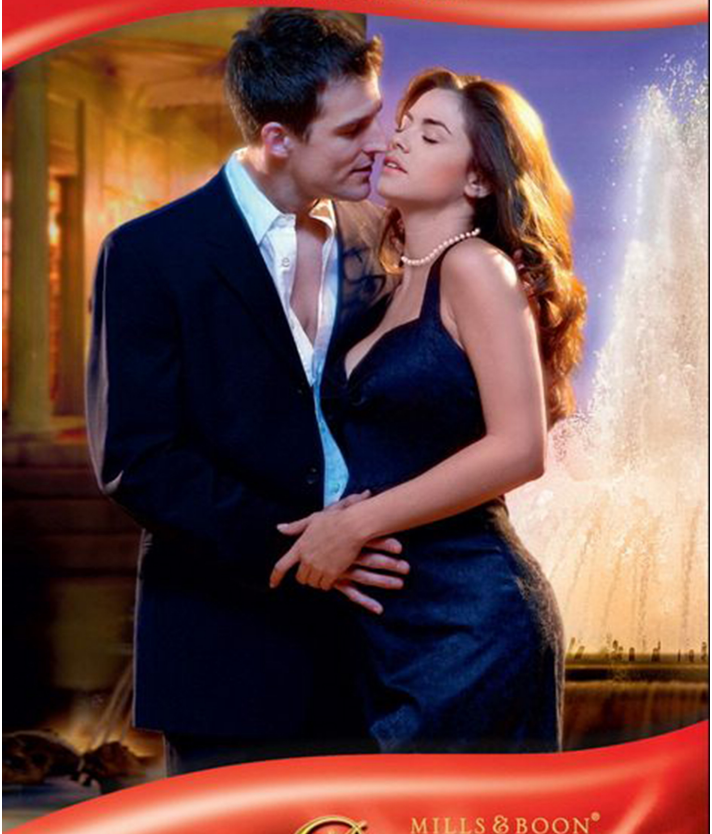
One Night, Two Babies

Kathie DeNosky

Valente's Baby

Maxine Sullivan



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Kathie DeNosky
Maxine Sullivan

One Night, Two Babies / Valente's Baby: One Night, Two Babies

Аннотация

One Night, Two Babies Kathie DeNoskyHeiress Arielle Garnier was pregnant – with twins – and the father-to-be was nowhere in sight – until he barged into her office. Zach Forsythe, billionaire resort owner, was the man she'd had a week-long affair with. Why had Zach lied about his name and left her without a word?Valente's Baby Maxine Sullivan For Matthew Valente, paternity trumped everything. Never mind that his ex-employee Lana had kept his baby a secret for nearly a year or that he considered her a liar and a thief. Their child would bear the Valente name…and so would she!

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One Night, Two Babies by Kathie DeNosky

From the desk of Emerald Larson, owner and CEO of Emerald, Inc

To: My personal assistant, Luther Freemont

Re: My granddaughter, Arielle Garnier

My granddaughter, Arielle, has moved to Dallas, Texas, and successfully taken over Premier Academy for Pre-schoolers. But during my recent investigation to find her and her brothers, it was brought to my attention that she's pregnant and has been unable to locate the baby's father. I've been advised by the lead investigator that he's Zach Forsythe, whose nephew attends Premier Academy. I have every reason to believe they will come face to face in the very near future. That said, I expect you to arrange whatever you deem necessary to accomplish my goal of bringing them together. Keep me informed of the progress.

As always, I am relying on your complete discretion in this matter.

Emerald Larson

Valente's Baby by Maxine Sullivan

"Maybe you could have handled this differently, figlio mio"

"You were the one who told me to marry her, Dad."

"Megan needed the Valente name. If you hadn't, I would have found a way to force you."

"Yeah, like you did with Alex and Nick."

"Naturally." There was a lengthy pause before Cesare spoke

again. “What are you going to do now?”

“I’m not sure,” Matt murmured, sounding distracted.

Lana, standing in the doorway, felt as though her breath had been cut off. They were talking about *her*.

And what was this about Alex and Nick? Cesare had forced them to marry their wives? He would have forced Nick to marry, too?

God, how many lives were the Valentes prepared to wreck for the sake of the family name?

Available in August 2010 from Mills & Boon® Desire™

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Taming the Texas Tycoon by Katherine Garbera & *One Night with the Wealthy Rancher* by Brenda Jackson

One Night, Two Babies by Kathie DeNosky & *Valente’s Baby* by Maxine Sullivan

One Night, Two Babies

By

Kathie DeNosky
Valente's Baby

By

Maxine Sullivan



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One Night, Two Babies

By

Kathie DeNosky

About the Author

KATHIE DENOSKY lives in her native southern Illinois with her big, lovable Bernese mountain dog, Nemo. Writing highly sensual stories with a generous amount of humour, Kathie's books have appeared on bestseller lists and received the Write Touch Readers' Award and the National Readers' Choice Award. Kathie enjoys going to rodeos, travelling to research settings for her books and listening to country music. Readers may contact Kathie at PO Box 2064, Herrin, Illinois 62948-5264, USA or e-mail her at kathie@kathiedenosky.com. They can also visit her website at www.kathiedenosky.com.

This series is dedicated to Charlie, the love of my life.

A special thank-you to Donna Swan, Carolyn Jordan and Lisa Swan for the Saturday Night Girls' Club. You're the best.

Dear Reader,

Last month you met the Garnier siblings, three more of Emerald Larson's ILLEGITIMATE HEIRS, and with her help, watched Luke find true happiness with his executive assistant, Haley Rollins. This month, Emerald turns her unwavering determination and full attention to setting things right for Luke's sister, Arielle.

After spending the most exciting week of her life in the arms of Zach Forsythe, Arielle Garnier finds herself alone and facing the challenge of single motherhood. But when she unexpectedly

comes face to face with Zach and he learns she's pregnant with twins, he's determined to do "the right thing" and make Arielle his wife.

So please sit back and enjoy the ride as, once again, Emerald Larson helps one of her illegitimate heirs find true love in *One Night, Two Babies.*

All the best,

Kathie DeNosky

Chapter One

"Mrs. Montrose, I know what Derek did was wrong, but you have to give him another chance."

When Arielle Garnier looked up from her computer screen at the sound of the male voice, her heart came to a screeching halt. The man who just stopped inside her office doorway was the last person she ever expected to see again. And if the look on his handsome face was any indication, he was just as surprised to be coming face-to-face with her, as well.

His vivid green eyes pinned her to the chair. He stared at her for several uncomfortable seconds before he finally spoke again. "I need to talk to the preschool's administrator, Mrs. Montrose, about an incident involving Derek Forsythe. Could you please tell me where I could find her?"

"Helen Montrose is no longer in charge here. She sold the school and retired a couple of weeks ago." Arielle tried desperately to keep her voice even in spite of her jangled nerves. "I'm the new owner and administrator of Premier Academy for Preschoolers."

She took a deep breath and reminded herself to remain outwardly calm, even if his reappearance in her life did shake her all the way to the core. This was her territory and he was the one intruding. Besides, she'd rather walk barefoot across hot coals than allow him to think he still had any effect on her.

When he continued to stare at her, she forced herself to ask, "Was there something you needed?"

He finally shook his head. "I don't have time to play games, Arielle. I need to speak with Helen Montrose as soon as possible."

The shock of seeing him again quickly gave way to anger that he didn't believe she was the new owner. "I told you, Mrs. Montrose retired. And if you have business here at the school, you will have to deal with me."

He didn't look at all pleased with the situation, but that was just too bad. She certainly wasn't excited to be seated before the man who, three and a half months earlier, had spent a week loving her like she was the most desirable woman alive, then disappeared without so much as a backward glance. He hadn't even had the decency to call or leave her a note.

"All right," he eventually said. She could tell he wasn't happy, but instead of pressing the issue any further, he took a deep breath. "I suppose this would be a good time to reintroduce myself. My real name is Zach Forsythe."

