

**MAUREEN
CHILD**

**BARGAINING FOR
KING'S BABY**



Published by Silhouette Books
America's Publisher of Contemporary Romance

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SILHOUETTE BOOKS

ISBN-13: 978-0-373-76857-8
ISBN-10: 0-373-76857-5

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Printed in U.S.A.

One

“You’re obsessed.” Travis King looked at his older brother and smiled. “And not in a good way.”

“I agree,” Jackson King said, with a shake of his head. “Why is this so important to you anyway?”

Adam King looked from one of his brothers to the other and paused for a few seconds before answering them. When he did, he used the tone he usually reserved for his employees—the tone that precluded arguments. “We agreed when we took over the reins of the family businesses from Dad that we’d each be in charge of our own areas.”

Then he waited, because Adam knew his brothers weren’t finished. Every month, the King brothers held a meeting. They’d get together either here at the family ranch, at the vineyard Travis operated or on one of the

executive jets Jackson owned and leased to the mega-wealthy of the world.

The King family had holdings in so many different areas, the monthly meetings helped the brothers keep up with what the tangled lines of the King dynasty were up to at any given moment. But it also gave the brothers a chance to catch up on each other's lives. Even if sometimes, Adam thought, that meant putting up with interference—no matter how well meant.

Picking up his Waterford crystal tumbler of brandy, he swirled the amber liquid in the bottom of the glass and watched the firelight from the hearth wink in its depths. He knew it wouldn't take long to get a comment from his brothers and he silently bet himself that it would be Travis who spoke first. A moment later, he was proven right.

"Yeah, Adam, we each run our own areas," Travis said, taking a deep sip of a King Vineyard Merlot. Travis preferred drinking the wines his vineyard produced to the brandy Adam enjoyed. He shot a look at Jackson, who nodded at him. "That doesn't mean we won't have a question or two."

"Have all the questions you like," Adam told him. He stood up, walked to the massive stone hearth and stared down into the crackling fire. "Just don't expect me to answer them."

Jackson spoke up as if to head off a budding confrontation. Holding his glass of Irish whiskey, he said, "We're not saying that the ranch isn't yours to do with as you want, Adam. We're only trying to figure out

why it means so damn much to you to get back every inch of land we used to hold.”

“The ranch is mine,” he said simply. “If I want to make it whole again, why should you care?”

“We don’t,” Travis said, speaking up before Jackson could. Leaning back in the maroon leather chair, he kicked his feet out in front of him, balanced the fragile wineglass on his flat stomach and looked at Adam through slitted eyes. “I just want to know why *you* care. Hell, Adam, Great-Grandpa King sold off that twenty-acre parcel to the Torinos nearly sixty years ago. We already own nearly half the county. Why’s that twenty acre plot so important?”

Because he’d set out to do this and Adam had never given up on anything. Once he’d made up his mind to do something, it got done, come hell or high water. He glanced from his brothers to the wide front windows overlooking a stretch of neatly tended lawn and garden that stretched for almost a quarter of a mile before feeding into the road.

This ranch had always been important to him. But in the last five years, it had become everything to him and damned if he’d stop before it was complete again.

Outside, the night was thick and black, broken only by tiny puddles of decorative lights positioned along the wide, curved driveway. This was his home. *Their* home. And he was going to see to it that it was once again completely in King hands.

“Because it’s the last missing piece,” Adam said, thinking of the last five years. Years that he’d spent buying

back every piece of land that had been in the original King land grant more than a hundred and fifty years ago.

The King family had been in central California since before the gold rush. They'd been miners and ranchers and farmers and ship builders. Over the years, the family had changed with the times, moving into different fields, expanding their dynasty. Generations of them had worked to broaden the family's holdings. To grow and build on the previous generations—with one exception.

Their great-grandfather, Simon King, had been more of a gambler than a family scion. And to support his gambling habits, he'd sold off pieces of his heritage.

Adam didn't know if he could make his brothers understand—didn't know that he cared to try. All he knew was that he'd devoted the last five years to putting the jigsaw pieces of this ranch back together and he wasn't going to stop until he'd completed the task.

"Fine," Jackson said, shooting Travis a quick *shut-up* look. "If it's that important to you, go ahead."

Adam snorted. "Your permission isn't necessary. But thanks."

Jackson smiled. As always, the youngest of the King boys was almost impossible to rile. "Good luck getting that land away from the Torinos, though," he added, taking a sip of his whiskey and giving a dramatic sigh. "That old man holds on to everything that's his with both hands." His mouth twisted into a smile. "Like you, big brother. Sal's not going to just up and sell it to you."

Adam smiled now, and lifted his brandy snifter in a salute. "What was Dad's favorite saying?"

“*Every man’s got his price,*” Travis said, and lifted his glass, too, as he finished their father’s quote, “*the trick is to find it the quickest way you can.*”

Jackson shook his head, but lifted his glass to his brothers. “Salvatore Torino may be the exception to that rule.”

“Not a chance,” Adam said and he could already taste the victory he’d worked five years for. He wasn’t about to let one stubborn neighbor stand in the way of success. “Sal’s got a price. *Somewhere.*”

Gina Torino hooked the heel of her scuffed boot on the bottom rung of the weathered wooden fence. She crossed her arms on the top rail and looked out at the field in front of her. The sun was shining out of a clear blue sky, the grass was thick and green and a brand-new baby was trotting alongside his mother.

“See, Shadow?” she whispered to the contented mare, “I told you he’d be fine.”

Of course, last night Gina hadn’t been so sure. Playing midwife to a Gypsy horse she’d raised from infancy had absolutely terrified her. But today, she could smile and enjoy the moment.

