information from Kelly on her old boss, after dinner. Perhaps, even a kiss or two, then drive them straight back to the airport the next day.

He stepped into his room and shut the door—a bit more soundly than warranted. He stormed over to the small desk in the corner, picked up his cell phone, and pulled up the number

to the airport. Service was sketchy at best, but they answered on the first ring. “I need two tickets to Denver for tomorrow morning.”

“One moment, please.” The sing-song voice of the agent grated on his last nerve. After a significant pause, she returned. “I’m sorry, sir, there’s nothing available until the following afternoon.”

Hell, two days? Worse—*nights*. How would he survive it? He swallowed a groan. “Book it.”

Kelly had the protection of her kid. What did he have? His CEO Certificate of Achievement? Right. Along with his college psych class—Restraint 101. He left the bedroom and ducked down the next flight of stairs. His best bet was to treat everything as he’d planned, then get them on the plane. Kelly would never have to know how low his actions were. How hard could it be?

“MEETING. AT THE table. Everyone!” Alex boomed, turning into the kitchen. Sound bounded off the wood surfaces throughout the house with force.

“Me, too?”

He backtracked and peered up the stairs where Taylor’s small head materialized over the third floor banister. Alex succeeded in keeping a straight face at the excitement beaming from her. What a strange little kid. His only recollection of small children before now was that of Emily. He was fifteen when she came along. By the time Emily had turned Taylor’s age, he’d been away from home and in college for two years.

“You, too,” he confirmed. Taylor crashed down the stairway, rattling through the house with pent up energy. Two days,

he reminded himself, pulling out a chair for her when she plowed through the kitchen doorway.

Kelly soon followed and dropped into the chair next to her daughter, suspicion permeating the air around her. “What’s this all about?”

“It’s a meeting, Mom. Let him talk.”

Kelly’s patience was at an end and when she opened her mouth to sandblast Taylor he held out an open palm to stall the tirade. “This is a good time to set up a few guidelines,” he said, reasonably.

*A sidebar from rule number eight: In control of attitudes. Handle crisis with calm and diplomacy; very few do.*

Okay, so it wasn’t a crisis. Yet, he acknowledged, remaining calm. A must, if one was determined to grip the situation with decorum. Kelly Mancer had an attitude he failed to recall from their previous acquaintance.

“What kind of guidelines?” Kelly shot him with narrowed eyes.

“Yeah, what kind of guidelines?” Imp echoed. The little traitor.

“Housekeeping detail. You know, the cooking, the cleaning, the playtime.” He lifted his shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. “I’ve booked the two of you on a flight back home two days hence.”

Kelly gasped.

“Yay, playtime. Wait, I thought we were ‘posed to be here two weeks.” Taylor frowned. “Mom?”

“That was my understanding, as well, darling. Perhaps we should ask the *boss*?” Kelly’s intensive gaze pierced him. Her calm was menacing. Unnerving, really. He blew out a pursed

breath. One issue at a time, he told himself.

He fought the urge to pull the shirt from his neck. It felt too tight. “Here’s the thing. We’re fairly secluded—”

“What’s secluded?” Taylor demanded.

“That means there’s no one else around.” Alex didn’t sit. He stood before them like any great CEO determined to lead his subordinates, rallying the forces.

“Why?” Taylor asked.

He stopped, frowning. Subordinates did not ask why. “Why is not important.”

Fortitude starting to ebb, Alex bit back sarcasm struggling to remember the little bulldozer was only five. “What I am trying to say, ,” he said, pointedly, “is that it’s remote here. I know it’s only two days, but you really need to stay in the house.” He directed the statement to both of them. “In other words, don’t leave the house.”

“Well, it’s certainly a given where Taylor’s concerned,” Kelly said through gritted teeth. “But—”

“—it goes for both of you,” he interrupted. The little kid certainly had her uses. That settled, he gave them a benign smile.

“Now, you listen to me—” Kelly rose from her chair.

Alex clamped a hand on her shoulder and pushed her back down. She landed with a resounding thump; he kept a pleasant smile in place. She turned one back on him, stunning him momentarily.

“Fine,” Kelly said. “But I believe you’ve failed to enlighten us to one of your key points. Two days versus two weeks?”

The room stilled, but not for long. “Yeah.” The echo.

“Two days,” Alex muttered, shaking his head to gather his wits. He certainly couldn’t tell Kelly he suspected Eckert in the area within the next two or three weeks. He had to get Emily home safely. Two pairs of gold-green eyes pierced him. Each waiting: Kelly’s narrowed, matching her compressed lips. Taylor’s full of suspicion, taking in each spoken word, watching every minute move.