Arielle's heart felt as if it had fallen to her feet. Among his other transgressions, he'd lied to her about his name? He was really Zachary Forsythe, owner of the Forsythe resort and hotel empire? And if he was here to discuss Derek Forsythe, did that mean he was the little boy's father? Was he *married?*

Bile rose in her throat and she desperately tried to think if she'd heard or read anything about him recently. But all she could

remember for certain was that Zach Forsythe was reputed to prefer a quiet lifestyle out of the spotlight and guarded his privacy as if it were the gold in Fort Knox. Unfortunately, she didn't know anything at all about his marital status.

But the very thought that she might have spent a week in the arms of a married man sent a cold chill slithering down her spine. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but a few months ago I distinctly knew you by the name of Tom Zacharias."

He ran an impatient hand through his thick dark brown hair. "About that—"

"Save it," she interrupted, holding up her hand. "I don't particularly care to hear whatever explanation you're about to fabricate. I believe you wanted to talk about Derek Forsythe?" When he nodded, she went on. "And I assume you wish to discuss his pending suspension for biting another little boy?"

His mouth thinned into a grim line before he gave her a short nod. "Yes. You have to give him one more chance."

"I haven't been here long enough to be familiar with his past behavioral patterns, but your son's teacher said he's—"

"Nephew." Frowning, he then flashed her the same smile that he'd used to seduce her almost four months earlier. "Derek is my sister's little boy," he corrected. "I'm not now, nor have I ever been, married, Arielle."

She was relieved to hear that she hadn't done the unthinkable. But his devastating smile and the intimate tone he used to say her name made it hard to think.

"You don't have to be married to have a child," she countered, doing her best to regain a bit of her equilibrium.

"I suppose it's a personal choice," he observed, shrugging. "But I, for one, won't have a child outside of marriage."

"Whether you do or not isn't the issue here, Mr. Forsythe."

"Call me Zach."

"I don't think…"

Before she could go on, he took a step closer. "And marriage may not be the issue, but I can't have you thinking—"

"What I think is irrelevant." Desperate to change the subject, she tried to concentrate on the matter at hand. "Derek's teacher said this is the third time he's bitten another child in the past week." She glanced at the teacher's recommendation for suspension on top of a stack of papers on her desk. "And the school has a strict three-strikes policy when it comes to this kind of behavior."

"I understand that. But he's only four and a half years old. Can't you make an exception this one time?" he asked, turning up the wattage on his cajoling smile. "If you haven't been told about my sister's accident by some of the other teachers, I won't bore you with the details, but Derek's experienced quite an upset in his life in the past few months and I'm sure that's the reason he's been acting out. Things are getting back to normal now and I'm sure he'll settle down. Believe me, he really is a good kid."

Zach or Tom or whatever he was calling himself these days was putting her in a very awkward position. On one hand, rules

were rules and had been put into place to discourage students' undesirable behavior. If she made an exception for one child, she'd have to make it for all of the children. But on the other hand, if she didn't give the little boy another chance, it might appear that she was punishing him for the actions of his nefarious uncle.

"Would it help sway you if I promise to have a long talk with Derek and make him understand that it's unacceptable to bite other children?" he asked. Apparently sensing her indecision, he walked to her desk and, propping his fists on the edge, leaned forward until their faces were only inches apart. "Come on, darlin'. Everyone deserves a second chance."

After the way he'd lied to her about his name, then disappeared without a word of explanation, she would debate that issue. But his close proximity and hearing him call her "darlin'" with his rich Texas drawl caused her to shiver.

"A-all right," she finally replied, forcing herself not to lean away from him, even though it made her extremely nervous being so near.

She was willing to say just about anything to get him to turn off the charm and get out of her office so that she could draw a decent breath. Besides, the longer he stayed the greater the possibility he'd find out why she'd spent several weeks desperately trying to reach him. And at the moment, that was something she just wasn't ready to address, nor was her office the place to do it.

"If you'll explain to Derek that it's wrong to behave that way toward other children, I'll let him off with a warning this time," she decided firmly. "But if it happens again, he will have to serve the suspension."

"Fair enough." He straightened to his full height, then, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his suit pants, rocked back on his heels. "Now that we have that settled, I'll let you get back to whatever it was you were doing." Walking toward the door, he stopped and turned to give her another one of his charming smiles. "By the way, it was a very pleasant surprise running into you again, Arielle."

And jackasses have sprouted wings and learned to fly, she thought, barely resisting the urge to convey her sarcasm aloud. But before she could comment on his obvious lie, he exited her office as quickly as he'd barged in.

Sinking back into the plush leather of her desk chair, Arielle tried to think. What on earth was she going to do now?

She'd given up all attempts to find him months ago when every one of her efforts met with a dead end. Of course, now she knew why. The man she'd been looking for didn't even exist. It had been Zachary Forsythe, hotel and resort magnate, who had held her, made love to her and…lied to her. And here he was living in the city she'd recently moved to, with a nephew in her preschool.

"How did my life get so out of control?"

Burying her head in her shaking hands, she did her best to organize her scattered thoughts. She had no idea what to do, *if*

she should do anything. Clearly he'd never expected to see her again, and wasn't overjoyed that he had. And she certainly wasn't thrilled with the situation, either.

Her stomach did a fluttery lurch and, placing a calming hand over it, she tightly closed her eyes as she fought to keep her emotions in check. First and foremost, she'd made a huge mistake falling for his charismatic charm. And second, she'd wasted countless hours trying to find a man who'd just proved he wasn't worth finding.

But she'd foolishly held out hope that he'd have a plausible explanation for leaving her to wake up alone all those months ago. Deep down she'd known she was deluding herself, but it was easier than acknowledging how gullible and utterly foolish she'd been. Now there was no denying that he was every bit the jerk she'd feared him to be.

She swallowed hard and, opening her eyes, reached for a tissue to dab at the moisture threatening to spill down her cheeks. Her move to Dallas was supposed to be a good thing—a symbolic gesture of leaving the past behind and making a fresh start. But he'd just ruined that. There was no way she could forget about him and move on with her life if he showed up at the school from time to time.

Sniffling, she reached for another tissue. She hated being so darned weepy all of the time, but then, that was his fault, too.

Her stomach clenched again and she automatically opened her desk drawer, reaching for the bag of crackers she kept for

just such occasions. Yes, Zachary Forsythe was to blame for her hormones making her emotional, as well as her other current problems. And the most pressing problem of all was figuring out how and when to tell the biggest jerk in the entire state of Texas that even though he wasn't married as he said he would be, in about five and a half months, he was indeed going to have a child of his own.

Zach entered his executive office at the Forsythe Hotel and Resort Group corporate headquarters still thinking about his unexpected run-in with Arielle Garnier. He'd thought about her a lot since their time together in Aspen, but he'd never expected to see her again. And certainly not at the same preschool where his nephew was enrolled. But thanks to the little boy's latest antics, Zach had been put in the awkward position of pleading Derek's case to the woman he'd, for lack of a better word, *dumped* a few months ago.

Walking over to his desk, Zach sank into the highbacked chair. Swiveling around, he gazed blindly at the framed aerial photograph of his luxury resort in Aspen. He distinctly recalled Arielle telling him that she was a teacher at some nursery school in San Francisco. So why had she relocated to Texas? And where had she come up with the money to buy the most prestigious preschool in the Dallas area?

He supposed that her older twin brothers might have had something to do with that. If he remembered correctly, she'd told him that one was a highly successful divorce attorney in

Los Angeles and the other owned the largest construction and development company in the south. They certainly could have afforded to front her the money to buy the school. In fact, they'd been the ones who'd given her the week's ski trip, complete with deluxe accommodations at the Aspen Forsythe Resort and Spa for her twenty-sixth birthday.

