

ASSIGNMENT: BABY
Lynne Marshall



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Lynne Marshall
Assignment: Baby

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One baby... Dr Hunter Phillips has to look after his little baby niece for a month – he's completely besotted, and totally out of his depth! As if that weren't enough, he also finds himself working with his ex-wife Amanda – the woman who left him when he told her he didn't want children... One meant-to-be marriage? Yet Hunter is still fiercely attracted to Amanda, and she's amazing with baby Sophie. As they pretend to play at happy families, Hunter begins to realise that winning Amanda back and having a family for real is what he really wants after all...

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“I’m taking care of Sophie out of obligation, nothing more. I owe it to my sister and her baby to do a good job. That’s as far as it goes.”

“You could have fooled me.”

Looking agitated, Hunter took another quick drink. “How do you intend to be a mom and get your PhD at the same time?”

Amanda looked aside and shook her head. “It’s not something I need to work out just now, but I’ve always said where there’s a will there’s a way. And kids feel the love no matter what, when it’s genuine.”

“I didn’t feel that from my own parents.”

She knew exactly what he meant. “But that doesn’t have to be the case with your own kids.”

“Not going to have any, remember?”

She wanted to dig her fingers into her hair and scream. Why couldn’t he see what a wonderful job he’d done taking care of Sophie?

Praise for Lynne Marshall:

‘Lynne Marshall has written a wonderfully romantic tale about two wounded souls finding love when they least expect it. Featuring a lovable heroine, an absolutely gorgeous hero, a splendid cast of secondary characters, vivid medical scenarios, heartwarming romance, tender passion, and plenty of warmth, wit and charm, SINGLE DAD, NURSE BRIDE is terrific tale which will delight and entertain fans of Medical™ Romance everywhere!

—*Cataromance*

‘Lynne Marshall’s latest Medical™ Romance is absolutely terrific! She peppers her narrative with plenty of authentic medical detail, steamy sexual tension, hot sex scenes and lots of humour and emotion. Her two characters, JT and Mallory, are richly developed and brought to life with plenty of aplomb and style. IN HIS ANGEL’S ARMS is a page-turning Medical™ Romance...captivating and romantic. IN HIS ANGEL’S ARMS is one book you just can’t miss!

—*Cataromance*

Lynne Marshall has been a Registered Nurse in a large California hospital for twenty-five years. She has now taken the leap to writing full time, but still volunteers at her local community hospital. After writing the book of her heart in 2000, she discovered the wonderful world of Medical™ Romance, where she feels the freedom to write the stories she loves. She is happily married, has two fantastic grown children, and a socially challenged rescued dog. Besides her passion for writing Medical™ Romance, she loves to travel and read. Thanks to the family dog, she takes long walks every day!

Recent titles by the same author:

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IN HIS ANGEL’S ARMS

HER L.A. KNIGHT

Assignment: Baby

BY

Lynne Marshall



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This book is dedicated to the “Jack Howling” of my life—Sweet William. Here’s to twenty-five more years!

CHAPTER ONE

AMANDA Dunlap prayed this wasn’t fate’s idea of a practical joke. It was the first day of her six-week statistical study on preventive cardiac care, which would comprise her first medical journal article. And there they were, the twenty carefully selected patients, each with three or four of the risk factors contributing to future heart disease—ticking time bombs, as her mentor had put it.

The participants sat quietly conversing amongst themselves, thumbing through the Mending Hearts Club syllabus and class outline, waiting for the evening to begin.

She glanced at her watch and a flutter of panic winged through her chest. After three months preparing every aspect of the curriculum for the pilot project, her bank account and her career were both on the line. If she achieved her patient goals, Los Angeles Mercy Hospital would use her health modification model for all three California Mercy hospitals, and her goal of a PhD in nursing would be waiting over the horizon. If she failed, she’d be stuck doing employee physicals and walk-in visits at the Serena Vista Clinic—and proving her parents right that she was reaching beyond her capabilities.

Yesterday, just her luck, all plans had come to a screeching halt when her mentor had dropped out for personal health reasons. Without a doctor to lend his name to the already promised medical journal article, her proverbial nurse practitioner butt was in a sling.

Thank heavens the Mercy Hospital medical director had found a replacement for their satellite clinic. Only one problem remained.

Where was her hero?

While destiny snickered, Amanda checked her watch again— seven-ten. Perhaps the replacement had gotten lost on the drive in or was wandering around trying to find the patient education classrooms? Whatever the reason for tardiness, she’d be forgiving, but she couldn’t wait a second longer. Having every minute of her two-hour introductory class mapped out, she owed it to the participants to keep her promise of starting and ending the sessions on time.

“Good evening, I’m Amanda Dunlap,” she said, and waited for everyone to face forward and quiet down. “I’m so happy to see all of you here tonight.” She went on to explain the purpose of the class.

A scuffle at the back of the room drew her attention from the faces in the front row. She glanced up in time to see the door swing open. An empty infant car seat was wedged to hold it open. Next a diaper bag was tossed into the back of the room, soon followed by a masculine thigh and shoulder pushing through.

A gurgling baby faced outward in a special carrier strapped across a man’s chest, drawing Amanda’s immediate attention. The child wore bright pink overalls and a patterned top, with super-white mock sports shoes made especially for feet that didn’t yet walk.

Amanda automatically grinned, and sweet warmth trickled throughout her body at the sight. Her substitute mentor was not only a hero but also a family man.

During her brief marriage, after never having had a maternal thought in her life, she’d missed a period, thought she’d been pregnant, and discovered a secret even she’d never suspected. She wanted

a baby. Her husband had been thrown into a tailspin when she'd brought up the possibility. When it had turned out she wasn't pregnant, her heart had already changed forever.

Now she didn't know if she'd be able to have a baby of her own. She glanced at the bittersweet surprise popping through the door and gave a wan smile.

Her eyes drifted upward to the bearer of the bright pink baby package, and her breath stuck in her throat. She froze, and grappled to maintain her composure as a chill ran up her spine.

Hunter.

She hadn't seen him in three years.

Bracing herself at the lectern until her knuckles went white, she recognized the sculpted cheekbones and the long jaw. Had he broken his nose?

Under thick, fox-brown hair and a strong brow were piercing though slightly apologetic brown eyes. They crinkled at the corners and his familiar mouth slipped into a tentative half smile. He followed it with a cautious nod.

Anxiety burst free in her chest, sending her heart into a gallop. She evened out her breathing and waited for her pulse to calm while continuing her death grip on the stand.

Hunter Phillips.

Fast as fireworks, thoughts exploded through her mind. She wanted to cry and point at his baby. *That's what I wanted and you wouldn't let me have it!*

When they'd married, they'd both agreed to pursue their careers at the expense of having children. Hunter's parents had done a grand job of ignoring him and his sister in favor of their professions, and he'd vowed never to repeat their mistakes. Amanda had accepted his conditions, since she had wanted to become a nurse practitioner and one day achieve her doctorate in nursing.

After her missed period and the newfound desire to be a mother, she'd pressed him on the topic. He'd accused her of being so wrapped up in work and school that she'd be too busy to care for a houseplant, let alone a child. That had stung to her core, and it still hurt to recall his lack of confidence in her. Just like her parents...

She stared at the gurgling baby. He'd moved on, found someone else and had the family he'd told her he'd never in a million years want. Pain seared her side as if he'd stabbed her. Could Hunter be so cruel? She thinned her lips and tried to hide the sadness coiling in her heart.