Her gaze followed the black-and-white mare as she moved lazily around the enclosure, new baby at her feathered heels. The Gypsies were the most beautiful horses Gina had ever seen. Their broad shoulders, proud neck and the “feathers,” or long, delicate hairs flying around their feet, looked exquisite. Most people, of course, took one look at the breed and thought...minia-

ture Clydesdales. But the Gypsy horses were something else entirely.

“You baby them.”

Gina didn't even turn when her mother spoke up from behind her. This was a long-standing argument—with her mother claiming that Gina spent too much time with the horses and too little time looking for a husband. “There's no harm in that.”

“You need your *own* babies.”

Gina rolled her eyes, grateful her mother couldn't see the action. Teresa Torino didn't care how old her children were. If they sassed, they were just as likely to get a swat on the back of the head as they had been when they were children. If she'd had any sense at all, Gina told herself, she'd have moved away like two of her three older brothers had.

“I know you're rolling your eyes....”

Grinning, Gina glanced back over her shoulder. Teresa Torino was short, curvy and opinionated. Her black hair was going gray and she didn't bother dyeing it, instead reminding everyone in the family that she'd *earned* those gray hairs. Her chin was stubborn and her brown eyes were sharp and didn't miss much.

“Would I roll my eyes at you, Mom?”

One dark eyebrow lifted. “If you thought you could get away with it, yes.”

Gina lifted her face into a soft wind blowing in off the nearby ocean and changed the subject. Safer that way. “I heard you talking on the phone to Nick this morning. Everything all right?”

“Yes,” Teresa said, walking up to join her daughter at the split rail fence. “Your brother Nickie’s wife is pregnant again.”

Ah. So this explained the *let’s get Gina married and pregnant* theme of the morning. “That’s great news.”

“Yes. That will be three for Nick, two children for Tony and four for Peter.”

Her brothers were really doing all they could to repopulate the world with Torinos, Gina thought with a smile. She loved being an aunt, of course. But she wished they all lived closer, so they could take more of the heat off of *her*. Yet of the three Torino sons, only Tony lived here on the ranch, working it with their father. Nick was in Colorado, coaching high school football and Peter was in Southern California, installing computer software for security companies.

“You’re a lucky nonna to have so many grandbabies to spoil,” Gina said, sliding a glance at her mother.

“Could be luckier,” Teresa countered with a sniff.

“Mom...” Gina couldn’t stop the sigh that slipped from her. “You’ve got eight and a half grandchildren. You don’t need me to produce one.”

Her mother had always dreamed of Gina’s wedding day. Of seeing her only daughter walk down the aisle on her father’s arm. The fact that Gina hadn’t complied didn’t sit well with Teresa.

“It’s not good for you to be alone, Gina,” her mother said, slapping one hand against a board hard enough to make the fence rattle.

“I’m not alone,” Gina argued. “I’ve got you and

Papa, my brothers, their wives, their kids. Who could ever be alone in this family?"

Teresa, though, was on a roll. The music of her still-thick Italian accent colored her words when she spoke again. "A woman should have a man in her life, Gina. A man to love and be loved by..."

Gina felt her back go up, even though a part of her agreed with her mother. It wasn't as if she'd gone out of her way to decide to *never* get married. To *never* have children. It's just the way things had worked out.

"Just because I'm not married, Mom," Gina interrupted, "that doesn't mean I don't have men in my life."

Teresa sucked air in through her nose in a disapproving sniff that was so loud, one of the horses in the meadow turned its head to investigate. "I don't want to know about that."

Good, because Gina didn't really want to talk about her love life—or lack thereof—with her *mother*. She loved her parents dearly, she really did. Teresa had been born into a huge Sicilian family and had come to America more than forty years ago to marry Sal Torino. And despite the fact that Sal had been born and raised in America, he tended to side with his wife when she clung to Old World values—namely, that daughters who hadn't found husbands by their thirtieth birthday were destined to be old maids.

Sadly, Gina's thirtieth birthday had come and gone two months ago.

"Mom..." Gina took a breath, blew it out and prayed for patience. She'd hoped that having her own small

house built on the family ranch would give her more privacy. Would make her parents think of her as a capable adult. She should have known better. Once a Torino child, *always* a Torino child.

“I know, I know,” Teresa said, holding up one hand as if to stave off a familiar argument. “You are a grown woman. You don’t need a man to complete you.” She gave an impatient huff. “I should never have let you watch those talk shows when you were growing up. They fill your head with—”

“—sense?” Gina offered, smiling. She did love her mom, it was just so aggravating having to apologize for not being married and/or pregnant all the damn time.

“Sense. Is it sense to live alone? To not have love in your life? No,” Teresa snapped, not waiting for an answer. “It is not.”

It would be easier to argue with her mom if a part of Gina didn’t agree. Okay, a small part. But a tiny voice in the back of her mind whispered that she wasn’t getting any younger. That she should give up on old fantasies that should have died years ago.

Yet somehow...she couldn’t quite manage it.

“I’m fine, Mom,” she said, willing herself to believe it.

Teresa laid one hand on her daughter’s forearm and gave her a pat. “Of course you are.”

Okay, Gina was willing to accept that, even if her mom was placating her. At least it had stopped the conversation. “Where’s Papa?” she asked. “He was going to come look over the new baby this morning.”

Teresa waved one hand. "He has a 'meeting' he said. Very important."

"Yeah? With who?"

"You think he tells me?" Teresa huffed out a frustrated breath and Gina smiled.

Nothing her mother hated more than not knowing what was going on at all times.

"Well, while Papa's in his meeting, you can meet the new baby."