Focusing his attention on the photograph of the luxury mountain resort, Zach couldn't help but grin when he thought about the first time he'd met Arielle. It had been her engaging smile and flawless beauty that had first attracted him. Her silky, dark auburn hair had complimented her porcelain skin to perfection and she had the prettiest hazel eyes he'd ever seen. But as the evening wore on, it had been her sense of humor and obvious intelligence that had him thoroughly captivated. By the following morning, they had become lovers.

As he sat there thinking about what had been the most exciting, memorable week of his life, his office door opened. His sister slowly walked across the room to lower herself into the chair in front of his desk.

"Did you speak with Mrs. Montrose about Derek?" she asked, propping her cane against the edge of his desk. "She's always been extremely fair and since the accident, she's been very understanding about his uncharacteristic behavior."

Zach shook his head. "Helen Montrose is no longer in charge at Premier Academy, Lana."

"She's not?" There was a hint of panic in his sister's voice.

"Who's taken over for her? Is he going to have to serve the suspension? Did you explain to whomever's in charge now that Derek's normally a very well-behaved little boy?"

"Arielle Garnier is the new owner and administrator," he answered, searching his younger sister's pretty face. To the outward eye Lana looked the picture of health. But she still had days when the fatigue of recovering from her horrific accident was overwhelming. "I don't want you to worry about it. I've taken care of everything and promised to have a talk with Derek about what's acceptable and what isn't. He won't have to serve the suspension, unless he bites the other children."

"That's a relief," Lana replied, finally smiling as she sat back in the chair. "He's settled down quite a bit now that I've had the casts taken off and we've moved back into the condo. And as our lives get back to normal, I'm sure his behavior will continue to improve."

With Lana having two badly broken legs, internal injuries and a couple cracked ribs, Zach had insisted that his sister and nephew move into his place during her recovery. And it was a damned good thing that he had. After her release from the hospital, Lana couldn't take care of herself, let alone see to the needs of an extremely active four-and-a-half-year-old boy.

"How did your physical therapy session go?" Zach inquired, noticing Lana wince as she shifted to a more comfortable position. "You seem to be having a little trouble."

"I'm ahead of where the therapist expected at this stage, but

it's not the exercises I'm doing that's causing my soreness today." She pointed to the floor-to-ceiling glass behind him. "It's this dumb weather. Since the accident I'm better at predicting a rainstorm than a barometer."

He glanced over his shoulder at the bright sunlight and brilliant blue sky just beyond the window. "It looks fine out there to me."

"I don't care," she objected, shaking her head. "My knees are telling me it's going to rain buckets sometime today, so grab an umbrella when you go out."

"I'll keep that in mind." When he watched her shift again, he offered, "If you'd like to go home and get some rest, I can have Mike pick up Derek from school in the limo."

Lana nodded as she levered herself out of the chair, waving Zach back down in his seat, and reached for her cane. "That might not be a bad idea. I promised him I'd bake some chocolate chip cookies for his afternoon snack. And a nap before I get started would be nice."

"Just don't overdo things."

She laughed as she made her way to the door. "No danger in that."

"By the way, I'm heading up to the ranch this weekend. Would you and Derek like to go along?" he asked, thinking they might like to get out of town for a while. Located just north of the city, the ranch where he and Lana had grown up had become a peaceful weekend getaway.

Turning, she shook her head. "Thanks, but now that I'm doing

better, I think Derek needs some uninterrupted mommy time. Besides, you know how it floods up there when it rains. I don't want to be stranded for the next few days while we wait for the water to recede. But please, give Mattie my love and tell her that Derek and I will be up to visit in the next couple of weeks."

"I'll drive myself and leave Mike here to take you wherever you need to go. If you change your mind, have him drive the two of you up to the ranch."

"I will, but don't count on us," she suggested, smiling.

After his sister left, Zach returned to work. But soon his thoughts were straying to Arielle Garnier and how absolutely amazing she'd appeared that morning. There had been a glow about her that he found completely fascinating.

He frowned. As unbelievable as it seemed, she was even prettier now than she had been when they'd first met.

But he wondered what brought her to Dallas. When they first met, she'd told him that she'd been born and raised in San Francisco and how much she loved it there. Had something happened to change her feelings? And why hadn't she moved to Los Angeles or Nashville to be closer to one of her brothers?

By the time he left the office for the day, Zach was filled with far more questions than he had answers. Something just didn't add up. And even though where Arielle lived or what she did was none of his concern, he decided to stop by the school on his way out of town. He had every intention of finding out why a woman who had been perfectly content with her life a few months ago

would make such a drastic change.

"Thank God it's Friday," Arielle muttered as she pulled her raincoat close and splashed through the ankle-deep water covering the school's parking lot on her way to her red Mustang. "The whole day has been one big royal pain in the neck."

The gentle spring rain that had started shortly before lunch had quickly turned into a torrential downpour and had continued throughout the afternoon, causing the pre-K field trip to the petting zoo to be canceled. Then, if thirty extremely disappointed four-year-olds hadn't been enough to contend with, one of the little girls in the three-year-olds 'class stuffed a bean up her nose during craft time and had to be taken to the urgent care facility around the corner to have it removed.

Opening the car door, she quickly closed her umbrella, threw it into the backseat and slid in behind the steering wheel. She couldn't wait to get home to her new apartment, slip into a baggy pair of sweats and forget the entire day ever happened. Since becoming pregnant, she'd started taking a nap when the children took theirs. Having missed hers this afternoon, she was not only tired, she was cranky, as well.

But her well-laid-out plan to spend a quiet weekend at her new home came to a swift end when she backed the low-slung car from her reserved space, drove halfway across the parking lot and listened to the motor sputter twice, then die. When all of her attempts to get the car going again failed, she closed her eyes and barely resisted the urge to scream. She should have known

when Zach Forsythe showed up first thing this morning that it was going to be one of those days.

She sighed heavily and, reaching for her cell phone, quickly dialed the number for roadside assistance to send a tow truck. But her already low spirits took a nosedive when, after holding for ten minutes, a representative came on the line to inform her that due to the high number of calls from motorists with stalled-out cars, it would be several hours before one of their drivers could come to her aid.

As she ended the call, she glanced at the water covering the parking lot, then at the school's front entrance. She couldn't just sit in the car until they arrived and trudging back into the school through inches of water wasn't appealing, either.

But her mood lightened considerably when the reflection of car lights in her rearview mirror drew her attention. A Lincoln Navigator pulled to a stop beside her. She briefly wondered if she should err on the side of caution and refuse any offer of help from a stranger. But she instantly dismissed the thought. They were in an exclusive, very affluent area of the city, it was still daylight and how many criminals drove luxury SUVs?

But when the driver got out, opened the passenger door of her car and Zach Forsythe got in, Arielle's gratitude died in her throat. "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

His knowing grin caused her heart to flutter like a trapped butterfly. "It would appear that I'm going to be rescuing you."

She shook her head. "No, I don't need help." Especially from

you, she added silently.

"Then why are you sitting here in your car in the middle of a flooded parking lot?"

"Maybe I just want to."

"Start the car, Arielle."

"No." Why couldn't he just go away and leave her alone?

His grin widened. "Is it because you don't want to or that you can't start the car?"

She glared at him before she finally conceded, "I can't."

He nodded. "That's what I thought. It's stalled out, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, that tells me you *are* in need of my help."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm sure you'll understand why I have to decline," she said stubbornly. If he was her only alternative, she'd just as soon fend for herself.

"Don't be ridiculous, Arielle."

"I'm not. I've already called my auto service."

"Really?" He didn't look at all convinced. "And just when is it supposed to arrive?"

"I'm sure it will be here any minute," she lied, staring at the street. Maybe if she wished long and hard enough, a tow truck would miraculously appear and Zach would disappear.

"Nice try, darlin'. But I'm not buying it." He leaned close as if he was about to share a secret. "Remember, I'm from Dallas. I know how it is around here in the spring and how long the auto club will take to get to you at this time of day. I also know that

calling a cab would take just as long."