Moisture prickled in her eyes. Feeling betrayed, she bit back emotion, swallowed hard and forced her face into a professional expression, praying that somehow she'd make it through the night. Then, first thing tomorrow morning, she'd call the medical director and demand a new mentor. She'd wing it by herself, work doubly hard—whatever it took until he found another replacement. No way would she work with Hunter.

She shook her head. Unbelievable as it was, her savior had turned out to be her ex-husband, in a wrinkled business suit with a bright pink baby surprise strapped to his chest.

Everyone in the classroom watched and waited. She couldn't stand there dumbfounded for one more second, so she took a deep breath to introduce him.

Oh, God.

"Good evening, everyone. Sorry I'm late," Hunter said, realizing they were all staring at him and Mandy hadn't yet been able to make her mouth work.

With everyone watching, he bent to pick up the baby carrier and almost bumped heads with Sophie. Could things get any more awkward? Even though he'd rehearsed and prepared for this moment the entire drive over, the depth of pain at seeing her again almost took his breath away.

After three years of hell and soul-searching since their divorce, the last thing he'd wanted to do was face her again under these unusual circumstances. But it seemed there was no way out. If he didn't help Mandy, the class would be history. And though he wasn't sure what her stake in it was, he was certain of his motivation.

Joel Hersh, the man who'd made sure Hunter had gotten a staff position at Mercy Hospital after his residency, had contacted him just that morning.

"You've heard about Charles Beiderman?" Joel had said.

"Yeah. Poor guy. And so unexpected." He'd been diagnosed with lymphoma.

"Charles was set to mentor one of our nurse practitioners on a community outreach program at our Serena Vista Clinic," Dr. Hersh had gone on to explain in detail.

"Sounds interesting."

"Yes, her approach to reaching patients long before they require surgical cardiac intervention is the way of the future. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Absolutely. Preventive care is the best offense." If only his father had thought the same, maybe his stroke could have been averted.

"I'm in a bind. The patients have already been lined up and everything is set to go. It would be cost-effective if you stepped in."

It was the first favor Joel had ever asked of Hunter. "Hey, I'd be glad to help," he said, straightening his tie. Since his father's recent death, he'd made it a personal goal to enlighten his patients about blood pressure and heart health. This would be an opportunity to reach more people.

"Good, then. I'll let Amanda know she can proceed with the study."

His shoulders had stiffened at the name. "Amanda?"

"Yes. Amanda Dunlap."

Hunter's heart had stumbled. His fingers had clutched the knot in his tie just above the similar knot that had formed in his throat. Mandy? As in his ex-wife, Mandy? Obviously the medical director didn't know. This couldn't have come at a worse time for him, but he couldn't very well weasel out now. And he did owe the man a major favor...

Now, placing the carrier on a nearby table, Hunter looked around the room filled with middle-aged faces, ignoring the painful reminder at the head. "Don't mind me." He waved his hand, pretending to have everything under control, while still reeling from the earthquake in his gut at seeing Mandy again. If he felt this shaken up, he could only imagine what must be going through *her* mind. "Go right ahead."

"Class, this is my ex-hu...er...Dr. Phillips," Mandy said, with a corrected businesslike tone. She blushed crimson at her near mistake, which turned her blue eyes almost neon and softened the effect of her curt introduction. Obviously she was no happier to see him than he was to be here.

He'd missed those fiery eyes, even though they looked boggled right about now, as though she'd just been caught out on reality TV. He could only imagine how he must look.

"We were getting ready to have a quick anatomy class on the heart," she said, obviously trying to hide her true reaction to his showing up in *her* classroom. "Why don't you do the honors?"

He fought the urge to glance over his shoulder, point to his own chest and mouth, *Me?* Instead, he forced an affable smile and said, "Sure." She'd put him on the spot and given him no choice.

He could handle this. No problem. He glanced around wondering where to put the baby carrier, planning to buckle Sophie inside. That was if he could remember how to set it up outside of the car.

Sophie gurgled and cooed. One of the women students sprang up. "I'll hold her. I've got seven grandchildren."

"Oh," he said, relieved. "Thanks."

She lifted the child from the harness around his chest. As naturally as a penguin sheltering its young, she took the baby into her arms and grinned at her. Sophie didn't seem to mind, so he nodded in gratitude.

As he approached the front of the class, Mandy rolled a cart to the center of the room for his use. Perched on top sat a larger-than-life plastic heart complete with arteries. She'd wasted no time getting him involved. Was this the price he had to pay for being late?

Doing a quick mental review of heart physiology, he stepped forward. He remembered the absurd harness and fought clumsily to remove it. After running his hand through his hair and straightening his shirt and jacket, he jumped right in on the mini anatomy lesson. He used his penlight as a pointer and made sound effects to explain the role of circulation and heart valves. *Lub-dub. Thump-swish.*

Sophie appeared fascinated.

Ten minutes later, Mandy cleared her throat...several times. He glanced up, stopped his long-winded lecture and noticed her squinting and nodding toward the students. Following the roll of her eyes, he saw the dazed look on everyone's faces. Had he moved beyond layman's terms? Possibly. At least it had kept his mind off his ex-wife for a while.

"Yes, well...that will be enough anatomy for today. Mandy? I mean, Ms. Dunlap, what's next?"

With a subtle sigh of relief, she snatched up her notes and stepped to the podium, cutting in front of him. She still wore the same fragrance—some aromatherapy herbal body lotion. Inhaling, he didn't feel inclined to step away, but he backed up just enough to give her room. She turned and glanced at him briefly before addressing the class. He averted his gaze rather than chance her seeing the surprising and pathetic hope he still harbored. Was he really such a glutton for punishment? He studied her dark brunette hair. She'd pulled the thick and shiny waves into her signature low ponytail, complete with long escaped strands around the ears.

Some things hadn't changed about Mandy. Except now she looked borderline too thin, as if she'd been working hard and long and not caring for herself enough. So what else was new? When they'd been married they'd watched over each other, balancing out their tendencies toward personal neglect in favor of work.

Mandy tossed another warning stare over her shoulder. Okay. He got it. Trying hard to seem aloof and casual, he strode toward Sophie and, when the grandmotherly student offered, took the baby back. It was all a paltry show to prove he wasn't the least bit shaken up about seeing Mandy. Now, if he could only convince himself...

The nine-month-old baby kicked her legs several times and squealed with glee. He quieted her down with a pacifier he dug out of his pocket, and found a seat at the back of the class with an excellent view of his ex-wife.

He'd known it would be difficult, but still he hadn't expected to be this jarred by seeing her again. He'd spent a full year trying to put the pieces of his life back together after their breakup. How could she have walked away over a disagreement on kids? Why had he let her? He'd moped, drunk too much, even womanized briefly. Nothing had helped until he'd toughened up and gone back to the way of his parents: becoming a devoted workaholic. It hadn't changed anything, but at least it had kept him from thinking about her. His gaze drifted upward to the woman he'd once loved and trusted—until she'd changed their game plan.

The topic turned to the importance of daily exercise. Mandy had everyone up and stretching. Hunter had a sudden memory of being in running gear with her. She'd worn a sports bra and silky short-shorts with slits up the sides. A lazy smile crossed his lips. Damn, he was a masochist.

"We'll be doing this routine every morning. Isn't that right, Dr. Phillips?"

What? He straightened in his chair and tried to appear halfway alert. "I'm sorry. I was distracted with the baby."