"Horses," Teresa muttered. "You and your horses."

Gina laughed and took her mother's hand. "Come on."

As they walked to the fence gate, a rumble of noise drifted to them and Gina turned to watch a car approach down the long driveway leading in from the main road. Dust billowed behind the black luxury SUV and Gina felt a stir of something deep inside her when she recognized the car. Despite trying to ignore that feeling, her breath caught and held in her chest and her mouth suddenly went dry.

She didn't even need to read the license plate... KING 1 to know without a doubt that Adam King was in that car. She felt it as surely as she felt the rocky ground beneath her feet. What was that, anyway? Some sort of inner radar that leaped into life whenever Adam got close?

"So, Adam King is the important meeting," her mother mused. "I wonder why."

Gina wondered, too. She knew she should just go about her business, but somehow, she couldn't make her feet move. She just stood there and watched as Adam

parked his car and opened the door. When he stepped out and looked around, his dark-eyed gaze sliding across the ranch yard, something inside her jumped in reaction. Stupid, she told herself. Stupid to feel anything for a man who didn't even know you existed.

Adam's gaze kept moving, as if he were cataloging the Torino ranch and would be given a test on it later. Finally, his gaze moved over Gina. She stiffened. Even from a distance she felt the power of his stare as if he'd reached out and touched her.

He nodded at her and her mother, and Gina forced herself to lift one hand in a halfhearted wave. Almost before her fingers had stopped moving, though, Adam had turned for the house.

"A cold man, that one," Teresa said in a quiet voice from right beside Gina. Crossing herself she added, "There is a darkness in him."

Gina had felt the darkness, too, so she couldn't really argue the point. But she'd known Adam and his brothers all of her life. And she'd always wanted to be the one to ease the darkness back for him.

Stupid, she supposed. What is it with women that we all want to be the one to "save" a guy? she wondered.

She was still standing there, watching after Adam, even though he'd already gone into the ranch house for his meeting with her father. And finally, Gina felt her mother watching her. "What?"

"I see something in your eyes, Gina," her mother whispered, worry tightening her mouth and flashing in her gaze.

Gina immediately turned away and started walking toward the horses in the meadow. Lifting her chin, she whipped her hair back out of her eyes and said, "I don't know what you mean, Mom."

Teresa wasn't so easily put off, however. She hurried after her daughter, took hold of Gina's arm and dragged her to a stop. Looking into her eyes, Teresa said, "You cannot fool me. There is something there in you for Adam King. And you must not surrender to it."

Surprised, Gina laughed. "Excuse me? This from the woman who not five minutes ago was telling me to get married and start having babies?"

"Not with him," Teresa said. "Adam King is the one man I do not want for you."

Unfortunate.

Since Adam King was the only man Gina wanted.

Two

Adam knocked on the front door, waited impatiently and then jerked to attention when a shorter, older man opened it and smiled out at him.

“Adam,” Sal Torino said, stepping back and waving him inside. “Right on time, as always.”

“Sal. Thanks for seeing me.” Adam stepped into the house and glanced around. It had been a long time since he was last here, but he noticed that the place hadn’t changed much.

The entryway was wide and lit from above by a skylight that spilled sunshine in a wash of gold across the gleaming pine floors. The hall leading to the back of the house was covered in framed family photos of smiling kids and proud parents. The high, arched doorway that led into the living room where Sal

gestured for Adam to follow had been unchanged, as well. The walls were still a soft, warm yellow, the furniture was oversize and comfortable, and a stone hearth, cold now, held a copper urn filled with fresh flowers. Sal took a seat on the sofa and reached for a coffeepot sitting on a tray atop a wide, scarred pine table.

While Sal poured coffee Adam didn't want, he wandered the room and stopped at the curved bay window. The glass gleamed in the morning light and provided a sweeping view of the neatly trimmed lawn ringed by ancient oak trees. Adam hardly noticed, though. His mind was already focused on the task at hand: How he would convince Sal to sell him the land he needed.

“So, what brings Adam King to my house first thing in the morning?”

Adam turned around to look at his neighbor. Sal stood about five foot eight, had thick black hair streaked with gray, skin as weathered and tanned as old leather and sharp brown eyes.

He walked over to take the coffee cup Sal offered him and then had a sip just to be polite. Sitting down opposite the other man, Adam cupped the heavy mug between his palms and said, “I want to talk to you about that twenty-acre parcel in your north pasture, Sal.”

The older man's face split in an understanding smile as he leaned back into the sofa cushions. “Ah.”

It wasn't good business to let your opponent know how badly you wanted something. But Sal Torino was no dummy. The King family had made offers for that

land several times over the last couple of decades and Sal had always turned them down flat. So, he already knew how important this was to Adam. No point in trying to pretend otherwise.

“I want that land, Sal, and I’m willing to make you a deal that’ll give you a hell of a profit on it.”

Shaking his head Sal took a gulp of coffee, swallowed and sighed. “Adam...”

“Hear me out.” Adam leaned forward, set his coffee cup down on the tray and sat back again, bracing his forearms on his thighs. “You don’t use that piece of land for grazing or pasture. It’s just sitting there.”

Sal smiled and shook his head again. Fine. He was stubborn. Adam could appreciate that. He bit down on the impatience scratching at his insides and forced a congenial tone to his voice. “Think about this, Sal. I’m willing to make you another substantial offer for the property.”

“Why is this so important to you?”

Now we play the game. Adam wished this were all somehow easier. Sal knew damn well about Adam’s quest to make the King ranch whole again, but clearly he was going to have to spell it all out.