"I don't mind waiting," she repeated.

Why did he have to be so darned good-looking?

"In case you haven't noticed, it's pouring and doesn't look like it's going to let up anytime soon. You'll be lucky if anyone can get here until this time tomorrow."

"Surely it won't take that long."

"Trust me, it could be even longer. And there's no way in hell I'm going to leave you sitting here in your car all night."

"I'll just go back inside the school until they get here," she decided, thinking quickly. Sleeping on the narrow couch in her office held very little appeal, but it would be a lot better than accepting aid from a lying snake like Zach Forsythe.

After a long staring match, he finally insisted, "Let me make this clear for you, darlin'. Either you get in my SUV and let me take you home or I'm going to stay right here with you for as long as it takes to get your car towed."

"You can't do that."

He folded his arms across his broad chest and settled back in the bucket seat. "Watch me."

His overly confident smile and arrogant manner grated on her nerves. "I'm sure you have more interesting things to do with your time than sit here with me all evening, so I suggest you go do them."

"Actually, I don't."

"Then why don't you go hunt for something to do and leave

me alone?"

A tiny ache began to settle in her stomach and she wished he'd leave so she could go inside and find something to eat in the cafeteria before she got sick. Her morning sickness had mostly disappeared a few weeks ago, but she still became queasy if she let her stomach get empty.

Besides, the longer she was around Zach, the greater the chance he would discover that she was pregnant. And although she would tell him that he was going to be a father, she wasn't prepared to do so at this moment. She was still coming to terms with the shock of running into him again.

Shrugging, he shook his head. "I'm not leaving until I'm certain you're okay."

"Why not? If you'll recall, you didn't seem to have that problem almost four months ago," she retorted before she could stop herself.

His smile fading, he uncrossed his arms and reached out to lightly trace his index finger along her jaw. "The circumstances are entirely different than they were then. Now, if you don't get out of this car and into mine voluntarily, I swear I'll pick you up and put you there myself."

A shivering thrill raced up her spine at his touch. "Is that a threat, Mr. Forsythe?"

"No, darlin'. That's a promise."

Chapter Two

Zach steered his SUV out of the school parking lot and onto the street. After giving him her address, Arielle plastered herself to the passenger-side door and clutched the front of her oversize raincoat like a security blanket. He'd also noticed she'd become quite pale.

His earlier irritation with her stubbornness quickly turned to concern. The woman he'd known in Aspen had been vibrant, outgoing and exuded good health. But Arielle's demeanor and the disturbing pallor of her complexion gave him every reason to believe that she was coming down with something.

"Are you all right?" he asked, glancing over at her again.

"I'm fine."

Stopping at the red light on the corner, he turned to face her. "I don't think so. You make a ghost look colorful."

She shook her head. "I'll be a lot better if you'll just take me home. Once I have something to eat, I'll be okay."

When the light changed, he gave serious consideration to taking her to her apartment, bidding her farewell, then leaving town as he'd planned. But his conscience nagged at him and he just couldn't do it.

Arielle was new to town, had no family in the area that he knew of and he'd bet his last dime that her only acquaintances were the people she worked with. How could he possibly leave

her to fend for herself when she was obviously ill?

Making a snap decision, he headed straight for the interstate. She might not like it, but she needed someone with her until her illness passed. And the way he saw it, he was about the only choice she had.

"What are you doing?" she asked, raising her head from where it had rested against the passenger window. "Why did you pass up my street?"

"It's obvious you're sick and I don't think you need to be left alone."

"I told you, I'm fine," she insisted. "Now turn this truck around and take me home."

"No." He changed lanes to avoid a huge amount of water covering the road ahead. "I'm taking you to my weekend place north of the city."

"I'm not going anywhere with…you." Her voice sounded a bit shaky and her pale complexion had taken on a sickly, greenish hue. "All I need is something to…eat and I'll be…good as new."

"I'll let my housekeeper, Mattie, be the judge of that." He'd feel a lot better having her oversee Arielle's care. Mattie had been like a grandmother to him and Lana and nursed them through every one of their childhood illnesses with a jar of VapoRub in one hand and a bowl of homemade chicken soup in the other. "Her home remedies are as effective as any prescription medication."

"I'm sure they are. But my apartment is a lot closer and…I

told you, I'll be fine as soon as I—" She stopped suddenly. "Pull over. I think…I'm going to be…sick."

Zach had the SUV stopped before she could finish the thought. Throwing open the driver's door, he rushed around the front of the truck to help her out. Putting his arm around her shoulders, he supported her while she was sick, and if he wasn't sure before that he'd made the right decision, he was now. The last thing she needed was to be left alone to contend with a very bad case of the flu.

"I think I'll be…all right now," she finally said, raising her head.

After helping her back into the truck, Zach got in behind the steering wheel and turned on the heater. "Let's get you out of your raincoat," he proposed, reaching over to help her. The garment was completely soaked. "I'm sure you're cold and uncomfortable in that thing."

"I'd rather keep it on," she objected, shaking her head as she clutched the folds of the coat. "It's waterresistant and the inside is still warm and dry."

Had that been a flash of panic he'd seen in her expressive hazel eyes? Why the hell would she be afraid to take off her wet coat?

"I'm not absolutely certain that's a good idea, darlin'."

"I am." As she leaned her head back against the headrest, he watched her close her eyes as if it was too much of an effort to keep them open. "Now, will you please stop telling me what to do and listen to me? I want to go home to my apartment."

"I'm sorry, Arielle, but I just can't do that. Try to rest. We'll be at my ranch before you know it."

"This could easily be considered a kidnapping," she relayed, sounding extremely tired.

"Not if the alleged kidnapper is only trying to do what's best for the alleged kidnappee," he elaborated, shifting the SUV into gear and merging back into the busy rush-hour traffic.

"Best in…whose opinion?" she argued, delicately hiding a yawn behind her hand.

"The only one that counts right now—mine." He smiled at the long-suffering expression on her pretty face. "Now, try to take a little nap. I'll wake you once we get to the ranch."

When she felt herself being gathered into strong, capable arms, Arielle's eyes snapped open. "Wh-what on earth do you think you're doing, Zach?"

Lifting her to him, he gave her a grin that curled her toes inside her soggy shoes. "You're not feeling well, so I'm helping you—"

"Just because I'm not one hundred percent doesn't mean I can't get out of the truck on my own," she interrupted, desperate to put some distance between them. What if he felt the bulge of her stomach?

"You need to conserve your energy to fight whatever bug you have," he explained, setting her on her feet. When he shut the SUV's door, he placed his arm around her shoulders, tucked her to his side and guided her from the garage across the covered breezeway into the house. "Besides, I'm not running the risk of

you passing out and possibly adding a concussion to your other ailments."

His secure hold caused her heart to thump even harder. "H-how many times do I have to tell you? All I need is something to eat and I'll be fine."

He stopped ushering her along when they entered the kitchen. "Mattie?"

"Stop your hollerin', Zachary. I'm old, but I ain't deaf." A gray-haired woman in her late sixties walked out of a pantry and stopped short at the sight of Zach holding her. "Did I forget about you bringin' company for the weekend?"

He shook his head. "No, but Arielle's sick and can't be left alone. Probably coming down with a bad cold or maybe even the flu and requires your expert care."

Arielle tried to push away from him. "I don't have the—"

"Hush, darlin'," he said close to her ear, causing a shiver to course through her. "Mattie Carnahan, this is Arielle Garnier. She's in need of some dry clothes. See if you can find something of Lana's for her to put on while I take her to the guest room."

He led her down a hall and opened the door to a beautifully decorated room. When he reached to help her out of her coat, Arielle shook her head and took a step back. "I don't need your help."

"You need to take that coat off," he insisted, moving toward her. "It's soaked."

