



Triple the Fun (Billionaires and Babies)

By Maureen Child

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He's a captain of industry, a brooding billionaire and—a daddy? When Connor King learns he has fathered triplets, he feels double-crossed. Now nothing will stand in the way of claiming his heirs, not even their alluring legal guardian, Dina Cortez.

With the babies' mother gone, Dina has vowed to protect Sage, Sam and Sadie. But who will protect Dina from her feelings for the dark and defiant Mr. King? Because once she and the children are moved into Connor's California seaside mansion, his stately bed is just a heartbeat away...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Maureen Child writes love stories with humor and warmth and says it's because "Love and laughter go hand in hand. At least in my world they do." Her many books include "Finding You, Knowing You," and "Loving You."

Her award-winning novels have been called "simply wonderful," "captivating," and "beautiful love stories that will live in the heart forever." A three-time Romance Writers of America Rita-finalist, Maureen Child lives in Southern California with her family.

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"You're *where*?" Connor King didn't bother to hide the laughter in his voice. He kicked back in his office chair, propped his feet on the edge of his desk and stared out the window at his view of the Pacific Ocean. Holding the phone to his left ear, he listened to his twin's grumbling with a widening smile on his face.

"With the twins at the park near the house."

"How the mighty have crashed and burned," Connor chortled, shaking his head. Only two years ago, his identical twin, Colton, had been single, driven, a wild man who chased down every extreme adventure their company offered to other risk takers around the world.

Then Colton had found out that his ex-wife, Penny, had given birth to twins, a boy and a girl. His world had been thrown into turmoil and he'd been forced to make some real changes and face some hard truths. Though he'd nearly blown the whole thing, Colt had wised up in time to build a new life. Now he had a wife and two kids and was happier than ever before.

That didn't mean that Connor wouldn't give him grief at every opportunity, though.

"*Aplaydate*" he repeated with a laugh. "Man..."

"Yeah, yeah," Colt muttered. "Have your laugh and get it over with. Then we can talk about the Ireland plans. You still flying over there to check things out?"

"That's the idea," Connor said, still chuckling. In the last year, King Extreme Adventures had morphed into King Family Adventures. When Colt had finally realized what was most important in his life, he and Connor had reevaluated their business plan. Extreme adventures were risky and dangerous, and the potential client base very limited. On the other hand, by switching the emphasis of their company to family adventures, they'd opened themselves up to a worldwide audience.

Sure, they still ran the extreme adventures for those that wanted it, but since shifting their business focus, the company had grown exponentially.

"I'll be staying at Ashford Castle and Jefferson's setting me up with a guide to show me around the area."

"Amazing," Colt muttered. "We go from offering black diamond ski runs in the Alps to family tours of Ireland."

"Things change," Connor reminded him. "You should know that better than anyone."

"Not complaining," his twin said, then in a louder voice called out, "Reid, don't throw sand at your sister."

Con chuckled. "Riley can take care of herself."

"Yeah—there she goes. Sand right back at him." Colt laughed a little. "Penny's at home painting their bedroom."

I figured taking the dangerous duo to the park was the easier job. Should've known better."

While his brother talked, Connor looked up as their admin, Linda, walked into his office with the mail. She smiled at him, handed the stack of letters over and left the office. Idly, Con picked out a legal-size manila envelope from the rest and threw the others on his desk. Catching the phone between his ear and his shoulder, he ripped open the flap, pulled out the papers and skimmed them. It only took a second for him to say, "What the hell?"

Colt paused, then asked, "What's wrong?"

"You're not going to believe this," Con muttered, straightening in his desk chair, staring at the papers in his hand. The edges of his vision darkened until he was looking at the typeset words as if through a telescope. Despite the legal language designed to make most people feel inadequate to the task of deciphering it, Connor understood enough to know that his world had just taken a major shift.

"What's going on?"

Colt's voice in his ear sounded far away, as though the phone had become a tunnel miles long. Connor's gaze locked on the phrase that had leaped out at him. A heavy band tightened around his chest until drawing a breath seemed a Herculean feat. A ball of ice dropped into the pit of his stomach.

He swallowed hard and made himself say the words. "Apparently, I'm a *father!*"

An hour later, Con was standing on the flagstone patio at Colt's cliff-side home in Dana Point. Staring out at the ocean below them, Con hardly noticed the sailboats, the surfers or the waves pounding against the shore with a regular rhythm that sounded like a heartbeat. If he turned his head to the left, he'd be able to see his own house, not a mile farther down the cliff road.