“I’m sorry?” Kelly said.

“Two days,” he said. “The next available flight out is the day after tomorrow.” He forced a deep breath and expelled it slowly. Somehow Alex resisted the urge to run his fingers through his hair. The trick with these two was not to let them gain the upper hand.

*Rule number five: Think before speaking. One must discipline oneself to slow,* he coached himself.

Kelly opened her mouth but help came from an unexpected source when she caught her daughter’s mutinous expression and crossed arms. The fight fled her in a big whoosh.

“He’s right, Taylor.” Kelly’s steady, matter-of-fact manner dealing with her daughter drew a rise of unexpected admiration. Alex should have lifted his hand from Kelly’s shoulder but found touching her oddly irresistible. “It’s too isolated out here,” Kelly said. “There could be animals about. We’re practically in the wild. Not to mention the creek and the lake—”

“But I know how to swim,” Taylor whined. “And, I have my lucky charm. See?” She held out her outstretched palm.

“Lucky charm?” Alex leaned over Kelly’s shoulder to see where the urchin was pointing. An exotic scent of flowers filled

his nostrils. He blinked trying to concentrate. Ah, the moon-shaped mark on her hand.

“I know, darling, but it’s not your ability to swim that worries me, or your lucky charm—though, they’re important, too. It’s too cold this time of year.” Kelly clasped the urchin’s hands and leaned down giving her a direct, forthright gaze. Alex found himself mesmerized by the level of her intensity, the admirable strength. “If you somehow fell, God forbid, hypothermia could set in.”

“What’s pythermia?” Taylor demanded. Alex was sure she wasn’t quite convinced her mother spoke the truth.

“Hy-po-ther-mi-a,” Kelly enunciated slowly. “It’s when your body gets too cold and can’t warm up. People fall asleep and never wake up again. That wouldn’t be lucky, would it?”

“But I wouldn’t fall in,” Taylor insisted.

“Not on purpose. But if you slipped somehow...” Kelly swallowed. Alex felt Kelly’s reluctance in the line of conversation warring with her need to convey the importance of her message. “I would die if anything ever happened to you.” She’d ended on a whisper.

Alex snatched his hand off her shoulder and swiveled to the counter, started slamming canned goods into an overhead cabinet. He should have insisted she leave the urchin behind, not that he’d had any choice in the matter. Kelly hadn’t listened in the first place, had she?

The air suffocated him. The realization of his intrusion had his pulse accelerating, filled his ears with a sudden pounding. He did not fit into this little scenario. He didn’t need the complication of another family on top of everything else.

“Okay, Mommy. I won’t. I never want you to die.”

*Mommy?* Hadn't the bulldozer told him she didn't call Kelly "mommy"?

Unable to resist, Alex glanced over his shoulder. Just in time to see the tiny elf launch herself into Kelly's arms.

Kelly wrapped her daughter in a tight hug, pulling the child onto her lap before stabbing him with a lethal gaze. All he could think was that he was in deep shit. Very deep shit. The worst kind of bully, insisting Kelly leave behind a child. *Her child.*

"Is that all for your *rules?*" she directed to him over the head of cloudy black curls. Her calm demeanor defied her rigid form.

Alex cleared his throat in an awkward cough, straightening away from the cabinet. "Yeah, I thought we might want to share taking care of the meals, clean up. That sort of thing."

"Of course," Kelly agreed. "I certainly didn't expect you to cook and clean up after us."

Taylor twisted and pinned him with her wide gold eyes. Head against her mother's neck, thumb in her mouth, the urchin suddenly appeared exactly what she was—a five-year-old little girl.

Disturbed by this picture of vulnerability, he stood motionless, unsure of what to do. Not CEO-like at all.

The thumb plunked from the elf's mouth with a distinct plop. "Mom doesn't eat breakfast," she informed him blithely. "*She* sleeps late."

A dull red crept up Kelly's neck. The sight reassured him for some reason. Her blush made her more human somehow. As did an image of her flushed body beneath his, blurring his vision for a second. He blinked it away.

“Fine, uh, I’ll handle breakfast,” he offered quickly. “We can all help with the cleanup, I suppose. If you don’t mind doing dinner...” he trailed off.

“Doing dinner?” It was the first genuine smile he’d seen from Kelly since the whole absurd ordeal began, stirring a simmering heat through his veins. Two days. He could survive two days unscathed.

Taylor let out a giggle. Surely, that...that child did not perceive any innuendos?