She took a few steps backward. "The only thing I want from

you is to be left alone. But if you feel you have to do something, find me something to eat and then take me back to my apartment. What part of that don't you understand? And exactly how can I make it any clearer for you?"

As they stood glaring at each other, Mattie walked into the room to place a set of gray sweats and a heavy pair of socks on the bed. "Honey, he can be as stubborn as a jackass when he gets something in his head." She motioned for Zach to leave. "You go get your things out of the car and I'll have supper on the table by the time you get unpacked."

Zach didn't appear to be all that happy with his housekeeper taking over the situation. "I can do that later. I need to make sure Arielle is—"

"Go," Arielle and the older woman both said at the same time.

Muttering a curse, he finally turned and walked from the room.

Mattie started to follow him. "If there's anything else you need, just let me know."

"Thank you," Arielle said, meaning it. At least the housekeeper had given her a bit of a reprieve from Zach's overpowering masculinity. "And for the record, I don't have the flu."

Mattie nodded as she stepped back into the room and closed the door. "Zachary means well, but he doesn't have any idea you're pregnant, does he?"

A cold sense of dread spread throughout Arielle's body. "I…

Uh, no, he doesn't."

"How far along are you, child?" Mattie asked, her voice so kind and understanding it chased away some of Arielle's apprehension.

There was no use denying what the housekeeper had guessed, although Arielle didn't have any idea how the woman could have possibly figured it out. "I'm only three and a half months pregnant, but I'm already starting to get a nice little bulge."

Mattie nodded. "I thought you must be showing some since you were so determined to keep your coat on and kept holding it together. That's why I brought some of Zachary's sweatshirts and pants, instead of his sister's. You'll have to roll up the legs and push up the sleeves, but I thought you might need the extra room."

"But how did you know?" Arielle was thoroughly amazed by the woman's intuitiveness.

"Some women have a look about them when they're pregnant and if ever a woman had that glow, you do," Mattie revealed, shrugging. "And if that wasn't enough, Zachary telling me that you got sick on the drive up here and your insistence that all you needed was something to eat was. I always had to keep something on my stomach when I was carrying both of my boys." She smiled. "Now, get changed and come to the kitchen. I'll make sure you get something to eat before you get sick again. Then I'm going home so that you and Zachary can talk things over in private."

When Mattie closed the door behind her, Arielle at last took off her soggy raincoat and sank down on the bed. There hadn't been the slightest bit of condemnation in the older woman's voice, but she had to have strong suspicions that Zach was the baby's father. Why else would she leave them alone?

As Arielle started taking off her damp clothes to put on the dry fleece, she sighed heavily. It appeared that the time had come to tell Zach about the baby and discuss how they would handle the issues of custody and visitation.

She wasn't looking forward to it, but it would almost be a relief to finally have her pregnancy out in the open. Other than her new sister-in-law, Haley, and her newfound grandmother, no one—not even her brothers, Jake and Luke—had a clue that she was going to have a baby.

And although she loved her brothers with all of her heart, just the thought of telling them about her pregnancy made her want to take off for parts unknown. She was no longer the ten-year-old girl they'd raised after their mother's death, but they still insisted on meddling in her life. Although she'd learned to stand up to them, if they knew, they would tell her what they thought was best for her and the baby. No doubt they'd even convince her to move closer to one of them.

But thankfully they wouldn't have the opportunity to once again play the overly protective older brothers. Now that she'd found Zach, she fully intended to handle things on her own terms. By the time she told Jake and Luke about her pregnancy, she and

Zach would have hopefully made all of the important decisions.

She finished pulling the thick, warm socks on her feet then stood to go into the kitchen. In theory, her plan sounded logical and should work out. But something told her that if telling Zach he was going to be a father went like the rest of her day, she'd better brace herself for life to become more complicated instead of simpler.

When Zach walked into the kitchen, Arielle was already seated at the table with a plate in front of her piled high with mashed potatoes, vegetables and a country-fried steak smothered in milk gravy. "Shouldn't you be eating something a little lighter than that?" He frowned when he watched her take a big bite of the steak. "Chicken soup would be a much better choice for someone with the flu."

He watched her close her eyes for a moment, obviously savoring the taste of the beef. For someone with an upset stomach, she certainly had a hearty enough appetite.

"We'll talk about the reason I got sick after we eat," she replied, reaching for a slice of homemade bread. "But maybe now you'll believe me when I say I don't have the flu."

"Leave her be and have a seat, Zachary." Mattie had always called him by his given name, and although he preferred the shortened version, he'd long ago stopped trying to get her to change. "That little gal is going to be just fine."

"If Arielle doesn't have the flu, what's wrong with her?" he demanded, getting the distinct impression that the two women

knew something he didn't.

Ignoring his question, Mattie set a plate of food at his usual place at the big, round oak table. "I'm gonna cross the yard to my house before the ground gets so mushy I end up sinkin' to my knees in mud. And if you need me for anything, it had better involve somebody bleedin' or somethin' bein' on fire before you call me to come back over here."

"Is it still raining hard?" Arielle asked a moment before he watched a forkful of mashed potatoes disappear into her mouth.

He couldn't get over the change in her. The more she ate, the less sickly she appeared.

"It's supposed to keep rainin' like this all weekend," Mattie informed, nodding. "And if it does, y'all will be on your own tomorrow and Sunday because I'm too old to be gettin' out in weather like this."

"Don't worry about me," Arielle responded, taking a big drink of milk. "I won't be here. I'm going to have Zach take me back to the city after dinner. But it was very nice meeting you, Mattie." When neither he nor Mattie commented, she frowned. "Is there something I should know?"

"Do you want to tell her or should I?" Mattie offered, turning her full attention on him.

"I will," he conceded, seating himself at the table.

When his gaze clashed with hers, he watched Arielle slowly put her fork on the edge of her plate, her expression guarded. "Tell me what?"

"We probably won't be going back to Dallas before the middle of next week at the earliest."

She didn't look as if she believed him. "You're joking, right?"

"I'll let you kids work this out," Mattie remarked, quickly removing her jacket from a peg by the door. "I'm goin' home before all hell breaks loose."

He heard the back door close as he and Arielle sat, staring at each other over the table. "When it rains like this, the Elm Fork of the Trinity River backs up into the tributaries and the creek between here and the main road floods out," he described. "You were asleep when we drove over the bridge, but we barely made it across. By now I'm sure it and the road are under several feet of water."

"In other words, you're telling me we're trapped?" She made it sound more like an accusation than a question.

"You could look at it as being on a minivacation," he suggested, turning his attention to his own plate.

"But I have things at school to take care of and an important appointment to keep."

He nodded. "I've got things I need to do, too. But that doesn't change the fact that I can't drive you back to Dallas until the water recedes."

Arielle's ravenous appetite suddenly disappeared. "Isn't there another road that's not flooded?"

"Not really." He shifted in his seat. "The way the creek winds around, it makes this part of the ranch a peninsula. Then, when

rains are heavy, like now, the dry wash cutting through the middle of the property floods and this section becomes an island."

"That's kind of poor planning, don't you think?" she asked, raising one perfectly shaped eyebrow.

Laughing, he shrugged. "I suppose it seems that way now, but when my great-great-grandfather settled here over a hundred years ago, it wasn't. Back then, a natural water source was essential to a ranch's survival. Besides, we're two miles from the creek and there's a couple hundred acres between here and the dry wash. Not exactly a threat of being flooded out here on higher ground."

"But you knew this would happen and you still insisted on bringing me here?" If the heightened color on her face was any indication, Arielle was more than a little upset with him. "Why, Zach? Why did you do that when you knew full well how much I wanted to go home?"

"You were ill and needed someone to watch over you," he noted, stating what he saw to be obvious. "And since you don't have family close by, I was the only available choice."

She shook her head. "You're unbelievable. If I had been sick and did need someone to care for me, it would have made more sense to take me to my apartment. It was closer to the school and at least in the city, there are doctors and hospitals close by. And none of this was necessary because I'm not ill."