“It’s the last piece of the original King family holdings,” Adam said tightly. “Which you already know.”

Sal smiled again and Adam thought the older man sort of looked like a benevolent elf. Too bad he didn’t look like an elf who wanted to sell. “So let’s get down to business here. You don’t need the land. I want the land. Simple as that. So what do you say?”

“Adam,” Sal started, pausing for another sip of coffee, “I don’t like selling land. What’s mine is mine. You know that. You feel the same way I do.”

“Yes, and that parcel is *mine*, Sal. Or it should be. It started out King land. It should be King land again.”

“But it isn’t.”

Adam quietly seethed with frustration.

“I don’t need your money.” Sal sat forward, set his coffee cup down and then stood up to wander the room. “You know that, and yet, you come to me anyway, thinking to sway me with an argument for profit margins.”

“Making a profit’s not a sin, Sal,” Adam countered.

“Money is not the only thing a man thinks about, though.”

Sal stopped at the hearth, leaned one arm on the heavily carved mantel and looked down at Adam.

Adam wasn’t used to being the one on the defensive in a negotiation. And looking up at Sal from the comfort of a too-soft chair made him feel at a disadvantage, so he stood up, too. Shoving both hands into the pockets of his jeans, he watched the older man and wondered what Sal was up to.

“I hear an implied ‘but’ in there somewhere,” Adam said. “So why don’t you just tell me what you’ve got in mind and we can decide if we’re going to be able to make a deal.”

“Ah,” Sal said. “So impatient. You should learn to enjoy life more, Adam. It’s not good to build a life solely on business.”

“Works for me.”

Adam wasn't interested in listening to advice. He didn't want to hear about “enjoying” life. All he wanted was that last piece of land.

“There was a time when you didn't feel that way,” Sal mused and the smile slipped off his features even as his dark eyes went soft and sympathetic.

Adam stiffened perceptibly. The worst part of living in a small town was having everyone for miles around knowing your personal business. Sal, he knew, was trying to be nice, so he kept a lid on the simmering knot of something ugly inside him. People thought they knew him. Thought they could understand what he was feeling, thinking. But they were wrong.

He wasn't interested in sympathy any more than he was looking for advice. He didn't *need* anyone's pity. Adam's life was just as he wanted it.

Except for owning that damned piece of land.

“Look, Sal,” Adam said slowly, quietly, “I'm not here to talk about my life. I'm here to make a deal. So if you don't mind...”

Sal clucked his tongue in disapproval. “You are a single-minded man, Adam. And while I admire that, it can also make one's life harder than it has to be.”

“Let me worry about my life, okay?” That sizzle of impatience he'd felt earlier had begun to bubble and froth in the pit of his stomach. “What do you say, Sal? Are we going to be able to come to an agreement?”

Sal braced his feet wide apart, folded his arms across his chest and tipped his head to one side, studying

Adam as if looking for something in particular. After a long moment or two, he said, "We might be able to strike a deal. Though the terms I have in mind are somewhat different than you were expecting."

"What're you talking about?"

"Simple," Sal said with a shrug. "You want the land. I want something in return. And it's not your money."

"Then what?"

The older man nodded, walked back to the sofa and sat down again, getting comfortable. When he was settled, he looked up at Adam and said, "You know my Gina."

"Yeah..." Suspicion rattled through Adam.

"I want to see her happy," Sal said.

"I'm sure you do." And what the *hell* did Gina have to do with any of this?

"I want to see her married. Settled. With a family."

Everything in Adam went still and cold. He suddenly became hyperaware. He heard the ticking of the clock that hung over the fireplace. He heard a fly bumping against the bay window. He took a long, slow, deep breath and dragged in the enticing aroma of spaghetti sauce bubbling in the kitchen. Adam's skin felt too tight and every nerve ending in his body was standing straight up.

He took another breath, shook his head and stared at Sal, hardly able to believe what he'd just heard—realization at what Sal could be insinuating hitting him like a ton of bricks. But the older man was staring at him through steady, determined eyes, allowing Adam

time to absorb what he'd said. But how could he possibly believe the old man was serious?

Adam had faced tough negotiators before and come out on top, though. Today would be no different.

"I don't see what Gina getting married has to do with me *or* this conversation."

"Don't you?" Sal smiled. "You're a man alone, Adam. Gina is alone, as well..."

This was *not* going the way he'd planned.

Gina?

Married?

To *him*?

No way. He looked into Sal's eyes and saw that the older man was absolutely sincere. No matter how whacked it sounded. Adam ground his back teeth together and took a couple of long, hopefully calming, breaths. Didn't help.

"Let me be clear," Sal said, shifting to rest one arm along the back of the sofa, like a man completely at ease with himself and his surroundings. "I offer you a deal, Adam. Marry my Gina. Make her happy. Give her one or two babies. And I give you the land."

Babies?

Fury erupted within and turned Adam's vision red at the edges. His lungs labored for air. His brain was covered in a mist of temper that made thinking nearly impossible. Which was probably for the best. Because if he took the time to actually consider what Sal was saying, who the hell knew what he might say?

He couldn't even remember being that angry before.

Adam wasn't manipulated—he was the one who did the manipulating. *He* was the one who was a shark in negotiations. He didn't get surprised. He didn't feel at a loss. He was *never* at a loss for words, damn it.

And looking at Sal now, he could see the old guy was really enjoying him being confounded, which only made Adam more furious.

“Forget it,” Adam said, the words hardly more than a hiss of sound. Unable to stand still, he stalked over to the bay window, glared at the outside world for a second or two, then spun back around to face the man still seated on the couch. “What the hell's wrong with you, Sal? Are you delusional? People don't bargain their daughters for gain anymore. This isn't the middle ages, you know.”