Colt's house was modern, with lots of glass and chrome, though Penny had made inroads there, infusing the place with warmth and color over the last couple of years. Con's place was more traditional, though it clung to the face of the cliff as well.

But he wasn't thinking about houses, style or the damn sea that relentlessly swept in and out. All he could think was: *triplets*. He'd outdone his brother by one, though he couldn't really take credit for it, could he? Sure, it had been his sperm, but it wasn't as though he'd been involved any further than that.

Hell. He hadn't even known the babies existed until today. Because a woman he'd trusted—a *friend*—had lied to him. And that was almost harder to believe than the fact that he was suddenly the father of three.

He had to get to the bottom of this. Find out everything he could before deciding on a plan of action. But

there *would* be a plan. He was sure of that much, at least. What exactly it would entail was still a mystery.

Connor had put the King family lawyers on the case before he left to come to Colt and Penny's house. He was going to be logical. Rational. He wasn't giving in to his instinct to *do* something. Anything. But it wasn't easy.

So far, all he knew was the name of the woman currently suing him for child support. Dina Cortez. Sister of Elena Cortez, wife of Jackie Francis.

Jackie.

Shaking his head, Con gritted his teeth against a wild rush of anger. Jackie had been Con's best friend all through high school and college. When he got burned in love, Jackie was the one he turned to. She was the one woman in his life he'd always trusted—mainly because she'd never wanted anything from him. In fact, the only time they'd ever argued was second year of college when they'd both fallen for the same girl. A faint smile briefly twisted his mouth as he remembered that rather than discover which of them the woman might go for, they'd both chosen their friendship over the redhead.

Three years ago, Con had been Jackie's best man when she married her longtime girlfriend, Elena Cortez. Hell, he'd even taken her to Vegas for a mini bachelorette party before the wedding. He would have bet the King family fortune that Jackie would never lie to him. And yet.

"So stupid," he muttered, stabbing his fingers through his hair as a cold June wind pushed at him.

"How were you supposed to know?" Penny King stepped up alongside him and gave his arm a pat.

As much as he appreciated the support from his sister-in-law, she simply couldn't understand the level of betrayal he was feeling. *He* could hardly grasp it. "I should have checked. When Jackie moved to Northern California, I should have kept in touch. Maybe then."

"None of this is your fault," Colt said as he walked up beside his wife and stood staring at his twin.

"My sperm. My babies. My fault." Con shook his head and tightened his grip on the bottle of beer he didn't even want. He knew his family was on his side, but the bottom line here was, he hadn't made a move to keep up with Jackie. He'd merely let her slide out of his life. If he'd done things differently, he wouldn't be in a state of shock today.

"You know," Colt murmured sagely, "it's easy to see where you made a wrong turn when you look back at the road you're on. Not so easy when you're looking ahead."

Frowning, Connor grumbled, "You can spin this any way you want. Fact is, I screwed up."

And nothing his family said could change that. Turning his face back into the wind, gaze fixed on the frothing ocean, memories rose up and nearly choked him.

"Connor, we want to have a baby."

He laughed, dropped one arm around Jackie's shoulder and said, "Congratulations! So it's a trip to the sperm bank for you guys! See? I always told you that you 'd need a man eventually."

Jackie grinned and shook her head. "Funny guy."

"I try. Which one of you's getting pregnant?"

She leaned into him and shrugged. "Elena's going to do the heavy lifting. I'm her support system."

"You'll be great parents," he assured her and steered her toward the bar in the corner of his living room. Once there, he dug a couple of beers out of the minifridge and opened them. Handing one to Jackie, he tapped the neck of his bottle against hers. Then, frowning a little, he asked, "How does that work, though? What does the kid call you? Are you both Mommy? Mommy One and Mommy Two?"

"Yeah, I don't know. We'll figure that out when we get there." Jackie took a sip of her beer and said, "There's a lot to take care of before we get to the kid talking. And part of that is, Elena and I, we wanted to ask you something important."

"Okay..." Connor picked up on her sudden nervousness, and it was so unlike Jackie, he was concerned. "What's going on?"

Rather than answer right away, she took another sip of beer, chewed at her bottom lip and then blew out a long breath. "See, this is why Elena will carry the baby. I don't think I could give up beer for nine months."

"Uh-huh," Connor said with a frown. "Quit stalling. What is it you're trying to say?"