"Class, you can all sit down." Clearly giving him the benefit of the doubt, she gave a tolerant nod, but he detected something else in her eyes. "I was saying that after thorough physical examinations, we'll be evaluating everyone here and dividing them into groups of walkers and joggers. I'll handle the walkers and..." She glanced at Hunter and frowned. "Well, we'll figure that out later."

Hmm. He would play along for now, but once class was over, and he had Mandy to himself, he'd grill her on what exactly *was* expected of him and for how many hours a day. Since Joel Hersh

had handily omitted those details. And if his suspicions were right that she planned to replace him, he'd put his foot down. As difficult as it would be, he owed his father and Joel at least that much.

He would have spent more time thinking about his Mending Hearts Club duties, but Sophie had a hold of his nose. She twisted it in an unnatural direction. When he looked up, for the first time that night a smile hinted at the corners of Mandy's mouth. Until now she'd been ignoring them both. Settling for any possible headway, and feeling like the class clown, he shrugged, gingerly removed Sophie's sticky fingers, and apologized with a smile. Looking flustered, Mandy reached for a loose lock of hair and nodded, before quickly looking away.

As the class went on, he surreptitiously read part of the syllabus—as much as was possible with Sophie trying her best to swat at the pages and rip them to shreds. Mandy had everything carefully analyzed and set up to perfection. To do anything less would go against her character.

An hour and a half later, the room had cleared of everyone but Mandy, Sophie and Hunter.

She tugged at her hair again and approached cautiously, slowly building speed and looking more confident. “No way are we going to work together,” she said.

“Yes, way. Because I've signed on and I'm not a quitter.”

“I'm calling Dr. Hersh first thing tomorrow morning and asking for a replacement.”

“And he'll tell you exactly what he told me. ‘Good thing you've agreed, Hunter. I was about to cancel the class.’” After a brief, silent standoff, she said, “I don't believe you.” “It's true, so get over it. I'm here to stay.” One little white lie couldn't possibly hurt their already strained partnership. Mandy stared him down with a defiant glint in her eyes.

“I'm your last resort. Take it or leave it,” he said.

Something changed in her demeanor. Was it acceptance of her rotten luck?

She walked back to the podium and shuffled some papers. “I almost had a heart attack when you walked into the room.”

Hunter followed her. “Then you were in the right class.”

“Don't be a smart-ass,” she said.

“Believe me, no one was more surprised than I when Joel told me who I'd be working with.”

“Why did you agree to work with me?”

“Because you needed help,” he said quietly.

She glanced at him, but her eyes darted away before he could engage her.

Feeling a twinge of guilt, he continued. “That's not completely true.” He scratched the back of his neck. “I didn't know you were involved until I'd already committed.”

She tilted her head and quirked her mouth, looking neither disappointed nor surprised at his confession. “But you didn't back out?”

“Nope.”

She shook her head. They stared at each other for a beat, and he thought he saw a hint of gratitude.

Drawing her brows together, she gazed at Sophie and asked with an acerbic flare, “Babysitter problems?”

The baby had fallen asleep halfway through the session, and had used his shoulder to lay her head and drool on.

“No. This is Jade's daughter. I *am* the babysitter.”

“Jade had a baby?” Relief flashed on her face but she quickly concealed it. Amanda and Jade had become great friends while she and Hunter had been married. Unfortunately, after the divorce they'd drifted apart. Her shoulders relaxed and she seemed to breathe easier. “How wonderful.”

A surge of dread coursed through him. Of course—how else would it look? *You jerk!* What a heel she must have thought he was. “Oh, man, you thought Sophie was mine, didn't you?”

She looked confused. “What was I supposed to think, Hunter?”

A sudden need to make sure she knew and understood his circumstances made him blurt out, “For the record, I’m not remarried or involved, and I don’t have any children.”

She lifted her brows, and after a long silence said, “I can’t believe Jade had a baby.”

“It wasn’t under the best circumstances. She’s a single mother and she’s been having a rough time of it since delivery. Truth is, she’s admitted herself to the hospital for treatment for severe postpartum depression, and I’m Sophie’s guardian for at least the next month.”

She looked him square in the face and he noticed a flicker of surprise in her eyes. “All the more reason for you to step down and let me find someone else...”

“We’ve gone over that already, Mandy.”

Subtle warmth spread across his chest. When he placed a hand on his shirt, he realized with chagrin that Sophie needed a diaper change. Now.

“Oh, damn,” he said, holding the baby at a distance and letting the overflow drip to the floor. He’d have to send the suit to the cleaners. He was still on a learning curve with diapers— and *everything* else where his niece was concerned. Apparently he hadn’t sealed the diaper tight enough.

Sophie’s eyes opened and she fussed, fisted her hand and shoved it into her mouth. He strode to the nearby table and reached for the diaper bag, then dug inside with one hand while balancing the baby under his other arm, butt out and away from his suit. The diaper bag dropped to the floor. “Damn it.”

From the podium, Mandy shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Here, let me help you out.”

If he didn’t love Jade so much, he would never have agreed to take on such a responsibility. What was he supposed to do with a baby? But, through their parents’ neglect, the bond between him and his sister had been cemented. He couldn’t let her down.

Mandy approached, picked up the bag, reached inside and tossed him a cloth diaper and some baby wipes. After spreading out the small vinyl-lined diaper-changing pad on the floor, she reached for Sophie, who continued to protest. Mandy gently patted the baby’s head to help soothe her. “There, there. We’ll get you fixed up in no time so you can go back to sleep.”

The craziest thought occurred to him: he was thankful the baby didn’t have a diaper rash—as though it would reflect badly on his parenting skills. All three and a half days of them.

He couldn’t believe he still cared what Mandy thought, or that he was having such a mundane moment with the woman he’d never been able to get completely out of his system. Be careful, he warned himself. She can’t be trusted.

He’d stood still too long, and let things grow too quiet. She glanced up at him with questioning aqua eyes.

“So you’re working toward your PhD, I’m told.”

“Who told you?”

“Dr. Hersh. He seems very impressed with this study of yours.” Maybe she’d thrown herself back into her career and had given up on her baby fantasy?

She smiled. Sophie fussed again.

“I think she’s hungry,” she said. “Did you bring a bottle?”

He finished wiping his hands and removed his soiled jacket, wishing he could strip off his shirt, too. Mandy had always been so organized. Even now, when it was none of her concern, she seemed to know exactly what needed to be done. “Uh, yes. There’s a can of powdered formula and a bottle of water to mix it with somewhere in there.”

“You take care of the meal and I’ll change her diaper. Did you bring her jammies?”

“Jammies?” He paused. “Oh, pajamas. Yes.”

“Let me guess. Pink ones?” She smiled briefly and he thought daylight had broken through the night. Her finely pointed features had never ceased to amaze him, and right now the slant of her eyes and the turn of her nose captivated him. Through his eyes, Mandy had always been beautiful, and it appeared she’d only gotten better with time. But what was the point of entertaining those thoughts?

He glanced at his niece on the changing pad. How ironic. Mandy's sudden desire to have a baby had driven them apart. Now a helpless baby was forcing them to drop the past and focus on the "right now."

He needed to say something. Anything. Now. "Jade has this thing for pink...for such a staunch feminist it's strange..." he mumbled, and fumbled with the can.

"Pink is just a color, not a political statement." She looked up, a tentative look in her eyes. "She's really a beautiful baby."