Truthfully, he wasn't entirely certain why he'd brought her to the ranch. Maybe it had been a way to make things up to her

for leaving her in Aspen without so much as a simple goodbye. But whatever the reason, when he'd seen she was in need, he just hadn't been able to walk away.

"If you weren't sick, then why did you look like you were at death's door?" he observed, his own irritation beginning to rise. "And why did we have to stop on the way here for you to throw up?"

He watched her take a deep breath, then, as if coming to a decision, meet his questioning gaze head-on. "Do you know why I get sick if I don't eat? Or when I do eat, why I put food away like a starving lumberjack?"

The back of his neck began to tingle the longer they stared at each other. He had a feeling he was about to learn something that he wasn't prepared to hear and might not like.

"No."

"Because that's what happens to some women when they become pregnant," she said defiantly.

Silence reigned while he tried to process what she'd said. "You're pregnant?"

"Yes."

"Just how far along are you?" he prompted, his heart beginning to thump inside his chest like an out-of-control jackhammer.

Her gaze never wavered from his when she answered. "Three and a half months."

He immediately glanced at the front of the sweatshirt she

wore, but it was big on her and a little too early to notice any telltale thickening of her stomach. Unable to sit still, Zach rose to his feet and began to pace the length of the kitchen. It didn't take a math degree to figure out that the baby she was carrying was most likely his.

"And before you ask, yes, I'm pregnant with your baby," she stated, confirming his suspicions.

His stomach twisted into a painful knot as he recalled another time a woman was carrying his child. "We used protection."

"Yes, but one of the condoms broke," she reminded him.

He'd figured the chances of making her pregnant from that one time had to be fairly remote. Apparently he'd been wrong.

Nodding, he rubbed the tension building at the back of his neck. "I remember. But why didn't you tell me sooner?" Her desire to be left alone to deal with the flooded-out car and her refusal to take off her bulky raincoat suddenly made perfect sense. She'd been trying to hide the pregnancy from him. With his jaw clenched so tight it felt welded shut, he asked, "Didn't you think I had the right to know?"

He watched her expression turn from defiant to righteously indignant. "Oh, no you don't, buster." She stood to face him. "I'm not letting you get away with playing the victim here. You *lied* to me about who you were. And up until this morning, when you barged into my office and told me your *real* name, I thought I was having Tom Zacharias's baby." She started to walk away, then, turning back, added, "And just for the record, I searched

desperately to find a man who didn't even exist because I thought he needed to know that he was going to be a father." She swiped away the tears suddenly spilling from her eyes. "When all of my efforts proved useless…you can't even begin to imagine…how much of a fool I felt or…the emotional pain I went through. So don't…even go there."

Zach stood in the middle of the kitchen long after he watched Arielle rush down the hall toward the guest room. Stunned, he had a hard time believing how rapidly his life had changed in the past twelve hours. When he'd gone to the school this morning, he'd had nothing more on his mind than sweettalking Helen Montrose into going easy on his mischievous nephew, then heading to the office to go over the contracts and blueprints for his newest resort. But along with his discovery that the old gal was no longer in charge at Premier Academy, the only woman he'd been tempted to have a relationship with since his ill-fated engagement had reappeared in his life and was pregnant with his baby.

Just the thought that he was going to be a father caused a myriad of feelings to course through him. Had it not been for his ex-fiancé, he might have felt pride and excitement about the baby Arielle carried. But thanks to Gretchen Hay den and her duplicity, he was filled with a deep sense of apprehension that he just couldn't shake.

Five years ago, he'd thought he had it all—a thriving business, a devoted bride-to-be and a baby on the way. But all that had

changed when Gretchen decided that motherhood would be detrimental to her figure and seriously limit her options should something better than being the wife of a hotel entrepreneur come along.

He took a deep breath in an effort to chase away the ugly memory of the day he'd discovered the woman he'd thought he loved had deliberately ended the life of their unborn child. All of his focus now needed to be on Arielle and protecting the baby they'd created together. And this time the outcome was going to be different than it had been five years ago. *This time,* he wasn't going to take it on faith that Arielle truly wanted his baby. He was going to make certain his child was protected.

Most of his anger dissipated as he thought about her trying to tell him about the baby and how hurt she'd been when she couldn't. But not all of it.

He understood her inability to find him after they parted in Aspen. In order to be completely anonymous, he always registered under an assumed name when he checked into one of his hotels. It was the only way to get an accurate idea of the quality of guest services and the efficiency and courtesy of the resort management. Besides, it was standard practice that guest information was kept in the strictest of confidence. If Arielle had inquired about him, and he had every reason to believe that she had, the management at the resort wouldn't have given her anything. And even if they had broken protocol and given her the name and address he'd registered under, the information would

have proven completely worthless.

But that didn't explain why she hadn't told him about the pregnancy when they were in her office this morning. And she'd had ample opportunity to tell him this afternoon when he'd discovered her sitting in her car in the school's parking lot. And why hadn't she told him the real reason that she had become sick on the drive to the ranch?

His appetite deserting him, Zach removed their plates from the table, scraped the food into the garbage disposal and put the dishes in the dishwasher. He'd give her time to calm down, then he wanted answers. And he wasn't going to bed without them.

With her emotions once again under control, Arielle wiped away the last traces of her tears and sat up on the side of the bed to look around the guest room. It was decorated in shades of peach and antique white and at any other time, she would have loved staying in such a beautiful room. But at the moment, it felt like a prison cell, albeit a very pretty one.

She was stranded on a remote ranch with the man who had lied to her about his identity, abandoned her without a word, broken her heart and made her pregnant. And if all that wasn't enough, he was blaming her for not telling him about the pregnancy.

"Unreal," she said aloud.

But even more incredible was that her life was paralleling her mother's. Francesca Garnier had fallen in love with a man who had impregnated her with a set of twin boys and simply walked away. Then, ten years later, the man had shown up long enough

to rekindle their romance, which led to the birth of Arielle, and once again disappeared. And when Arielle and her brothers first met their paternal grandmother a few months ago, they'd learned their father had used an assumed name.

Instead of Neil Owens, the starving artist their mother knew, their father was the infamous playboy Owen Larson, the only offspring of Emerald Larson, one of the richest, most successful businesswomen in the modern corporate world. During the ten years away from their mother, Owen Larson had fathered three other children—all boys and all with different women.

It was so bizarre, she even had a hard time believing it. But when Emerald Larson had contacted them Arielle had gained three more brothers. And Emerald had embraced the Garnier siblings as part of her family, giving each a multimillion-dollar trust fund and one of the many companies within the Emerald, Inc. empire. Arielle became the new owner of Premier Academy and moved to Dallas.

But that was immaterial. What was extremely disconcerting was, as her mother had done with her father, Arielle had fallen for a man she'd thought to be as honest and forthright as she'd been with him. But just like her father had done to her mother, Zach had deliberately lied to her to keep her from finding him.

She shook her head to chase away her disturbing thoughts and concentrated on forgetting what she couldn't change and focusing on her present dilemma. In spite of the stress and tension she had experienced or because she hadn't finished her dinner, her

hunger had returned full force.

Unfortunately, if she went to find something for herself in the kitchen, she'd likely run into Zach. Though they had several things to discuss and decisions to make, she wasn't ready for that just yet. She'd already had an extremely upsetting day.

But the decision was taken out of her hands when her stomach rumbled. If she waited much longer she'd become sick again and since they were flooded in, she didn't have much choice.

Sighing, she rose from the bed, opened the door and walked right into Zach's broad chest. "Oh, I…um, didn't know you were there. Excuse me."

He placed his hands on her shoulders in a steadying gesture and she noticed his gaze immediately settled on her stomach. "Are you all right?"

Even though his touch through the thick fleece sweatshirt and the low timbre of his voice sent shivers straight up her spine, she forced herself to remain motionless. "I need something else to eat," she said, nodding.