Slowly the older man stood up, narrowed his eyes on Adam and pointed his index finger, stabbing at the air with it. “This is not for my gain,” Sal pointed out. “This is for *your* gain. You think I would accept *any* man for my Gina? You think I value her so lowly that I do this without thinking? Without considering?”

“I think you're *nuts*.”

Sal snorted a laugh that had no humor in it. “You want the land so badly? Do this one thing and it's yours.”

“Unbelievable.” This was crazy. Plain and simple. He'd always liked Sal Torino, too. Who knew the old guy was off his rocker?

“Why does this seem so unreasonable to you?” Sal demanded, coming around the sofa to stand beside

Adam at the window. Sunlight speared in through the leaded glass panes, dotting the two men and the wood floor with diamond-shaped splotches of gold. “Is it crazy for a father to look to his daughter’s happiness? To the happiness of the son of a man I called friend? You’re a good man, Adam. But you’ve been alone too long. Lost too much.”

“Sal—” His tone filled with warning.

“Fine.” He held up both hands. “We won’t speak of the past, but of the future.” Sal turned his head, looked out the window and stared into the distance. Nodding his head, he said, “My Gina needs more in her life than her beloved horses. You need more in your life than your ranch. Is it so crazy to think the two of you could build something together?”

Adam just stared at him. “You want your daughter to marry a man who doesn’t love her?”

He shrugged. “Love can grow.”

“Not for me.”

“Never say never, Adam.” Sal slid a glance at him. “A life is long and not meant to be lived alone.”

Life wasn’t always long and Adam had discovered that it was better lived alone. He had no one’s interests but his own to look after. He lived the way he wanted and made no excuses or apologies for it. And he had no intention of changing any part of his life.

Irritation spiked inside him. He *did* want that damned land. It had become a Holy Grail of sorts for him. The last square to place in the King family quilt of holdings. He could almost taste the satisfaction of

finishing the task he'd set for himself. But now...looked like he'd be tasting failure instead and that knowledge notched his irritation a little higher.

"Thanks, Sal. But I'm not interested." In any of it. He wanted the land, but he wasn't willing to marry again. He'd tried that once. And even before the crashing end, it hadn't worked out for him or for his wife. He just wasn't built to be a husband.

"Think about it," Sal said and pointed out the window.

Adam glanced in the direction indicated and saw Gina and her mother out in the pasture. While he stood there, Teresa walked off, leaving her daughter alone in the field, surrounded by small, sturdy horses.

Sunlight dropped down on Gina like a cloud of light. Her long, dark hair whipped around her shoulders and when she tipped her head back to laugh, she made such an intriguing picture Adam gritted his teeth even harder.

"My Gina's a wonderful woman. You could do worse."

Adam tore his gaze from the woman in the meadow, shook his head and looked at the older man beside him. "You can let this idea of yours go, Sal. So why don't you do some realistic thinking and come up with a price for the land that we can both live with?"

This whole situation had gotten way out of hand and Adam felt as if the walls were closing in on him. Looking at Sal, you'd never guess he was crazy as a loon. But clearly he was. Who the hell bartered their children these days?

Giving reasonable one last shot, Adam asked, "What the hell do you think Gina would say if she could hear you?"

Sal shrugged and smiled a little. "She doesn't have to know."

"You live dangerously, Sal."

The older man snorted. "I know what's good for my children. And, I know what's good for you. This is the best bargain you could ever make, Adam. So *you* are the one who should think carefully before you decide."

"Decision's already made," Adam assured him. "I'm not marrying Gina or anybody else for that matter. But if you change your mind and want to actually talk business, you give me a call."

Adam had to get out of there. His blood was buzzing in his veins and he felt like his skin was on fire. Damned old man, throwing something like this at him out of the blue. Turning for the foyer, Adam crossed the room in a few long strides and yanked open the front door just as Teresa Torino was stepping inside. She jolted.

"Adam."

"Teresa." He gave her a nod, shot another incredulous look at Sal, then walked outside, closing the door behind him.

Instantly he felt as if he could breathe again. The sharp, clear air carried the scent of horses and the far-off sea. A cool wind brushed past him and almost without thinking about it, Adam turned his head and thoughtfully looked at the meadow where Gina Torino was communing with her horses.

Even from a distance, he felt the tug of an attraction he hadn't felt in too long to count. The last time he'd seen Gina, it had been at his wife and son's funeral. He'd been too numb that day to notice and since then, he'd mostly spent his time working the ranch.

And rather than heading for his car, he surprised himself by heading toward the fenced meadow.

Gina watched Adam approach and told her hormones to take a nap. Apparently, though, they weren't listening. Nope, instead of lying down and keeping quiet, her hormones were instead tap dancing on every one of her nerve endings. Heck, she was surprised she wasn't actually *vibrating*.

"Oh, Shadow," she whispered, stroking the mare's velvety neck, "I am *such* an idiot."

"Morning, Gina."

She braced herself, turned to face him and with one look into Adam's dark eyes, Gina knew she could never be "braced" enough. Why was it this one man absolutely lit up her insides like a fireworks display on the Fourth of July? Why did it have to be Adam King her heart yearned for?

"Hello, Adam," she said and silently congratulated herself on keeping her voice so nice and steady. "You're out early this morning."

"Yeah." His features twisted briefly, then he made an obvious effort to ease them before saying, "Had a meeting with your father."

"About what?"

“Nothing,” he said so quickly that Gina knew something was definitely going on. And knowing her father as she did, it could be *anything*.