"You think?" Truth was he didn't have a clue how babies were supposed to look.

"How old is she?"

"Uh...nine months."

Mandy kept staring at him, and he felt compelled to fill the silence. "Who'd have thought in a million years we'd be working together again?"

"If I can finagle it, we *won't* be working together."

He finally popped open the powdered formula can. "I told you—it's a done deal," he said. "Baby and all."

Amanda pondered the incongruity of their current situation. When they'd married, they'd agreed to put their careers first and forever. And because she'd worked so hard the stress had caused her to miss a period. The fleeting possibility of being pregnant had changed her outlook on babies so drastically she'd known she could no longer agree to a life without children. Even though she hadn't turned out to be pregnant, she'd already made that choice. She wanted a family, not just a degree. But Hunter hadn't budged. "*You promised you never wanted children,*" he had repeated, over and over.

"Life is certainly full of surprises," she said under her breath now, as she removed the soiled disposable diaper, thinking she couldn't have made up a wilder story if she'd tried. She and Hunter working together while he took care of his niece? She shook her head. "Speaking of surprises, you'll need to actually read my syllabus if you insist on being my mentor."

He nodded. "I know. And I will."

"I've got everything broken down day by day," she said, trying her hardest not to think about how wonderful it felt to hold a real live baby in her arms. "Like I said, we'll start with physical examinations tomorrow. I've arranged for two exam rooms on the first floor. You can do the men and I'll do the women." She concentrated on Sophie, cleaning her porcelain fine skin with a moist baby wipe, trying not to succumb to her charm. "We need to get labs drawn and EKGs."

Back then all she'd wanted was Hunter and a baby...and an advanced degree. What too much to ask? And here they were.

"We'll do stress tests on Thursday, and by Friday we should have our group divided for the physical training portion." If only things could have been different. This could be their baby and they could be working as husband and wife... Where was she now? She didn't dare look into his eyes.

"Oh, and you'll have to follow the diet while you're involved. I know how you like your double-double cheeseburgers, but that's out of the question for now."

He nodded while fiddling with the formula can and half-heartedly measuring out a scoop for the bottle. "As far as my eating is concerned, you've got me all wrong. Since Dad died from a stroke I've opted to change the one thing I have control over. My diet."

"I'm so sorry to hear about your father, Hunter. Did you ever have a chance to work things out?"

He somberly shook his head.

Amanda had finished the diaper change and now sat yoga-style. Hunter attempted to join her and almost spilled the formula. His knees were high off the floor and his back was hunched awkwardly. Completely unnatural, and obviously in pain, there he sat. She tried not to think how silly he looked, and almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

Without being asked, Amanda took the scoop from his hands and read the label. Sophie, tired of playing with her toes, rolled over and crawled across the floor.

Amanda mixed the powdered formula into the water and studied Hunter. Why not state the obvious? “It’ll be tough working together.” She sighed. “But we’re adults, Hunter. And if you insist on staying, I’ll just have to get used to it.”

Shaking the bottle, Amanda tried to get Sophie’s attention. When the baby noticed, she immediately crawled over and sat. She grabbed the bottle with both hands and stuck it into her mouth. Amanda tried not to react to how cute that was. Glancing at Hunter, she noticed an apathetic glaze in his eyes. Obviously his mind was elsewhere, and he was no more interested in babies today than he’d been when they were married.

It being tough to work together was the understatement of the century. Mandy watched him with her sea-blue eyes and he remembered how he’d never gotten tired of looking at her when they were a couple. Being around her day after day would be torture.

He wished that things hadn’t gone so sour between them. But, like she’d said earlier, life was full of surprises. Like when she’d had a sudden change of heart about wanting babies. Both being young and stubborn to a fault, and compromise being a foreign word, they had foolishly lost everything.

And here they were.

She stood up and dusted her hands on her workout pants. His knees cracked when he joined her. Her pants seemed baggy. She clapped her hands together and stared him smack in the face.

“Have you lost weight?”

“Did you break your nose?”

They asked the questions in unison.

“Yes.”

They shared an awkward moment at having spoken at the same time twice. Eyeing each other suspiciously, they let their respective questions lie for another time.

Sophie dropped her bottle, crawled between them and slapped at Hunter’s pant leg.

He picked her up. “It’s way past her bedtime,” he said, letting his gaze linger an extra moment on Mandy’s face. Being this close put him off balance. “And I’ve got an hour’s drive home.”

She scratched her cheek and shifted her weight back and forth. “Right. Have you made childcare arrangements?”

He shook his head. “It’s going to be traumatic enough for Sophie not to have Jade around. I can’t bring myself to drop her off anywhere with strangers. My medical assistant and I have been working things out at the Mercy clinic.”

She nodded and lifted her chin. “Then we’ll just have to do our best to work around Sophie, too, I guess.”

Their eyes locked in benign accord. “Thanks for understanding.”

“No problem,” she said, and quickly glanced down. “Jade was my friend, too.”

But as far as Hunter was concerned, he did have a problem. A major problem. The very thought of being around Mandy day in and day out, with all the memories, concerns and longings it would dig up, made the monumental task of single-handedly caring for Sophie feel like a mere stroll in the park.

CHAPTER TWO

AMANDA glanced at the clock on the wall of the tightly packed office. Two desks had been crammed into a space that had once been an exam room. She and Hunter would be painfully close in here but would have to make do, since she’d go to any length for the heart study and her article. She could almost touch her dream, and if dealing with her ex-husband and all the baggage he brought with him was the price she’d have to pay to reach it, so be it.

Amanda had her reasons for advocating diet and exercise to avoid invasive procedures, and she’d put her nursing career on the line for the Mending Hearts Club program. Promoting holistic heart health was the best option, and nothing would stop her from moving forward as planned.

Not even Hunter.

Confronting Hunter last night had practically sent her into palpitations, and had come in a close second to the shock she'd felt after her recent diagnosis. Sure, they'd acted mature and civil toward one another, but the emotional storm raging beneath the surface of her carefully orchestrated facade had almost pulled her into its depths in the process.

Memories steamrolled through her mind. She remembered what a fine doctor he was, and how gentle he could be one moment, as well as how he could become an unsympathetic oaf the next. And she asked herself questions—questions about why they couldn't have handled their dilemma differently, like agreeing to postpone a baby discussion for another time instead of both getting swept up in a temperamental standoff. She'd made the mistake of thinking they were soul mates. That if she'd been the true love of his life he'd have done anything for her. But they'd been young and headstrong. And once the baby bug had bitten Amanda, their future had changed, whether Hunter had been ready to deal with the fact or not.

A never-ending parade of thoughts had kept her awake most of the night. And a tiny voice still kept wondering if maybe their marriage could have survived.

She didn't really know Hunter anymore. Their lives and circumstances had evolved, and now they were nothing more than business professionals working on the same project. But he'd made it clear he wasn't involved with anyone. Why would he do that with a mere project partner?

She stepped outside the second-floor office and tapped on the first door—a makeshift exam room that used to be a supply closet.

“Mrs. Anderson, are you ready for me yet?”

Mrs. Anderson was Amanda's second physical of the morning. Two of the male patients who had appointments with Hunter still sat down the hall, in a group waiting room.

“Yes. Come in.” The patient's muffled voice could barely be heard.

Amanda's eyes drifted to her watch. He was late—again.

Though Hunter had been nearly a half hour late, due to bad traffic and a fussy baby, he'd made up for lost time. By mid-morning he and Mandy had gotten halfway through the physical examinations.