“Sure, I’ll be happy to cook dinner. Taylor can be in charge of lunch,” Kelly settled, in his stumped silence.

Kelly’s decisiveness had him wondering who the hell had appointed her CEO. Taylor squirmed out of Kelly’s arms, enthused with her new assignment. Spying the glimmer of humor in Kelly’s eyes had Alex spinning back to the groceries on the counter. She would not crack his resolve. He needed to get them away. His bright idea of having Kelly help rescue Emily was turning out to be one of the worst ideas he’d ever had.

BRUSHING A WAYWARD STRAND from her face, Kelly wandered into the living area of Log Hill House where low lighting from a single lamp cast a soft glow. Taylor’s exhaustion finally won out at eight o’clock that night. It only took traveling through two airports, supervising lunch, drying the dinner dishes, and a leisurely walk (under Alex’s strict supervision). Kelly’s threshold was not so far behind. Yet she smiled, having watched Taylor scarcely make it through her bath with her eyes open. Up three flights of stairs, no less.

“I don’t know how you do it.” Alex said, startling her. His relaxed form reclined on the sofa glass of red wine in hand. His

long legs stretched out, ankles stacked, perched on the coffee table.

An enticing fire burned bright in an outrageously ornate fireplace comprised of intricately carved marble and iron. The intimacy of the situation hit her like a tidal wave. The sight reminded her of her ridiculously naïve longings years before. Before Taylor. Before Samuel Eckert.

Hiding doubts and irritation behind a façade of calm, she said, “I think it’s time you leveled with me.” Kelly’s gaze dropped to a second glass sitting on the table, half full.

“For you,” he said. His deep lazy resonance sent her stomach fluttering with awareness.

Kelly picked up the glass. If anything, it gave her something to focus on besides him. Twirling it in circular motion, its ruby tint hypnotized her for a moment.

“About what?”

Kelly lifted her eyes to his and sipped some wine. “What’s this nonsense about neither one of us leaving the house? That’s what you meant, wasn’t it, Alex? The place is deserted, for God’s sake.” Kelly moved to the window and looked out into a clear sky where a smattering of stars glittered brilliantly. The remoteness was unnerving. A shiver skittered down her spine.

“We’ve gone over this before.” His tone matched hers, she noted. Cool, level, and detached. She turned from the window to face him, resting her hip on the sill.

“Don’t play coy with me. Two-days-versus-two-weeks? Again, I ask, what’s really going on?”

He shrugged, and stared down into his glass. She narrowed her eyes on him.

“Yes, well. There’s something you’re *not* telling me, isn’t

there?" She'd nailed him, she thought, watching him shift. The move was subtle, but he was definitely uncomfortable. He tilted his glass for a small sip, the fragile stemware starkly evident in his strong, squared, capable hand. He deserved points for his skillful presentation.

She met his gaze head on. Unwavering.

"Samuel Eckert seduced my sister."

That surprised her. "Emily is your *sister*?" Kelly stood from the window, indulging in the sudden urge to pace. Why hadn't he mentioned the connection before now? "Why does she have a different last name?"

"A rebellious marriage right out of high school to spite my mother," he said, exasperated. "With an even quicker divorce."

"Go on," she said tightly.

"That's all. Everything is just as I told you. I need your knowledge about Eckert to help me get Emily away from him."

Unease slithered along her skin. "But you said there was no chance he'd see me," she accused. Something unreadable flared in his gaze. But it was gone so fast it looked like a trick from the flickering firelight. Only her survival instincts said otherwise.

"And I stand by that," Alex said. "But—"

The room suddenly became too stifling, the heat from the fire too hot. Her vision blurred, and for a moment she felt her balance shift axis. A strong arm had her by the shoulders, glass plucked from her fingers. She found herself planted on the sofa, way too close to Alex for comfort.

"Are you alright?"

Kelly brushed beaded moisture from her hairline, focused

on solid, deep intakes. She should never have given up her anxiety medication. Resentment plowed through her. How dare he put her in this position? She spent years doing right by Taylor. In less than a minute, Alex Gentry, the bastard, managed to turn her orderly life inside out. She gave him a hard look but he'd retrieved his glass from the coffee table.

“When did you say our flight was?” she demanded.

## THREE

TWO DAYS.”

The confidence and certainty that brimmed from Alex reassured her a little. She'd never trust any man completely. “The isolated house,” Kelly said. “Is he here? In the vicinity?” She choked out the question.

“No, he's not here.”

He might as well have said, *not yet*.