They'd spent the day together, catching a movie, going to check out the Porsche Connor was thinking of buying and ending up back at his house for a quick one-on-one game of basketball. She hadn't said a word about any of this. Suddenly, though, she wasn't being herself, and that was starting to worry him.

"Okay," she repeated, then took a deep breath. Lifting her gaze to his, she said, "The thing is, Elena and I have been talking about this for a long time."

"Yeah? Not surprising. You're both all about hearth and home—"

She snorted. "Yeah, we're practically a '50's sitcom. Anyway, you know how you just said we'd have to head for the sperm bank because, you know, obviously we need a donor, and—" She paused for another sip of beer as if her throat was too dry for her to force the words out. "Okay, I'm just gonna put it out there. We don't want to go with some stranger we picked out of a catalog. We'd like you to be the baby daddy."

Surprise slapped at him. For a second or two, he could only stare at his best friend. Jackie's gaze was sure and steady, but there was also a flicker of understanding there, too, as if she knew exactly what he was feeling. Well, hell. He hadn't really thought about who might be the father of the child his friend wanted so badly—he'd assumed that she and Elena would go to a sperm bank and pick out some genius donor.

But now that she'd asked him, Connor realized it made sense. He and Jackie were practically family. Who the hell else would she ask? "Elena wants this, too?"

"Completely," Jackie assured him, and now that everything was out in the open, she was clearly more relaxed. "Con, there's no pressure on you, okay? Feel free to say no, with no hard feelings between us, I swear. Just...don't say no right away. Think about it, all right?"

Connor reached out, grabbed her and pulled her in for a tight hug. She sighed, wrapped her arms around his middle and held on. "I know this is big, Con. Seriously big. And I know it's kind of weird, me asking you for your baby stuff! But—" she tipped her head back and looked at him "—we really want this and we want that...connection to the baby's father, you know? You mean a lot to us. Not just me."

He gave her a squeeze. "Yeah, I know. I love you, too."

"God, we 're mushy all of a sudden."

"Babies'll do that to you, I hear," Con said. Her eyes went misty. "A baby. Hard to imagine me a mom."

"No, it's not," he assured her. And seeing that dreamy, wistful look on her face would have decided him even if he hadn't already made the choice. They'd been friends so long, how could he not help her when she needed it? "I'd have a condition, Jack."

She sucked in a breath and held it. "What?"

"I can't just father a kid and walk away. I'll have to be a part of my child's life."

Part-time father, he told himself. All of the fun and little of the hassles.

"Absolutely, Con. Agreed."

"All right then." Connor swung her in a circle and Jackie shrieked with laughter. When he set her on her feet again, he gave her a fast, hard kiss and said, "Let's make a baby."

They'd tried.

But Jackie told him the insemination hadn't taken. When he'd offered to help them try again, she'd turned him down. Said that she and Elena were moving to Northern California to get a fresh start. Then she'd sort of disappeared from his life. No phone calls. No nothing.

He'd allowed it to happen, too, so he couldn't throw all the blame on Jackie for that. "I should have checked," he said again, hating that he hadn't.

"Yeah, well—" Colt leaned back against the low stone wall separating the patio from a wide swath of manicured lawn "—who would have expected Jackie to lie to you?"

That was the hardest part to swallow, Connor admitted silently. He'd always trusted her. Had never doubted what she told him. And all this time, she'd hidden *his children* from him.

Con shook his head and squinted into the wind. His heartbeat raced and the ice in his stomach was colder, deeper somehow than it had been only an hour before. And after all the lies, he couldn't even yell at her. Because she and Elena were dead. He hadn't been able to cut through most of the legalese in the damn letter from the lawyer, but that much he'd caught. Dina Cortez, the babies' guardian, named by the *late* Jackie and Elena Francis, was the one suing him.

How the hell could he mourn his friend when he was so furious with her all he wanted to do was rage at her for what she'd done?

"So who's Dina Cortez?" Colt folded his arms over his chest.

"Elena's sister," Connor told him. "I met her at the wedding. She was Elena's maid of honor and the only one of her family who showed up." He frowned. He still couldn't understand how family didn't support family, no matter what. "Don't remember much about her, really."

"Doesn't matter, I guess," Colt mused. "You'll be getting to know her pretty damn well soon enough."

"True." And he'd have plenty to say once he met up with Dina Cortez again.

Users Review

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Gary Lopez:

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