Thankfully, Sophie had played contentedly in a portable playpen in one tiny corner of the office. He liked to think the soft and relaxing classical music from his laptop made the difference. Out of desperation he'd put music on in the car on the drive to work, when Sophie had begun to wail shortly after they'd entered the freeway. The noise from her crying had jangled his nerves until his temples had throbbed. When she'd finally quieted down, he'd taken a long and deep breath of relief, though he still suffered from a dull headache.

From time to time in the office, Sophie let out a shrill noise, or banged a slobbery rubber toy until it squeaked. Over and over. Would he ever get used to being around a kid?

At the first outburst, Mandy had jumped in her seat and tossed her pen in surprise. He'd bitten back his urge to laugh at her. *Yeah, well, get used to it. This is the reality of a baby, sweetheart.*

Mandy looked even more tired than yesterday, as though she'd only gotten a few hours' sleep. Considering all that his guilty conscience had dredged up last night, about what he'd once said or done to Mandy, he'd managed to sleep fairly well. But packing up a child and commuting at the peak traffic hour had put him behind schedule again. Sophie hated being cooped up in a car seat, and made his life miserable with protest. This routine would grow stale quickly, but he'd do it—because he'd committed to Mandy and Dr. Hersh, and he owed them both. He owed it to his father, too.

Noticing the tension at the corners of Mandy's eyes, he wondered if their being forced to work together was such a good idea after all. Did either of them need to be reminded that they'd once shared a great love and blown it? And now he was dangling the baby she'd wanted all along right before her eyes.

“Here,” he said. “I snagged you a cup of coffee from the employee lounge. You look like you need it.”

“Oh, thanks. But you have it.”

“You’re saying no to coffee? Are you the same woman who used to savor that first cup every day?”

She gave a lifeless smile that didn’t come close to her eyes. “Now I only do decaf.”

That was certainly a change. Something wasn’t right, and he had strong suspicions it had nothing to do with the coffee.

“Is something bothering you?” He took a sip rather than waste the drink.

“What? Oh, no.” She reached for the stack of neatly piled charts on her desk and took the next one.

“You seem upset about something. It’s me, isn’t it?”

Her shoulders slumped and she stopped thumbing through the charts. “Men.” She sighed. She thinned her lips and shook her head. “You’re not the center of my universe, Hunter.”

To lighten things up, he feigned a wound to the heart and waited for her to unwind a bit. “What is it, then? Is there something I can help you with?”

“Do you really need to know? We’re nothing more than business associates. Remember?”

In other words...back off. Hunter nodded knowingly. “Gotcha.” He reached for his next patient’s chart and made some preliminary notes on the form to distract himself as Mandy’s words echoed in his head. *We’re nothing more than business associates.*

By lunchtime they’d each performed ten physicals. Amanda hoped she could set up the participants with the overnight halter monitors quickly. She wanted to leave early to rest a bit before her Urgent Care duty, which began at seven. Hunter had told her he had a late-afternoon clinic scheduled back at Mercy Hospital. In light of her recent diagnosis, she knew she needed to stay calm and get more rest, but life wasn’t exactly cooperating. She’d had palpitations a couple of times already this morning, and couldn’t afford to keep feeling so stressed. If she didn’t watch out she would wind up back in the ER. And then where would her Mending Hearts Club program be?

And Hunter. How was she supposed to handle working with him every day, pretending she was fine with it, and that her heart didn’t still have a gaping wound where he was concerned? The smell of his aftershave reminded her how, when they’d first broken up, she’d bought his brand and sniffed it like potpourri. Then cried until her nose was congested and she couldn’t smell anymore. How pitiful was that?

Amanda sat at her desk, cradling her forehead in her hands. Sophie was quiet, and Amanda had been so wrapped up in her thoughts she’d forgotten the baby was even there. Was that treating her like a houseplant? She glanced into the playpen. Sophie had fallen asleep; no wonder she hadn’t noticed her. The nap probably had to do with the soothing nocturne now playing on Hunter’s laptop. Too bad it hadn’t helped her headache.

“There’s nothing like Chopin’s piano pieces to massage the nerves.” Hunter’s distinct masculine voice as he entered the room made Amanda gasp and jerk her head up. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I’m just a bit edgy,” she said. “I don’t recall you being a Chopin man.”

“You’re looking at the new and improved version of me.”

“Yeah? Well, for the record, I liked your old nose better.” Why did his mere presence make her feel so testy?

Taking her rebuke in his stride, Hunter sat and hitched half his mouth into a smile, then rubbed the bump on the bridge of his nose. “Yeah? Well, I got it defending myself against a gang of hoodlums.”

“Really?” she said flatly.

“Must have been a dozen of them. Came at me from all angles.” “Uh-huh.” His efforts at lightening her mood failed miserably. “And they were huge.”

She avoided looking at him, fearing she might crack a smile. After a moment, he rolled his chair next to hers. He had that *I've-been-thinking* look in his eyes.

When they'd been married, and they'd had a problem to solve, he'd withdraw for anywhere from a few hours to a few days—then suddenly resurface with that exact expression to present his fail-safe plan. The problem was, she'd rarely agreed with his solutions.

Well, here he was beside her, looking that way again, and she wondered what great insight he was about to share.

"I've been thinking," he said.

She almost smiled.

He touched her hand with one finger, causing an unwanted spark of warmth on the underside of her wrist.

He gave an understanding nod. "This *is* a bizarre situation, given our history, but if we keep reminding ourselves it's strictly a professional association, things should work out. I admit that seeing you has been a shock, and you've admitted it was the same for you, but we'll get used to being around each other again." He rested his hand on hers and looked into her eyes. She blinked. "Let's just keep focused on why we're here. This is for Joel and my father—and whatever reason you're working so passionately for."

She'd resisted that tingle at first contact by tricking herself into thinking it was a fluke. Her hand had been cold, and that was why she'd felt it. That was all. But now, with his hand on top of hers, the unsettled feeling made her want to squirm. The touch crept up the surface of her skin as if a cool breath tickled the inside of her elbow. It had been hard enough facing him after years of separation; now, adding this innocent touch, it all felt far too intimate. She couldn't let herself go there.

"Mandy, you're not the only one feeling all mixed up."

"I realize that," she said, removing her hand and diverting her eyes. Had he read her mind?

When had they changed places? Wasn't she the one who'd used to initiate enlightening conversations and he who had given curt replies? Maybe his nose wasn't all that had changed.

Having a sudden need to move away from him, she reached for the intercom and asked the receptionist to send the first patient in for halter monitor application. While she waited, she continued to avoid his gaze by pretending to read the patient's chart. She couldn't decipher a single word.

"Hello, Mrs. Drake." Amanda stood and gestured for the patient to sit at the chair in front of her desk. "Are you ready to wear the halter all night?"

"Will it get really irritating when I try to sleep?"

"Maybe a little, but you'll survive."

"Okay, I'll give it a shot," the round, middle-aged lady replied cheerfully.

Amanda assisted the woman by applying the EKG leads after the patient had opened her blouse. She removed the monitor from its portable pocket and unwrapped the wires, before connecting it to the leads on Mrs. Drake, then she put the device back into its halter pocket for easy traveling. She'd analyze the findings tomorrow, along with all of the others.