Kelly stood again and made her way to the window. She placed her heated cheek against the cold glass. After a long moment she lifted her face to the clear night sky and marveled at how well she kept her matter-of-fact tone.

“Not for fifty thousand dollars,” he quipped. “I *employed* you. But you brought your daughter. And I won't take the chance if something does turn sour.”

“Right. Fifty thousand dollars,” she repeated. “Turns sour? Are you telling me he could show?” Panic ripped through her outright. Nothing subtle. The beads of perspiration lining her forehead and under her breasts seemed to dehydrate her, while chill bumps pricked her arms and neck. “When is our flight?” she whispered.

“You asked that already. Thursday, around three.”

The thoughts flew through her mind, fast and furious. “I could rent a car and drive,” she said. She paced the distance

between the fire and the window, unaware she'd spoken aloud. "I need to pack." She stopped and turned on him. "Where's the phone in this godforsaken place?"

"You're not going anywhere."

"I had one request. One." Kelly brushed past him, furious. She had to check on Taylor. His hand snagged her arm. "I fail to see how you can stop me."

"Two," he said, looking pointedly down at the arm he held. "How do you propose getting to a rental car? Or paying for it? Have you not heard a word I've said?" He smiled. The flames from the fire made it appear demonic. "We're isolated. I own the keys to the Jeep, sweetie."

She stared at him, stunned. He was taunting her. The bastard. "How dare you," she hissed. Astonishment—and his grip—had her rooted in place.

"I cannot imagine what has you so tripped out about the guy. You worked for him for four years."

She jerked her arm from his hold. The oxygen in the place suddenly scarce, the fire sucking every last bit up the chute. Kelly spun, the move making her light-headed. She needed air. *Now*. She stumbled to the window. Where was the latch? Where was the goddammed latch?

"What is wrong with you?" Alex barked. His large hand pushed hers away and he flipped a connector between vertical frames.

Kelly shoved at the wood, and a rush of ice cold winter air bathed her hot cheeks. She gasped at the sting in her chest. The air was heavy, not dry like she'd imagined it should be.

"You need the money, don't you?" His tone shifted to a cajoling lure. "Look, we'll go over everything you know about

Eckert, his work habits, the people he knew well. Things of that nature before you head back. We can start tonight.”

Kelly twisted to study him outright. “Why did you bring me here?” she demanded. The slow smile he turned on her set her senses vibrating and her teeth on edge.

“What do you think?” he said softly.

“Oh. My. God. To seduce *me*?” Her voice raised in outrage. “That’s why you were so aggravated when you realized Taylor was with me.” She rubbed her hand over the arm she’d liberated from his hold, listening to the power vibrate through his voice.

He shrugged, looked as if he were about to respond, but snapped his mouth shut, stepping back. Not denying her accusation, not the least bit repentant.

“You’re willing to pay me fifty thousand dollars to get me in your bed? You could have hired a prostitute for much less.” What a total idiot he must think her.

He had the gall to laugh. “It *was* twenty-five. You upped the price, remember?”

“So I did.” She tossed him a sarcastic smile. “Apparently, my services are worth a small fortune. I had no idea.”

“Just relax,” he said. “In two days you and Taylor will be home safe and sound. Although, I should charge you twenty-five grand for bringing protection.”

Her moment of panic subsided. “Protection?” He was right, in two days she and Taylor would be home. She pulled the windows back in and locked them in place.

“The kid,” he grimaced. After a moment, his voice pitched low, serious. “Eckert was released from prison two months ago. He’s certainly not trustworthy. It’s my belief that he went after

Emily for revenge against me. For taking down his company.”

Kelly could well believe it.

“If you knew my mother, you’d pay it, too,” Alex went on. “Hell, I probably just should have let her at him. The bastard wouldn’t know what hit him.”

She turned quickly. What the hell was he talking about? “So your sister’s dating him?” She snagged her wine from the table, took a large gulp.

Alex frowned at that. Screw him—and took another drink.

“Eckert is bad news,” she said. “Your sister must have been desperate for attention to go after him.” She blew a strand of hair from her eyes.

“Emily didn’t go after *him*, Eckert went after *her*.”

Kelly quirked a brow at him.

Alex let out a frustrated sigh. “I believe I mentioned she’s a little rebellious.”

And, obviously, not too bright, Kelly thought. Part of the reason she’d decided to help Alex was that Kelly *knew* how dangerous Eckert was. As Alex so eloquently related, she’d worked for the man for four years. “So what else *aren’t* you telling me?” Kelly managed to keep her voice level, but despite that, a slight edge seeped through.