"Yeah, that probably wouldn't be a bad idea." He released her, running a hand through his thick hair. She could tell by the action that he wasn't comfortable with the situation, either. "Neither of us finished dinner."

They stared at each other as if thinking of something to say when her stomach rumbled again. "I'd better find something in the fridge or I'm going to be sorry."

"Oh, yeah, sure," he agreed, standing back for her to precede

him down the hall.

When they entered the kitchen, Zach walked to the refrigerator and opened the door. “Do you want a sandwich or would you prefer something else?”

“A sandwich and a glass of milk would be nice,” she answered, trying not to think about how handsome he was.

He’d changed into a pair of worn jeans and a black T-shirt that emphasized every well-defined muscle of his upper body. Dear Lord, he was without a doubt the best-looking man she’d ever seen. She’d thought so in Aspen and she thought so now. But thinking along those lines was what had landed her in his bed and ultimately led to her current predicament. She’d do well to remember that and concentrate on their upcoming conversation about the baby and what role, if any, he intended to take as the baby’s father.

“If you’ll tell me which cabinet the glasses are in, I’ll pour the milk,” she offered, forcing herself to look away from the play of his biceps as he lifted a gallon jug from inside the refrigerator door.

“I’ll take care of that.” He motioned toward the pantry. “Why don’t you get a loaf of bread and see if you can find a bag of chips.”

As he poured two glasses of milk, she retrieved the bread and a bag of pretzels and by the time everything was on the table, her nerves were stretched to the breaking point. They were both being overly congenial and polite, but there was an underlying

current of tension that was so strong, it could have been cut with a knife.

"We have to stop this, Zach," she declared, seating herself at the table.

To his credit, he didn't feign ignorance and act unaware of what she was referring to. "I don't want to upset you any more than I already have," he began, setting a couple of plates on the table. "But I'd bet my next resort project that our discussions are going to be tense at best."

"I'm sure they will be," she concurred, reaching for a package of sliced turkey. If she'd thought their talk was going to be unpleasant, the strained atmosphere now was far worse and she'd just as soon get it over with. "But putting it off isn't going to make it any easier." She nibbled on a pretzel. "Where would you like to start?"

He held up his hand. "We'll go into my study after we finish eating. I don't think it would be a good idea for you to have another meal interrupted, do you?"

"Probably not," she agreed, taking a bite of her sandwich.

They both fell silent as they ate and by the time they'd cleared the table, Arielle found herself actually looking forward to the confrontation she knew would follow. It would be a relief to get it over with so they could move forward. Zach was a highly successful businessman, much like her brothers, and she had no doubt he'd start by making demands and telling her what he expected her to do. But thanks to dealing with her brothers, years

ago she'd learned to stand up for herself and she knew exactly how much she was willing to give and what she intended to get in return. And the sooner Zach came to that realization, the better.

Several minutes later, he showed her into his study. Arielle glanced around, then seated herself in one of the plush chairs in front of the stone fireplace. She wasn't about to sit in the chair in front of his desk. He would have no doubt sat behind the desk, giving him a huge psychological advantage, much like a boss talking to his employee. And she wasn't allowing him any kind of edge.

"How has the pregnancy gone so far?" Zach asked, walking over to stand by the fireplace. Once again his gaze came to rest on her belly. "Have you experienced any problems other than having to eat frequently?"

"Not really." She shrugged. "Aside from a couple of weeks of intense morning sickness, everything has gone quite well."

"As long as you eat frequently?"

"Correct."

When she'd first discovered she was pregnant, she'd hoped that once she found him, the man who had made love to her with such tender care would be, if not happy, at least interested in their child. It appeared that Zach was very interested. But she couldn't ignore how he'd lied to her. Trusting him now would be foolish.

"When do you learn the sex of the baby?" he inquired, finally raising his eyes to meet hers.

"I'm not sure. On Monday, my obstetrician planned an

ultrasound to make sure everything is going well, but I don't know if the sex can be determined this early. But now I'll have to reschedule the appointment," she decided, it being pointless to remind him why.

To her surprise, he shook his head. "You won't have to reschedule. I'll call my pilot to bring the helicopter up from Dallas."

"But I thought you said we were stranded here until the water went down."

He again shook his head. "I told you I couldn't drive you back to the city, but I never said we were completely stranded. Besides, that was before I knew about the baby and the ultrasound." He gave her a determined smile. "Don't worry, I'll make sure that we keep this appointment and every other one until you give birth."

"We?"

"You didn't think I wouldn't be involved once I knew I had a baby on the way, did you?" There was an underlying edge of challenge in his tone and they were quickly approaching the more stressful phase of their discussion.

"To be perfectly honest, I didn't know if you would care one way or the other." She met his accusing gaze head-on. "If you'll remember, the man I thought I knew doesn't even exist."

The intense light in his dark green eyes stole her breath. "Darlin', the only difference between me and the man who made love to you in Aspen is the name."

"Really?" she dared, ignoring the swirl of heat the memory

created and concentrating on the hurt and disillusionment of discovering she'd been abandoned. "So when you're not using an alias, you habitually use women, leaving them behind, without waking them to say goodbye?"

"No, and that's not what happened," he retorted, shaking his head. "That morning, I had to get back to Dallas—"

"To tell the truth, it doesn't really matter, Zach."

She could see that he was angry she'd cut him off, but that was his problem, not hers. She had her pride and didn't particularly care to hear that he'd left because he'd grown tired of her or that things between them had moved way too fast and he'd wanted to avoid an uncomfortable scene.

"The only thing we need to talk over now is where we go from here," she stated determinedly. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of the baby's needs, so I don't want, nor do I need, monetary help from you. What I want to know is how involved you want to be in the baby's life. And will you want visitation rights every other weekend, once a month or not at all?"

His eyes narrowed as he took a step toward her. "Oh, I intend to be completely involved in every aspect of my child's life, Arielle. And as far as shared custody, visitation rights and child support are concerned, there is no need to work out any agreement."

"What do you mean?" Surely he didn't expect her to hand over full custody of her baby. If he did, he was in for the biggest, nastiest fight of his life. "I love this baby and I'm not giving it up

to you or anyone else."

Closing the distance between them, he stood over her much like her older brothers used to when she'd been called on the carpet for doing something they had disapproved of. "I'm not telling you I want full custody, darlin'. But spending time with my baby and supporting him won't be an issue because once we get back to Dallas, you and I are getting married."

Chapter Three

Zach watched Arielle open and close her mouth several times before she finally said, "You can't possibly be serious."

If ever a woman had the deer-in-the-headlights look about her, it was Arielle. Good. Now that he had her attention, maybe she'd start listening to him.

"Rest assured, I'm very serious." He folded his arms across his chest as he gazed down at the woman he had every intention of making his wife. "I don't joke about something as important as taking a trip down the aisle, darlin'. If *you'll* remember, I told you this morning that I wouldn't have a child out of wedlock. And I meant every word of it."

Anger sparkled in the depths of her hazel eyes. "And as I told *you* this morning, you don't have to be married to have a baby."

"That might work for some people, but not for me. I'm of the opinion that when a man makes a woman pregnant, he stands by her and does the right thing. We will be married as soon as possible."

"Oh, no, we won't." She rose to her feet, then poked the middle of his chest with her index finger. "Let me tell you something, Mr. High-and-Mighty. You're going to have to get used to the idea of being a single father because I would never marry you even if you got down on your knees and begged me."

Zach wasn't used to having anyone openly defy him—not in

the business world, not in his personal life. And if anyone did have the courage to cross him, they found themselves embroiled in a battle of wits they were most assuredly going to lose. But for reasons he couldn't quite put his finger on, he found Arielle's defiance mildly amusing, if not downright cute.

Maybe it was because of their considerable height difference. At six feet four inches, he towered over her. But that didn't seem to intimidate her one damned bit. Or it could have been the fact that he'd never had a pregnant woman get in his face and poke him in the chest to make her point the way Arielle had just done. Either way, he barely resisted the urge to smile. Their marriage was going to be anything but dull.