Demonstrating his somewhat improved caregiver skills, Hunter removed Sophie's bottle of formula from the portable bottle warmer—which Mandy had helped him set up—and checked the contents for heat level on the inside of his wrist, as previously instructed by Mandy, before giving it to his niece. Amanda tried her best not to notice, but the office was so small.

While she received her next patient, and the baby gulped her meal, he quietly packed up all of his paraphernalia, picked up Sophie, and left the clinic without so much as a nod or a goodbye.

Amanda refused to be affected. Would she expect anything more from any other colleague? After all, she'd been busy with a patient. If Dr. Beiderman had become her mentor and had left without saying goodbye, would she feel slighted? Not at all. Business associates had schedules to keep regardless of social niceties. That was the frame of mind she must keep while dealing with Hunter—strictly professional.

So what was this empty feeling settling into the center of her chest? And why did the office seem so dead and lifeless now?

She shook her head, refusing to go down that old and familiar road. Instead, she decided that if she were going to survive the Mending Hearts Club program, she'd need rules. Rules to keep things in perspective. She called for her next patient and while she waited scribbled a short list, just like she used to do. She planned to run it by Hunter tomorrow.

Hunter tossed his briefcase on his desk, slid into the cushy leather chair and rubbed his neck. The freeway drive back to Mercy Hospital had been bumper to bumper, and Sophie had wailed most of the way. This time music hadn't calmed her down. He felt the tension right...*there*. Ah.

Thankfully Sophie had slept for the last part of the drive, but how long would she tolerate being cooped up in her car seat on a daily basis? And when he was finally able to contact Jade, how would he explain his three-hour round-trip commute? She would not approve.

If there'd been any way to avoid taking on his niece, he would have suggested it. But Jade would never have considered leaving her baby with their mother, and Hunter would never expect her to. He ground his teeth, wishing Jade had at least one girlfriend she trusted as much as him.

For now his medical assistant, Maria, a short, plump woman with a gentle spirit, a contagious smile and a penchant for babies, had Sophie at her workstation while he prepared for his jam-packed afternoon clinic. He'd never be able to thank her enough. She bounced the baby on her knee until Hunter heard his niece's hearty belly laugh. It should have made him smile.

He bored a hole into the dark mahogany wood with his stare while he rubbed his temples and tried not to think about Mandy.

The commute had zapped his energy, too. Instinctively he reached for his earphones and plugged them in. He'd listen to Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* for a quick boost of energy.

Three months ago he'd taken Jade to music therapy for her depression. It hadn't helped her one iota, but through music he'd gotten in touch with his deepest feelings and, though shocking at first, had discovered his true gifts as a doctor.

The music therapy instructor had said he was a wounded healer, intuitive and caring. Yeah, he'd thought, with a wry smile, next he'd be reading his horoscope. Truth was, with the help of carefully chosen music, he'd noticed he could change Sophie's moods as much as his own. And if he could calm a baby down with music, wouldn't daily music and relaxation be beneficial for the heart study patients, too? He wondered if it might have helped his father.

Already Mandy's project mattered to him. He wanted to be useful, not a distraction for her. Maybe if she could put the past aside and see how sincere he was in wanting to help, they could pull this project off. But if their being thrown together felt one-tenth as hard for her as it did for him, he knew it wouldn't be easy.

Maria tapped on his door and, with Sophie contentedly resting on her hip, handed him his first afternoon appointment chart. She should be getting double salary for helping out, but after today he'd be out of the clinic until the Mending Hearts Club study was over, and she'd be working for Dr. Jimenez.

Fifteen minutes later, Hunter palpated his patient's left lower quadrant and determined that he no longer had tenderness from his diverticulitis flare-up. Last week the same patient had been doubled over in pain and begging to be hospitalized. A forty-eight-hour clear liquid diet and two different antibiotics had helped his condition miraculously in one short week.

He glanced at the patient's wife. She'd accompanied her husband last week for the visit, but Hunter had been totally preoccupied with his sick patient. He squinted, and looked at her again.

"Are you aware your thyroid is enlarged?" Why hadn't he noticed that slight asymmetry before? Her hand flew to her neck, as if to check for herself.

"You can get dressed now," Hunter said to the man. "But take every single pill until they're gone, in order not to have rebound diverticulitis or to develop a drug-resistant strain of infection."

The patient nodded.

Hunter washed his hands. “Let me take a look,” he said, turning to the wife.

Using his fingertips, he lightly palpated the area overlying her larynx and found a small but firm nodule. “Does this hurt?”

She shook her head, but alarm registered in her stare.

“Swallow?”

She complied. The nodule was fixed to the right lobe of the thyroid.

He felt for nearby enlarged lymph nodes, but didn’t find any. A good sign. “Have you been feeling any different?”

“No.”

“I’m going to order some lab work today, and a thyroid scan as soon as possible.”

“What’s wrong with me?”

“You have a small mass on your thyroid. It could be nothing, but it’s best to check it out. I’ll be out of the clinic for the next few weeks, but my colleague, Dr. Jimenez, will follow up on the lab results. If anything shows up on the scan, I’ll be in touch ASAP, and we’ll go from there.”

He ordered the lab tests and thyroid scan via the portable laptop computer in the exam room. He should instruct Maria to add the extra patient visit to his schedule, in order to charge for it, but the numbers game had never mattered to him. As long as Mrs. Peters got the medical attention she needed he’d be satisfied.

Hunter glanced at his watch. He was already a half hour behind schedule and he had only just started his clinic. It would be a long afternoon.

He rushed back into his office to find Sophie sound asleep in her portable bed. She looked so vulnerable, and she deserved better than this, but his sister had insisted he was the only person she trusted with her baby. For the life of him he couldn’t understand why.

Maria appeared at his door, handing him another chart. Starting tomorrow, to make life easier for Sophie, he might have to find somewhere closer to Serena Vista to stay. Maybe one of those extended-stay hotels during the week, and then he could go home on the weekends. Didn’t nine-month-old babies need to crawl and explore, not sit in a car half the day? If it was just him making the commute, he could handle it, but guilt over his sorely lacking parenting skills had him promising he wouldn’t let little Sophie suffer another day.

* * *

The next morning Amanda lifted her gaze from the EKG she’d been analyzing at her desk. She quickly scribbled NSR by the patient’s name on the list. Normal sinus rhythm.

Hunter appeared in the office doorway thirty minutes late. Again. Sophie gnawed on his chin as he held her in his arms. “I have an idea,” he said.

“You’re late,” Amanda replied with a no-nonsense glance.

He briskly entered the room and unloaded Sophie’s belongings onto his desk. “Sorry. Traffic’s a nightmare.”

She felt a guilty twinge about being annoyed, but refused to let on.

“Sophie’s been a grump all morning, too,” he said.

Mandy bristled at his underhanded comment on her mood, but again didn’t react.

The sturdy baby sucked on two fingers and looked innocently up at him. “You’ve been grumpy, haven’t you, kid?” He crossed his eyes and made a muffled elephant sound with his lips, which got a giggle out of her. She swatted at his mouth with her slippery fingers. He repeated the goofy process several more times, nibbling her fingertips in between, until she latched onto his chin again and gummed him up something fierce. “I don’t have a clue why she likes this, but I’ve discovered she does, and if it keeps her from crying, my chin is hers.”

Amanda fought off a pang of regret for giving him such a hard time. Being a stand-in father had to be a shock for him. But from the looks of things it was becoming second nature, whether he realized it or not.

“You said you had an idea?” she asked.