Alex, however, seemed to pull himself together. “Keep it down, would you? The kid just went to sleep. Do you want to wake her?” His condescending attitude, so cool-headed and removed, made her want to lash out.

How dare he act as if he knew her child? Her temper snapped. “Nice try. She’s on the third floor. Besides, once she’s out she sleeps like the dead.” *Oh, that should help maintain his distance.*

But the fact that Alex said he wanted her did send a tiny fission of thrill. It skittered over her raw senses like alcohol on braised skin. It felt like fire. It lasted half a second before fury warring with frustration reminded her she'd only doubted her instincts once years ago and it cost her. A mistake she'd learned a valuable lesson from. Or so she'd thought.

"Then what's to stop us from taking advantage of such a perfect opportunity." The provocative words had her whirling to him, her body reeling with contempt. Her nerves screamed with the need to explode. Her stomach coiled in knots. "We have unfinished business, you and I."

"There's never a perfect moment, never a perfect opportunity, never a perfect man," she bit out. Her face might still be hot, but her fingers were like ice. And it had nothing to do with the window she'd just closed. Kelly moved before the fire and held out her hands, let the blaze draw her in. Hypnotize her. She was immune to Alex Gentry. To all men. She damn sure didn't need or want the complication. So why was she letting him get to her?

She hauled in a lungful of air only to be hit with a faint hint of woody soap that *she* did not use. He'd closed in behind her. She fought the urge to shift away. That would have given him too much satisfaction. Steeling herself, she pivoted to face him and handed him a brilliant smile, all teeth. "You'd just better pray," she said softly. She felt him stiffen. Slight, but there. She leaned in, let her breath touch his cheek. And, just for an instant, wondered what his skin would taste like.

Horrified, yet stubborn and angry enough to maintain her position, she hissed, "that nothing happens to my daughter, because I'll fucking kill you." She stumbled back, praying it was

fury he read, before she stalked from the room. Somehow, she managed to control the contents of her wine, though they wobbled dangerously.

Kelly made it to the kitchen sink and downed the rest in one gulp, coughing at the pinch in her cheeks. She rinsed the glass with methodical precision, fingers shaking. She ascended the stairs in silence. Quite a feat, considering the echoing wood and her trembling knees.

A sudden urgency came over her at the second level, and she flew up the last flight in a dead run. She barely kept Taylor's door from slamming back against the wall and tip-toed to the bed to gaze down at her sleeping daughter.

Guilt swamped her knowing she treated her baby too much like an adult for all of Taylor's young age. She was growing up so fast. A tear slide down her cheek. The twenty hours of labor she'd suffered were worth every ounce of the pain. The large bed engulfing Taylor's tiny body snatched Kelly's breath. The covers wound around Taylor's legs leaving her arms bare despite the cool nip in the air.

Kelly stretched the covers to Taylor's chin and gently tugged her thumb from her mouth. It would be back before morning.

Alex Gentry may have set out to seduce her, but something resembling disappointment shot through her. Those dreams five years ago would never have an opportunity to come to fruition. A half-sob mixed with a strangled laugh erupted from her. Fifty thousand dollars in Bloomington was a house with a small yard, perhaps. In the country. Freedom from Aunt Mabel's patronizing remarks. A small financial safety net.

Of course, there was a lot more she wouldn't do. Becoming Alex's plaything being one. Dammit, there was too much at stake, and not all of it had to do with Taylor.

Kelly brushed a stray strand of hair from Taylor's brow and frowned. She should have left Taylor with Lorianne or Genna, Lorianne's partner in the bookstore. If anything happened to her daughter because she was too cowardly to face Alex alone, it would be her fault. She'd rather die than live life without that little girl. *Two days*, she promised herself. Her lips brushed Taylor's forehead. Safety was two days away.

Kelly moved to the chair to the windows and sat down. Moonlight filtering in shimmered off the gold threading throughout the room's papered walls. She could almost see the stream of cool air on the shafts of light as she settled in deep, letting the pillowed wings serve for heat. It would be a long time before she slept. She took comfort in Taylor's steady, even breaths. Let it ward off the ghosts from Kelly's past. More importantly, keep the devil of Alex Gentry at arm's length. How hard could that be for two days?

Another wave of guilt sliced through Kelly. She sincerely hoped Alex could help Emily. Eckert had a way of twisting the appearance of any situation. Her jaw clenched, almost in pain. Even rebellion did not deserve punishment at the hands of Samuel Eckert.