Still, it was clear Adam wouldn't be talking about whatever it was, so she'd save her curiosity for later. When she could pry it out of her father. For now, it was all she could do to keep from gibbering like an idiot. Adam walked closer, leaned his forearms on the top rung of the fence and squinted into the morning light. And wouldn't you know it, the wind shifted directions, just so it could tease her by drifting the scent of him toward her.

Nothing so prosaic as aftershave, though. Nope, the only scent she picked up was soap and man. Which only made it harder to draw a breath. Oh, yeah. This was going really well.

“Looks like you've had a new addition to your herd,” he said with a nod at the foal.

Instantly Gina grinned and looked at the sturdy baby nuzzling his mother. “He arrived last night. Well, the middle of the night, really. I was up until nearly four this morning—hence my close resemblance to Frankenstein's Bride.”

God, idiot. Make sure you point out to the man how haggard and hideous you look. First time you've seen him since his family's funeral and you have to look like the wrath of God? Just fabulous.

“You look great,” he said and almost sounded grudging about it.

“Yeah. I'm sure.” Gina laughed, gave Shadow one

more caress, then climbed through the fence. She knew right away that she should have just taken a short walk and opened the gate. She was too tired and strung a little too tightly to gracefully maneuver slipping between the rungs of the fence.

The toe of her boot caught on the bottom slat and she only had a second to think, *This is perfect. I'm about to fall on my face in the dirt, right in front of Adam. Can this get any better?* Then Adam's hand curled around her upper arm and he held on to her until she found her balance again.

Flinging her hair back out of her face, she looked up into dark-chocolate eyes and said, "Thanks—" Whatever else she might have added died unspoken because her mouth dried up completely.

The heat in his gaze was nearly overpowering. She felt blasted by it, as if she were being hit by a flame-thrower. Blood sizzling, breath straining in her lungs, stomach spinning in wild circles, she could only stare at him. The feel of his hand on her skin only added to the sensation of heat pouring through her.

And just when she wondered what in the hell she could possibly say to explain why she had suddenly become dumb as a post, Adam said, "Have dinner with me."

Three

The words were out before he could stop himself and once they'd been said, Adam thought—*why the hell not?*

Yeah, he'd surprised himself and judging from the expression on her face, he'd surprised Gina, as well. But damned if he'd expected this rush of something hot and needy pulsing inside him. She'd caught him off guard, that was for sure.

Gina Torino was luscious. He hadn't noticed the last time he'd seen her. But now, just looking at her made him feel something he'd thought himself immune to. And he was male enough to enjoy the rush of lust crowding his system.

While she stared up at him out of golden eyes, he heard her father's offer repeat again and again in his mind. And as desire pumped fast and fiercely through

his bloodstream, he told himself maybe he should rethink his instant rejection of her father's idea. It wouldn't be too much a hardship to make Gina Torino his wife.

And God knew he could hardly believe himself that he was considering this. But after all, it didn't have to be forever. There didn't have to be a baby. All he had to do was marry Gina and he'd get the land he wanted so badly. Then he'd divorce her with a good settlement and everybody's happy.

Was he as crazy as Sal? Possibly. On the other hand, Adam had always been able to look at a situation, see it from every angle and then make the moves necessary for him to come out on top. Why should this be any different?

It wasn't as if he was going into the deal with an idea to cheat Sal. The old man had come up with this bizarre plan all on his own. And Gina?

Well, hell. His gaze swept her up and down in a heartbeat of time. He took in her bright, golden eyes, her full mouth tipped into a smile, her lush breasts pressing against the faded fabric of a denim shirt and her rounded hips and long legs encased in worn jeans. She was enough to make any man's mouth water. And the fact that she was getting to him was enough to have him considering Sal's proposal.

"You look surprised," he said when he realized that seconds of silence were ticking past.

"Well, I am." She brushed her palms against her thighs but it was clearly more about nerves than clean-

ing her hands off. "I haven't even spoken to you in the last five years, Adam."

True. He'd never been a social type, like his brothers were. And in the last few years, he'd cut himself off even further from his neighbors. "I've been busy."

She laughed and somehow the rollicking music of it seemed to slice through him, cutting him so deep his breath caught in his chest. What was this? Lust he could deal with. Use to his own advantage. But he wasn't looking to be intrigued or captivated by her.

Yet he wanted her. And after years of feeling *nothing*, this rush of lust felt damn good. All he had to do was remind himself why he was considering this. The land. Marry Gina, enjoy himself, and when he was finished with her, they'd divorce and then this *lust* would be over with and he would have the land he required.

"You've been busy." Nodding, she shot him a smile. "For five years."

He shrugged. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"What've you been up to?"

Her eyebrows lifted and she tipped her head to one side to look at him. "Five years of news is going to take a little while to tell."

"So, do it at dinner."

"First a question."

"Of course." Women always had questions.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

“Why ask me to dinner?” She pushed her hands into the back pockets of her jeans, arching her back a little, making her breasts push against the fabric of her shirt. “Why now all of a sudden?”

Adam frowned a little. Figured she'd make him work for this. “Look, it's no big deal. I saw you, we talked, I asked. If you don't want to go, just say so.”

She stared at him for a long moment or two, but Adam knew she wasn't going to turn him down. She was intrigued. She was interested. And more than that, she was feeling the same sort of physical buzz he was. He could see it in her eyes.

“I didn't say that,” she said a moment later, proving that he could still read people pretty well. “I was just curious.”

He gave her a casual shrug. “We both have to eat. Why not do it together?”

“Okay...where are you taking me?”