He plopped Sophie down into her playpen and wiped the drool off his face and jacket. “Music therapy.”

“Music what?”

“You know—soothing music to help our patients release stress.”

Our patients? He’d definitely come on board with her project. “You mean like with meditation?”

“Exactly. We could assign them ten to fifteen minutes of quiet music meditation every morning. It might help bring down their blood pressure.”

She thought for a moment. “It wouldn’t hurt.”

“Great,” he said, practically straightening his collar and preening. “I’ll put together a list of composers and burn twenty CDs.”

“Sounds good.”

Sophie glanced up from her playpen and squealed a hello, obviously glad to see Mandy.

“What’s up, Soph?” The baby made a series of gurgles, blew some bubbles, and ended by giving Amanda a raspberry.

“I think she wants you to pick her up,” Hunter said with a smile.

She didn’t take the challenge.

There he was, standing too close again, looking handsome in his white doctor’s coat and a piercing silver-blue tie. He’d styled his thick brown hair so that it stood up on the top of his head. It gave him a whimsical appeal—until she glanced into his dark, sexy eyes and suddenly remembered he could also be dangerous. She didn’t linger there. She couldn’t.

He’d shaved close, except for a small patch just beneath his lower lip—had she noticed that before? She had an unwanted desire to touch it. What would he think if he knew she’d resorted to all but wearing his brand of cologne after he’d moved out to help her feel less lonely?

He inclined his head the slightest bit, studying her, sizing her up, as he’d used to when they were married. He lifted a brow. “Am I making you nervous?” A look of satisfaction stretched across his face.

She brushed him off. When had he become an expert at reading body language? “Not at all.” She turned and flipped the desk calendar to today’s date—once again all business. “All we have to do today is collect the halter monitor data and analyze it.”

She couldn’t even glance at him. Instead she pretended to be completely engrossed in the preplanned schedule. “Oh, and don’t forget to collect their daily diet journals when you remove the halter monitors.”

“Will do.” He strolled back to his desk, picked up a piece of paper, returned and handed it to her. “Here’s mine. Where’s yours? I want to make sure you’re getting enough calories.”

She pushed his list away. “*You* don’t have to report to me.”

“The syllabus says *everyone* will participate in the activities. Hand yours over.” He motioned with his fingers.

“I... I don’t have it.”

He raised a playful brow. “Naughty, naughty.”

Too young to have hot flashes, she was swiftly burning up. Why was he tormenting her?

“Mandy’s not playing fair, Sophie,” he teased, picking up the baby, who had now pulled herself to stand in the playpen. Sophie smothered his mouth with her hands. He kept talking, but Amanda couldn’t make out one single syllable.

“Okay, okay, I’ll start keeping track like everyone else.” She had a sudden overwhelming urge to bite the hangnail on her finger, but resisted.

Rather than look at Amanda, he made a clown face for the baby. “There you go.” Sophie giggled. “The playing part’s kind of fun, but the rest—” He made another face and the baby laughed more.

His frivolity was driving Amanda nuts. She picked up a chart and studied it, determined not to let Hunter lighten her mood. “I’ll tell them about the music meditation later, after we go over their EKG results at the group meeting this afternoon.”

She tapped her finger on her upper lip. There was no time like the present. “I have a few ideas, too,” she said.

“Yeah?” he said over his shoulder, putting Sophie in her jump seat, which he’d just attached to the door frame. The baby automatically started bouncing up and down, making a wide, gummy grin. “See—this is a lifesaver. I can hang her in here and she keeps herself busy for up to an hour sometimes.” He rubbed his jaw. “Now, if I could just figure out what to do with her the rest of the time...”

“Hunter.” Amanda refused to get sidetracked. “We need to set some ground rules about our professional relationship,” she said, noticing how ridiculous she sounded the moment the words left her mouth.

He stood perfectly still, while Sophie ricocheted off the floor as if an atomic particle.

Amanda cleared her throat and tried not to be distracted. “I don’t think we should discuss our past at work, or socialize in any way.” A flutter of nerves gathered in her stomach, making a tightly bound knot. “And no touching. That should be off-limits, too.”

He quirked a brow.

“Anything you’d consider off-limits for your medical assistant, or any female coworker, please do the same for me.”

He squinted, took a deep breath as if to say the first thought in his mind, then stopped and regrouped. “Sounds as if you could use some music therapy, too,” he grumbled, and stepped around the bouncing baby to leave the room.

Sophie grew fussier as the morning went on, until Hunter couldn’t stop her crying.

“Why don’t you borrow an otoscope from Peds and check if she’s got an ear infection?” Amanda suggested.

“She doesn’t feel feverish to me,” he said, pressing the back of his hand against her cheek and forehead. “And she’s not pulling at her ears. But it’s a good idea.”

When Hunter whisked Sophie out of the office and headed down the hall for the pediatric clinic, it dawned on her. Sophie was nine months old. She was probably teething. She rooted through the baby bag and came up with a liquid-filled teething ring. After washing her hands and the teething ring with soap and water, she waited for Hunter and Sophie’s return.

Soon he reappeared in the doorway, shaking his head. “Not an ear infection.”

Sophie whimpered and kicked her legs.

“Teething.” She held up the toy to entice Sophie to chew on it, instead of on Hunter’s chin and beard stubble.

“Would you like me to take her for a while?”

Hunter nodded gratefully.

When Amanda stepped forward and reached for the child, she noticed the dark circles under Hunter’s eyes. She hadn’t seen that before—probably because she’d avoided looking at him all morning. Had she put that on the no-no list? No eye contact? Maybe she’d add it, because as she recalled, his haunting dark eyes could work better than Svengali’s when it came to getting his way.

The poor guy had probably been up all night with a fussy baby. She regretted chiding him for being late again. His world had been turned sideways, having Sophie thrust on him right before he’d been hoodwinked into mentoring the Mending Hearts Club project. Truth was, she felt kind of sorry for him, and she wanted to make amends...to both of them. She also felt a major reversal coming on. For crying out loud, it had only taken two days.

“You know, Hunter, my house is only five minutes away. Why don’t you and Sophie go there and take a nap during lunch? It might do you both good.” That doesn’t qualify as socializing, does it? So what if the guy would have full access to where she lived? She wouldn’t be there. Was it too late to take back the offer?

He hesitated, making a thin line with his lips. “I couldn’t do that.”

Okay, good. She could back out now. He was right. He couldn’t and shouldn’t do that. “No. Really. You should.” Had she lost control of her mouth?

“I’d be breaking one of your rules,” he teased.

Underneath her professional facade, she was a person, a person with a heart. The guy needed to catch a break and she could give it to him. She’d do the same for any of her coworkers.

“This is an exception. You both look worn-out, and I can’t afford for you to get so run-down that you get sick.”

“Since you put it that way,” he said, fighting off a smirk, “I’ll take you up on the offer.”

Amanda fished through her purse and found her keys. She dangled them before him. “Turn left out of the driveway, go to the second light and turn right. I’m the third condo from the corner. Ground level. One-one-seven.”

“Thanks,” he said, snatching the keys from her hand—but not before he’d held her fingers for a moment. Staring deeply into her eyes, he said, “Sorry. I’m not supposed to do that, am I?” He caught her off guard with his charming smile and a quick wink. “You know me. I like breaking rules.”

That was precisely what she was afraid of.

CHAPTER THREE

HUNTER dug into his pocket with a damp palm for the house keys Mandy had given him. How would it feel to invade her privacy after being away all these years?