DAWN BROKE EARLY AS Alex pushed through the front door of Log Hill House the next morning. Chilled and heavy damp air greeted him with the fragrant fresh pine scent of the evergreens. He eyed the early morning clouds that rolled across the sky,

dark and ominous. Snow by late afternoon, if he wasn't mistaken. That should thrill the little urchin, remembering how he'd loved snow as a kid. Hopefully, the weather would not hinder Kelly and Taylor's flight home.

He ran a hand through his hair. The whole situation screamed disaster. Anger simmered just below the surface over Kelly's attack the night before. It was never his intention to put either Kelly or her daughter in danger. Her fears regarding Eckert were unwarranted. And the sooner Emily was safely back under his mother's controlling thumb, the sooner Alex could get on with...*with what?* Taking up where he and Kelly had left off five years ago? She stirred his blood to boiling, but now she had a child. That upped the stakes tenfold. Yet, could he walk away again, having never tasted her?

Definitely not, he grimaced. Just the thought of touching her singed his fingertips.

Alex wandered to the side of the porch, rested his forearms on the rail, and cast a moody glance over the lower valley to the lake. For a short time he allowed himself to be captivated by small choppy waves as gray and nippy as the clouds overhead. A small bird made a sharp dive, certain of its success in finding fish.

He'd flinched at Kelly's silent, retreating footsteps the night before. How ironic that after five plus years, he still harbored the deepest desire to pour himself into her. Hell, meeting her outrageous, outspoken, elf slash bulldozer would scare off the most determined man. But, not him. Oh, no. He just had to be the poster child for tenacity—or was it stupidity?

It was the haunted depths in her eyes that drew him. Something deep, siphoning his soul in a whirling vortex that he

couldn't, perhaps refused to, identify.

How was it the CEO of a successful merger and acquisitions company could be such a loser when it came to dealing with people—no, not people—women? No, not women, one particular woman, on a personal level. And her kid. And his sister. Ye gads. Emily had proven a prime example. Alex shook his head. Okay. Women, plural.

Still, he led his employees, men *and* women, with a gutsy confidence. Took pride in his detail-oriented competence. What was it about these interpersonal relationships that shot his all boardroom tactics to smithereens?

Without warning, a burst of wind whipped through heavy chimes mounted on the other end of the porch. Alex hadn't lied about wanting Kelly. Now he had two days to make good on his promise to her. But, God, how he hungered for her. More than anything he wanted that opportunity they'd lost all those years ago. *When she'd run*. Deep in his heart, he knew his attraction to her hadn't been shallow. She'd been the one. But how to show her? Get her to give them a chance?

He needed a plan. A plan that encompassed the daughter as well as the mom, because the two were a package deal. And at the moment, he was up to the challenge. Taylor was the key to his success. It may be cold-blooded but they *needed* him.

Alex drummed his fingers on the wooden rail. He just had to approach the situation with the same level of determination and straightforward maneuvering he did when a potential takeover was in the works. He shook his head, two days to get under her skin, because nothing would stop him from going after her when this mess with Emily was resolved.

Alex grimaced. It was all in the strategic planning. *Rule*

*number seven: Originality. The more opportunities you create, the less likely you are to ever run out of growth challenges. The task becomes selecting and executing the correct one.* A whoosh of air left him.

The task right now? Breakfast.

An enveloping warmth infused him when he entered the house after the cool mountain air. First up, coffee. Moving to the kitchen, he stopped. The sight of the scraggly haired elf standing in the middle of the room barefoot, anchoring a full gallon of milk with both arms, muscles straining, caught him off guard. Did little kids' muscles strain?

"That thing is as big as you are." He confronted her, hands on hips. "I thought *I* was in charge of breakfast."

Lifting her shoulders, she shuffled to the table and hefted it up, showing amazing strength for one so small. "I'm hungry." She faced him, mimicking his stance. Hers appeared much more defiant.

He grabbed the milk and shoved it back in the refrigerator, then reached for the eggs. Without a word, Taylor climbed up in one of the chairs and folded her arms across the table, dropped her chin on top of crossed wrists, eyeing him with speculation.

"Where's your mother?" he asked.

"In bed, a-course."

"What do you mean 'of course'?"

"She doesn't get up early." The urchin rolled her eyes. "Remember? I told you that yesterday. That's why she let you cook breakfast. She *hates* breakfast."

"Who doesn't like breakfast?" he muttered.

"She doesn't. I just told you."

He ignored that. “What time does she normally get up then?” He jerked a mixing bowl from a lower cabinet. Every moment spent in this *child’s* company left him wanting to laugh his ass off or scream for mercy. She was entertaining at least.

“After cartoons.”