He offered the first place that came to him. It wasn't as if he'd planned this all out. He'd come to the Torino spread looking to make a deal. Now, it appeared that he was going to make that deal after all—just not the one he'd counted on.

Gina's insides were doing a happy skip and dance. She couldn't believe that Adam King had finally noticed her. And for a few minutes, that was the only thought she concentrated on. But finally, dumb ol' reality crashed in. Why now? She had to ask herself the question. She'd known Adam all her life and up until

five minutes ago, he'd never acknowledged her existence beyond the occasional "hi."

Since the death of his family five years before, Adam had pretty much been a recluse. He'd shut himself away from everything but his ranch and his brothers. So why all of a sudden was he Mr. Charm? A tiny nugget of suspicion settled in the pit of her stomach, but it didn't do a thing to ease the thumping of her heart.

"What about Serenity?"

Ah. The almost impossible to get into place on the coast. He really was pulling out all the stops.

"Sounds good," she said, even though what she really meant was, *sounds fabulous, can't wait, what took you so long?*

"Tomorrow night? Seven?"

"Okay. Seven." The moment she agreed, she saw satisfaction glitter in his dark-chocolate eyes and the suspicion crowding her jumped up in her brain and started waving hands, trying to get her attention. Well, it worked. "Though I really would like to know what actually prompted this out-of-nowhere invitation."

His features tightened briefly, but a moment later, he gave her a small smile again. "If you're not interested, Gina, all you have to do is say no."

"I didn't say that." She pulled her hands from her pockets and folded her arms across her chest.

"Glad to hear it," he said and reached for one of her hands, holding it in his, smoothing his thumb gently across her skin. He looked into her eyes, gave her a

small smile and said, "So, I'll pick you up at seven tomorrow? You can tell me all about what you've been up to for the last five years."

When he let go of her hand, Gina could have sworn she could actually *feel* her skin sizzling from the heat he'd generated. Oh, she was sliding into some seriously deep waters here.

Adam was charming. Friendly. Smiley. Flirty.

Something was definitely going on here. Something he wasn't telling her. And still, she wouldn't turn down this invitation for anything.

"I'll be ready."

"See you then." With one last smile, he turned around and walked with determined steps across the yard to the SUV he'd left parked near the house.

Gina stood stock-still to enjoy the view. His excellent butt looked great in the dark blue jeans. His long legs moved with a deceptively lazy stride and the sun hit his dark brown hair and gleamed in its depths.

Her heart actually *fluttered* in her chest. Weird sensation. And not a good sign. "Oh, Gina," she whispered, "you are in very deep trouble, here."

Just being that close to Adam, having him focusing his attention on her, had been enough to stir up all of the old fantasies and dreams. She felt shaky, like the time she'd had three espresso drinks in an hour. Only Adam King was a way bigger buzz than too much caffeine.

Her breath left her in a rush as Adam steered his car down the driveway and away from the ranch. She

rubbed the spot on her hand where Adam had touched her. When the cloud of dust behind his car had settled back down onto the driveway, Gina thoughtfully turned her gaze on the house behind her. Adam might not be willing to tell her what was going on, but she had a bone-deep feeling that her father had the answers she needed.

“I can’t believe it,” Gina muttered, stalking around the perimeter of the great room. She must have made thirty circuits in the last twenty minutes. Ever since her father had confessed what his meeting with Adam King had really been about. Gina’s temper spiked anew every time she thought about it. She couldn’t seem to sit down. Couldn’t keep still.

At every other clomp of her boots against the wood floor, she shot her father a look that should have frizzed his hair. When she thought she could speak without screaming, she asked, “You tried to *sell* me?”

“You make too much of this, Gina.” Sal sat on the sofa, but his comfy, relaxed position was belied by the glitter of guilt and caution in his eyes.

“Too much?” She threw her hands high and let them slap to her thighs again. “What am I, a princess in a tower? Are you some feudal lord, Papa? God, this is like one of the historical romance novels I read.” She stopped dead and stabbed her index finger at him. “Only difference is, this is the *twenty-first century!*”

“Women are too emotional,” Sal muttered. “This is why men run the world.”

"This is what you think?" Teresa Torino reached over and slapped her husband's upper arm. "Men run the world because *women* allow it."

Normally Gina would have smiled at that, but at the moment, she was just too furious to see the humor in anything about this situation. Oh, man, she wanted to open up a big, yawning hole in the earth and fall into it. What must Adam have been thinking when her father faced him with this "plan"?

God. Everything in her cringed away from *that* image. Could a person die of embarrassment?

"You said yourself Gina should get married and have babies," Sal told his wife.

"Yes, but not like this. Not with him."

"What's wrong with Adam?" Sal wanted to know.

Nothing, as far as Gina was concerned, but she wasn't about to say *that*.

"There is...*something*," Teresa said with a sniff.

Gina nearly groaned.

"You don't know Adam well enough to think there's something wrong with him," Sal told his wife.

"Ah," Teresa argued. "But you know him well enough to *barter* your daughter's future with him?"

And the argument was off and running. Gina only half listened. In her family, yelling was as much a part of life as the constant hugs and laughter. Italians, her mother liked to say, lived life to the *fullest*. Of course, Gina's father liked to say that his wife lived life to the *loudest*, but basically, it was the same thing.

She and her brothers had grown up with laughter,

shouts, hugs, more shouts and the knowledge that they were all loved unconditionally.

Today, though...she could have cheerfully strangled the father she loved so much. Gina's gaze shifted around the room, picking out the framed family photos sprinkled across every flat surface. There were dozens of her brothers and their families. There were old, sepia prints of grandparents and great-grandparents, too. There were photos of children in Italy, cousins she'd never met. And there were pictures of Gina. With her first horse. As the winning pitcher on her high school softball team. Getting ready for her prom. Her graduation. And in all of the pictures of Gina, she was alone. There was no husband. No kids.