The door opened to a bright living room, much as he’d expected, and a house that smelled of flowers and grilled vegetables. Mandy had always been a healthy eater.

One long lime-green divan covered with flashy throw pillows and two loudly patterned chairs were an obvious change in her style. Candles were everywhere, almost like a shrine, and it made him worry she spent too much time alone...in the dark. Dried flower arrangements and picture frames were perched on bookcases and tables. Not one photograph was from their time together. Strangely, it made him feel forgotten.

He recognized an oil painting she’d bought when they were married, one they’d chosen together, and remembered how much he’d liked the abstract style after she’d convinced him to open up his artistic tastes.

A family shot taken of Mandy and her parents stood out. Her dutiful daughter role. To the common eye no one would notice her smile was ever so slightly strained. But he knew better. They’d never had any faith in Mandy, and it used to cut to her core. He, on the other hand, had encouraged her to go after her dreams...until she’d admitted to him *everything* she desired from life and their marriage. But that story had ended, and maybe it was best not to open the book again.

Hunter had resisted the breakup, preferring things to go on as they always had, but Mandy had dug in her heels and insisted on a divorce due to irreconcilable differences. He still scratched his head at her change of heart about having a baby. After their problem had been naturally resolved when she’d got her period, he’d expected her to join him with a *Whew, that was a close call* attitude and drop it. But she’d changed. Her career and marriage had no longer been enough. She’d given him no choice.

Hunter glanced at Sophie, asleep in her portable car seat. Though caring for her was only temporary, he feared the baby was already being neglected because of his job. He’d had to tote her everywhere, to depend on the kindness of others to see to her while he worked, then pack her up and confine her in the car for more travel. Which she hated. How could a child grow and be healthy under such circumstances? And what more proof did he need about mixing families with demanding

careers? He and Jade had paid a big price for their parents' successes, and he was damned if he'd make his children suffer, too. Nope. No babies for him.

A sturdy oak dining table sat before an entire wall of sliding glass doors that overlooked a covered patio. Pushing aside a stack of papers, he put the car seat in the middle of the table. Why, he wondered, did she have such a large table for one person? He didn't need to think for long. Being an only child had always been lonely for Mandy. Even now she obviously still dreamed of filling her table and home with a family. A big family.

He glanced outside and spotted healthy potted plants. Were they real? He shook his head remorsefully at the lack of faith he'd shown in Mandy years before. Just like her parents.

Hunter set up the portable baby bed in a snug corner, and gingerly lifted Sophie from her car seat—hoping with all his might he wouldn't wake her up. She fussed the slightest bit. *Please, no.* He worried she'd start crying again, but she didn't. Instead she snuggled down into her soft blanket and fell deeper into her dreams.

He heaved a sigh of relief.

At the beginning of a long hall, he found a bedroom on the right, abutting the living room. It was Mandy's. He inhaled her unmistakable scent. Was it rosemary she'd once said had been added to lavender? A sudden heady feeling followed a memory of having watched her apply lotion to her legs with long strokes after a shower.

Even if this was the only bed in the house, no way could he lie on it. He'd use the sofa. Why torture himself with memories of stretching side by side, flesh to flesh with his wife? He made a proprietorial survey for any telltale signs of another man. Negative.

A sly smile extended across his lips.

Closing the door, he walked farther down the hall toward the bathroom at the end. What the hell was that smell? It was pungent and foul, as if her plumbing might be backed up. No wonder she had potpourri all over the place. He closed the guest bathroom and the laundry room doors, then headed for the one remaining bedroom on the other side of the hall.

After a quick look around, he took off his jacket and flopped onto the mattress covered with a flowery spread. He didn't give a damn that it was another girly room as long as he could get some sleep.

Just as he was about to doze off, a soft thud next to his head made his lids fly open. He stared into a pair of devious amber-colored eyes. He'd been stalked, and now he knew what that damn smell was.

Cat box.

By three o'clock there was still no sign of Hunter. Amanda didn't have the heart to call home and wake him up. It was obvious Hunter and Sophie both needed their rest.

All she'd been doing was removing halter monitors and collecting food journals with each patient's appointment. She could take the remaining EKGs and diet journals home to analyze if she didn't finish them all here. Then she'd enter the data into her home computer after her shift in the Urgent Care clinic that night.

At a quarter to five, just as she was packing up, Hunter appeared in the office, looking rested but disheveled. "Mandy, I'm so sorry. If Sophie hadn't soaked her diaper we'd still be asleep."

"I was beginning to wonder..." A slight smile twitched at the edges of her mouth. He looked so...slept-in.

"How can I make it up to you? Do you want me to stay late?"

How like him to show up ready to work rather than call and see if he could get out of coming back, she thought briefly. "No. Go home, get a good night's rest, and show up on time tomorrow. We'll be running the stress tests and dividing everyone into exercise groups."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll see you tomorrow, then." He tossed her the keys.

She nodded, already preoccupied with the last EKG, pretending to be distracted. "See ya."

He turned to leave. "Nice condo, by the way."

For some silly reason, the compliment made her happy. “Thanks.”

“Should have told me about the cat, though.”

She fought back that tickly smile again, eventually giving in and grinning at the desk.

That evening, Amanda hadn’t been home more than fifteen minutes when someone knocked on her door. There stood Hunter, carrying Sophie in her car seat. The baby happily gnawed away at her teething ring, but made a quick kick and squeal when she noticed Amanda.

“What are you doing here?”

“Two diesel trucks jackknifed on the freeway and caught on fire. All lanes are shut down until further notice, and the detour will take a good two hours.”

“Then you’ll just have to stay here.” What in the world had she just said?

“You wouldn’t mind?”

Of course she would! “Not at all. You’ve already found the guest room. You and Sophie can set up in there.”

“What about all those ground rules you laid down?”

She sighed with indecision. Ah, hell. “They don’t apply in an emergency.”

He carried all the baby items he could hold through the door. “I owe you. I couldn’t stand the thought of sitting in traffic another minute.”

Hunter’s eyes came to rest on her legs. She’d just gotten ready to take a quick run before her shift, and had on nothing more than flimsy jogging shorts and a midriff-length T-shirt. Her cheeks burned with heat by the time Hunter glanced back up into her eyes.

“Am I interrupting something?” he said. “Besides your entire life, I mean?”

He pointedly tried not to check her legs out again, but her cheeks flamed hotter. She palmed her face with a cool hand, then pretended to find her carotid artery and time her pulse.

“Going for a run. Make yourself at home,” she said over her shoulder, and she bolted out the door.

Hunter stood and stared until she was halfway down the block. She was a natural runner, her arms relaxed at her sides, shoulders straight. He smiled at her long, smooth strides. The rump shot was fantastic, too.

The short-furred gray tabby came down the hall to take a peek. He didn’t know if the cat was allowed outside or not, so he held him back with his foot and regretfully closed the door.

Sophie fussed, as if to say, *Well? Are we staying or not?*

Great. Now he was interpreting baby thoughts. Well, that was better than the wicked ones running around his mind right then.

He cleared his throat. “Okay. Okay. Give me a second, will you, Sophie?”

The baby gave him a juicy raspberry.

“Back at ya, kid.”

He had to be nuts to have accepted Mandy’s invitation. It meant spending the evening in each other’s company, and that would be easy on neither of them. Being around her would dredge up old feelings, and, frankly, he’d already used most of his sentimental reserves caring for Sophie.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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