Yeah, that was helpful. He cracked an egg. Getting information out of an elf was something akin to pulling teeth. He wondered briefly if elves had teeth. Obviously, they did. He’d have to strive for more subtlety. Or finesse. Or blatancy. Whatever.

“Why does she sleep so late?”

“I don’t know. You’re gonna need milk for that.”

“So you know how to make an omelet, too?”

Tossing a glance over his shoulder he caught her wrinkling her nose. He cracked another egg.

She answered in disgust. “I could, but my mom doesn’t let me turn the stove on while she’s sleeping.”

“That’s something, anyway,” he said under his breath. He added two more eggs before turning to address her directly, “Do all little kids know as much as you?”

Silence and mutiny in the form of compressed lips met him. Uh oh. He’d said something wrong. The rebellious expression on her tiny face was becoming excruciatingly familiar. “Here,” he said quickly, plunking the bowl down in front of her. “You can beat the eggs. You *can* beat eggs, can’t you?”

“Not without a thingy,” she muttered. Her voice was taut with disapproval.

He gave her a quick questioning glance before catching on. “Oh, you mean a whisk.” He started pulling drawers. The best he could find was a large serving fork.

She hesitated, obviously contemplating its practicality before snatching it out of his outstretched hand. Her lips, however, remained pressed together in an unmistakable silent punishment he had yet to comprehend. He cast a fleeting glance to the hallway, wishing for respite from the third of this awkward triangle. When the silence grew so fulminating, he finally demanded, "Okay, what is it?" He kept his attention on his task.

She beat the eggs with a stubborn violence sure to send them to hell and back. In fact, if he wasn't mistaken a small drop just hit the back of his hand. He stepped to the sink and flipped on the water. Dousing the egg from his hand, he swiped up a towel, giving her plenty of time to respond.

Silence.

He sighed, thus, again, reaffirming his stand on small children, urchins, elves, and tiny bulldozers. And things had started so well.

He searched through the cabinets for a cutting board, and found one standing upright beneath the sink. He grabbed and braced the onion with deft fingers. The knife aimed at dicing split, precise, and even-cut pieces, relieving a little of his aggravation.

The fork banged the side of the bowl in an erratic pattern. Resisting the urge to look, he forced himself to concentrate on not cutting off his fingers. Short work of the ham was next.

"Damn it," she mumbled.

Alex kept his face averted until he could maintain, yet another, blank expression. She really needed to control her language better. On the other hand, he needed every advantage afforded him.

"Ahem," he coughed, discreetly. A small gasp erupted.

“Can I help you with something?” he asked her. Struggling to keep the twitch from his lips, he turned to meet her eyes.

“No,” she frowned. She stilled then she flattened him with an unwavering gaze. “Are you going to tell on me?”

He turned back to the stove top, tipping oil in the skillet over a small flame. “*I won’t say anything.*” After a short pause, he added, “But, surely you realize, you’re not fooling anyone?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s the only obvious conclusion if you’d gotten a spanking once before. *Someone* heard you. Was it your mom?” The uneven pounding resumed. Harder, even. He frowned.

“No.” He heard her sigh. “This needs milk.”

“I’ll get it,” he told her when she made to climb down from her perch. He pulled on the refrigerator door.

“It was my great-great Aunt Mabel.” The soft words seemed to crawl from her, prickling over his skin.

“Your Aunt Mabel spanked you?” he asked, brows drawn. “Did your mom know?” He grabbed the milk. Unscrewing the cap on the bottle offered him the opportunity to study her small pert face. She focused with such fierce concentration on the duty at hand, she failed to notice his scrutiny.

She had thick dark lashes and a nose that turned up at the end. Her full lips formed a definite pout. The resemblance to her mother was uncanny. Kelly’s future held a very large stick, beating the boys away. Something he did *not* envy.

“No.” Her voice dropped. He had trouble discerning the emotion in that one word. Embarrassment? Shame? Guilt? He tipped the milk into the bowl. Hurt?

“Not too much,” she instructed, drawing a quick smile from him.

“You’ve got egg on your face.” An unexpected urge to wipe it away struck him but he resisted. She’d probably bite his finger off if it got too close for treating her like a five-year-old. He hadn’t had time for vaccinations, he smirked. “Was she mean?”

Taylor ignored the question by pressing her lips together again.

They needed a change of subject, he decided. “Do you play cards?”

TAYLOR LEVERAGED A CONCENTRATED beam on Alex’s back. *She* wasn’t stupid like other little kids. She hated when people called her a little kid. Aunt Mabel treated her like she was three *and* stupid. Aunt Mabel was mean. She didn’t want to talk about Aunt Mabel. “I can play Go Fish and Crazy Eights.”