Just good ol' Aunt Gina.

Old maid.

The Torino clan was big on family. And she was no exception to that rule.

Gina had always wanted a family of her own. Had always expected that she would be a mother, once the time was right. But in the last couple of years, as she'd watched her brothers' families grow while she remained alone and single, she'd begun to accept that maybe her life wouldn't turn out the way she'd always hoped.

And on that depressing thought, she stopped walking crazily around the room, closed down her racing brain and focused her gaze on the slant of sunlight beaming in through the wide front windows and the dust motes dancing in the still air. The scent of her mother's sauce

spilled from the kitchen and wrapped itself around Gina like a warm hug.

Sal scowled at his wife, shot his daughter a cautious look and said, "Besides, all of this is wasted effort. You're angry for nothing, Gina. Adam turned me down."

"He did?"

"Of *course* he did," Teresa said, reaching out to give her husband another smack.

"Hey!" Sal complained.

"Adam King is not a man to be trifled with this way," Teresa said, lifting one hand to wag a warning finger. "There is a darkness there...."

Sal rolled his eyes and even Gina had to stifle a snort. Any man who didn't like pasta wasn't to be trusted in Teresa Torino's world.

"There's nothing wrong with Adam," Sal argued. "He's a good businessman. He's steady. He's wealthy so we don't need to worry about a man marrying Gina for her money—"

"Oh," Gina snapped, feeling the insult jab its way home, "thanks very much for that!"

"*And*," Sal continued before either his wife or his daughter could interrupt again, "he needs a wife."

"He had a wife," Teresa pointed out.

"She's dead," Sal argued.

"So you sign me up as a pinch hitter?" Gina demanded.

"It's not good to be alone," her father said.

"God." Gina slumped onto the arm of the closest

sofa and stared at her father. “Did you and Mom rehearse that little ditty? Maybe we should put it to music!”

“There’s no reason to be smart,” Teresa said.

“No reason?” Gina slid her gaze to her mother in astonishment. Typical. A minute ago, Teresa had been furious with her husband. But the moment she felt he was the underdog, she jumped onto his side of the debate.

“Mom, I know Papa meant well, but this is...is...” She stopped and shook her head. “I don’t even have a word for what this is. Beyond the usual. You know... humiliating. Embarrassing. Demeaning.”

Teresa blew out a breath. “So dramatic.”

Gina just goggled at her. How did a person argue with parents like this? And *why* was she still living on this ranch?

Oh, she wanted to scream. How mortifying was this? She was so pitiful, so unwanted that her father had to try to *buy* her a husband?

Her head was pounding and her chest felt tight. Vaguely she heard her mother’s whispered mutterings as she continued her tirade. But Gina couldn’t even think about her parents at the moment.

What must Adam have thought? Oh, God, she didn’t want to know. Way better to just push that little question right out of her mind. How would she ever face him again? How would she be able to keep that dinner date with him tomorrow night?

And with that thought, everything inside her stopped.

He'd turned her father down.

He wasn't willing to marry her for the land he wanted so badly. So why, then, had he stepped outside and asked her to dinner? Was this a pity date? Poor little Gina will never get married, why not toss her a bowl of soup and a nice night out?

No.

Adam wasn't the doing-good-deeds kind of guy. She didn't agree with her mother about the darkness in him, but he also wasn't the kind of guy who went out of his way for people.

So what did all of this mean?

Her headache erupted into migraine territory.

"So what?" Sal asked. "How long am I going to be in trouble?"

Gina glared at her father.

"Long time, I guess," he muttered.

"You want me to call and talk to Adam? Explain?" Teresa asked.

"Good God, no!" Gina hopped up off the arm of the couch. "What am I? In third grade?"

"Only to help," her mother soothed. "To tell him that your papa is crazy."

"I'm not crazy," Sal argued.

"Matter of debate," Gina said wryly and her father had the grace to flush.

"I meant no harm," Sal told her.

Gina's heart melted a little. No matter how furious he made her, she'd loved him too long to stay mad forever. "I know that, Papa. But *please* stay out of my love life."

“Yes, yes,” he said.

When her parents started arguing again, Gina left them to it. She was just too tired to hold up her end of the battle. Walking across the ranch yard, she went straight to her own small house and stepped inside. It was quiet. Empty. She didn't even have a pet. Since she spent so much time with her horses, it seemed silly to have another animal around.

She stopped just inside the living room. Her gaze swept quickly around the familiar space but it was as if she were seeing it with new eyes.

Here, too, just like up at the main house, there were framed photos. Pictures of her nieces and nephews. Laughing kids with gap-toothed smiles. Snapshots of days spent at amusement parks, on the Gypsy horses, eating at her kitchen table. There were drawings taped to the wall, too, each signed by the young artist.

And there were toys. Some scattered across her coffee table, others in a chest she kept under her front window. Baby dolls and fire trucks. GameBoys and coloring books.

In a blink, Gina knew that this was the pattern of her life. As it was. As it would always be. She would forever be the favorite aunt. The children she loved would never be her own. And she would no doubt end up an old woman, alone, with a houseful of cats.

Tears stung the backs of her eyes as she imagined it, the years spilling out in front of her so clearly, it made her head spin. Her house wasn't a home. It was a place where she slept. It was a place that children visited and

never stayed. It was a place that would forever be haunted by the ghosts of the children she *might* have had.

Unless she did something outrageous.

Something no one would expect.

Least of all Adam King.