“Crazy Eights, huh?” He turned from the stove and stood in front of her.

She met his eyes, wondering what it would be like if *he* were her dad. He wasn’t as mean as he tried to pretend. He probably wouldn’t be that bad. But then her mother would have to kiss him. She didn’t want to share her mom. They were a team. Mom *always* said so.

“Are those eggs ready yet? I’m getting hungry and we still have to cook them,” he demanded.

Startled from her silly dreams, Taylor peered in the bowl, frowning. They looked okay to her. Not perfect, but hell...heck, she was only five. She held the bowl out in answer.

Taylor watched him pour the eggs in the sizzling skillet. The cooked onions and ham wafting through the air made her stomach rumble. He threw a grin over his shoulder. She almost

smiled back, but stopped herself just in time. “Do you have kids?” She didn’t know how her mom could sleep through the smell. She was starving.

“Lord, no. What would I do with kids? I travel most of the time.”

“Oh.” Elbows on the table, chin resting on her fist, Taylor thought about that for a minute. “So?” She couldn’t see his face but she was almost positive he didn’t like her asking questions, ’cause he just pretended she hadn’t said it.

She saw him glance toward the hallway before asking, “How come your mom doesn’t talk about your dad?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“Have you ever asked?”

“I already told you, she won’t tell me,” she huffed. “—’cides, I just don’t think she knows.”

She winced at his startled exclamation. “Doesn’t know? I knew your mom several years ago and—” He stopped.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He bent down to look at the fire under the eggs and fixed it. He picked up the spatula to stir the eggs. *She* could have done that, she thought resentfully, and poked out her bottom lip.

What did he mean ‘nothing’? She narrowed her eyes. She may be five, but she knew it wasn’t nothing. “Don’t forget the cheese,” she told him.

“Ah, hell.”

She grinned.

KELLY WOKE TO A lingering fragrance of...of something. Whatever it was turned her stomach. Groaning with a luxurious

stretch, she burrowed her head deeper into the pillow, reveling in the huge bed's softness. Then, dreams of strong arms and firm lips surrounding her in a bubble world of safety came crashing forward. This was a disaster. It seemed her long ago attraction to Alex hadn't abated at all. She placed her palms on hot cheeks. "One more day," she moaned in a soft whisper, pulling the covers back over her head.

*What was that smell?* Breakfasts were nauseating. She hadn't been able to stomach eggs in the morning since her early pregnancy. In fact, the thought of breakfast, no matter what, was disgusting.

Though coffee would be nice. A steaming fresh brew of French roast with all the trappings. Did she smell coffee? Hmm, maybe. Oh, the peace. She shoved the covers from her head and rolled over slowly. The room, old-fashioned and charming, was nice to wake to.

She and Taylor had had a nice small apartment in Dallas before she'd become a statistic of the sagging economy. Kelly eyed the bay window. But nothing as grand as this. And once Grammy had passed on and she'd had to ask Aunt Mabel for help—well, it still galled her.

She let out a sigh. Oh, to lie here a whole day. But, no. She was a mom, and she had mom duties. Taylor must be up, that child had never been one for sleep. Never. The child rose with the roosters. What time was it anyway? She glanced around the room. No clock.

Kelly tilted her head, and listened. Nothing, but she definitely caught the un-enticing aroma of eggs. Her stomach churned. Good Lord. That girl had better not be trying to cook again. She *knew* better. Kelly jumped from the bed, feet hitting

the icy floor and jerked on the door.

A soft giggle from her precocious daughter drifted up the stairs followed by the deep mumblings of their housemate. She'd almost forgotten about Alex. A surprising feat since thoughts of him kept her awake long past the moment she'd heard him come up the stairs and slip into his room across the hall, which triggered more anxiety about Samuel Eckert that Alex was lying to her. He had to be in the area. Why else would Alex set up house in the middle of nowhere? She swallowed hard. One more day.

"I think you must be cheating." Alex's words reverberated up the wood stairs.

"I don't cheat," Taylor returned. Taylor's following huff indicated that things were well in hand.

Kelly retreated back into her room and pushed the door closed with a quiet click. She wasn't quite so reassured by his unperturbed pose and storm-gray eyes that trapped her so successfully.

She needed coffee. How she yearned for restful sleep. It was a luxury she hadn't experienced in years.

She cast a longing glance to the bed and sighed. Fifty grand. *I guess that's off the table now.*

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