"Never say 'never,' darlin'."

"I'm telling you right now, it's not going to happen," she declared, shaking her head. "Being married isn't a requirement to have a baby. Other arrangements can be made for you to play an equal role in the baby's life, so you might as well start thinking along those lines and stop insisting on a marriage that is never going to happen."

Without giving it a second thought, he reached out and took her into his arms. "First and foremost, calm down. Getting upset is not good for you or the baby." Pulling her against him, he finally smiled. "And second, it *is* going to happen. So I would suggest that you get used to the idea pretty quick and start thinking about what you're going to wear and whether or not you want your brothers to give you away during the ceremony. I'm

willing to wait until next weekend if you want them in attendance, but no longer than that."

Before she could protest further, Zach lowered his head to silence her with a kiss. As he covered her mouth with his, the memories of what they'd shared in Aspen came rushing back full force. From the moment he'd seen her that morning, he'd wondered if her perfect lips were still as soft and if her response to him would be as passionate and unbridled as his memories.

At first she remained motionless in his arms. But as he reacquainted himself with her sweetness, Zach felt some of her tension drain away and he seized the opportunity to deepen the kiss. To his immense satisfaction she finally parted her lips on a soft sigh and allowed him entry to her tender inner recesses. At the same time she wrapped her arms around his waist.

The signs of her acceptance encouraged him to explore her with a thoroughness that immediately had his body reminding him that several long months had passed since he'd held her, kissed her, made love to her. Stroking her tongue with his, his lower body tightened and his heart took off at a gallop. His faulty memory forgot how intoxicating her kisses were and how perfect she felt in his arms.

Unable to resist, he moved his hands to her sides and slowly slid them beneath the bottom of her sweatshirt, up along her ribs to the swell of her breasts. He realized she wasn't wearing a bra and without a moment's hesitation, he cupped the weight of her with his palms. The soft mounds were larger, most likely due to

her pregnancy, and when he lightly brushed the pebbled tips with his thumbs, her tiny moan of pleasure indicated they were highly sensitive, as well.

But as he continued to reacquaint himself with her body, Zach pressed himself closer and the slight bulge of her stomach reminded him of their current situation and the raw feelings still churning inside him. Arielle said she loved and wanted his baby, but he'd heard that from another woman just before she deliberately caused herself to miscarry.

Suddenly needing to put distance between them, he broke the kiss and, removing his hands from her breasts, pulled the sweatshirt down and took a step back. Gratified by the dazed expression on her face, he could tell that Arielle had been as shaken by the kiss as he had. But if past experience had taught him anything, he would not allow his judgment to be clouded by the haze of desire. Besides, they had more than enough to deal with at the moment without adding another complication to the mix.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, sounding delightfully breathless.

Her cheeks had turned a rosy pink and he wasn't certain whether the heightened color was due to rising passion or embarrassment at her eager response. It was probably a combination of both, he decided as they stood staring at each other.

"Kissing you was the only way I knew to stop you from arguing

with me."

She swiped at her mouth with the back of her hand as if trying to wipe away his kiss. "Well, don't do it again."

"You used to like it when I kissed you," he reminisced, stuffing his hands into the front pockets of his jeans to keep from reaching for her again.

"That was before I discovered how deceptive you are." If looks could kill, hers was sure to finish him off in about two seconds flat.

"What time is your appointment for the ultrasound?"

"Monday afternoon at three." She gave him a confused look. "Why?"

"I'll arrange for my pilot to pick us up before noon on Monday," he said, quickly calculating how long the helicopter flight would take to get back to the city. "I have clothes here, but that should give us more than enough time to go by your place so that you can get ready and still make the appointment."

She shook her head. "I'm sure you have another resort to build or some corporate thing that needs your full attention. You don't have to go with me. I'll be fine without you."

Yes, he did have to accompany her. But he wasn't about to tell her that he felt an obligation to protect his unborn child, even though she'd given him no good reason for concern.

"Clearing my calendar for the day won't be a big deal." He shrugged. "I'd already counted on spending a few extra days here because of the flooding. Besides, that's the beauty of being the

sole owner. You can do what you want, when you want and nobody says a word unless they don't care about being fired."

"Let me put it this way, Zach." He watched as she clenched both fists at her sides and he could tell her frustration level was close to the boiling point. "I don't *want* you to go to the doctor with me."

"Why? You said you spent several weeks trying to find me. Now you're telling me you don't want me around?"

"I searched for you because I thought you might want to know that you'd fathered a child," she said tightly. "Not because I wanted you to go with me to doctor appointments or 'do the right thing.'"

"That's too bad, darlin'." He rocked back on his heels. "I'm going to the doctor with you and there isn't a damned thing you can do to stop me." Smiling, he added, "And I will be doing the *right thing* and making you my wife."

"I don't understand why you're being so stubborn about this, Zach," she grumbled.

"I could say the same thing about you."

Closing her eyes for a second as if trying to keep from belting him one, when she opened them, they sparkled with anger. "I give you my word that I'll tell you everything the doctor says and even make an extra copy of the picture from the ultrasound for you."

"I'm sure you would." He'd like to believe Arielle would be completely honest with him, but he couldn't be one hundred

percent certain. After all, he'd trusted his former fiancée and that had ended in absolute tragedy. "But I'm a hands-on kind of guy, darlin'. I never rely on secondhand information and I want to hear for myself what the man has—"

"Woman," she corrected him. "My obstetrician is a woman."

"Okay. I want to hear what the *woman* has to say." He smiled as he reached forward and placed his hand on her pregnant stomach. "I'm the daddy. I'm entitled to know what's going on, as well as finding out whether we're having a boy or girl at the same time you do."

She shook her head and removed his hand from her stomach. "I didn't say you weren't. But did it ever occur to you that it might make me uncomfortable to have you in the room during an examination?"

Her revelation was unexpected. Before he could stop himself, he reached out to run his index finger along her creamy cheek. "Why, Arielle? It's not like I haven't been intimately acquainted with your body before."

"That was several months ago and a lot of things have changed since then," she said, looking away.

"Like what?" he asked, fighting the urge to take her back into his arms. "We're still the same two people who spent an entire week together."

As he watched, the color on her cheeks deepened. "I didn't mean *that."*

"Then what?"

"After waking up alone to find that I meant absolutely nothing to you, I don't particularly care to be around you," she declared flatly. "Nor do I care to hear the reason you left."

He regretted the emotional pain he'd caused her. But that couldn't be changed now. "I'm sorry you feel that way, darlin'. But it's something that's going to have to change, and damned quick." He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger and, tipping it up, forced her to look him straight in the eye. "Once we get married, we'll be together all of the time. We're going to live together, go to all your prenatal appointments together and…we'll be sharing a bed."

He heard a hitch in her breathing a moment before she backed away from his touch. "I don't think so." As she turned to leave, she added, "It's not going to happen and you might as well get used to that fact just as quick."

Watching Arielle storm from the room, Zach straightened his stance. Oh, it was going to happen, all right. They would be married as soon as he could get a marriage license. When he wanted something, he went after it with a single-minded determination that never failed to net him the desired results. And that was something else *she* was going to have to get used to.

From everything she'd said and the way she acted, she was happy and looked forward to having his child. But he would not take it on faith that was the case here. That's why he fully intended to make her Mrs. Zach Forsythe and ensure his right to monitor everything that took place for the rest of the pregnancy.

Abandoning the book she'd been reading, Arielle shifted to a more comfortable position on the window seat and watched the pouring rain. She had successfully avoided Zach at breakfast by getting up around dawn and bringing a couple of muffins and a glass of milk back to the guest room. But she wasn't naive enough to think she could do the same thing for lunch. In fact, she was surprised that Zach hadn't looked for her when she remained in her room all morning.

Sighing heavily, she lovingly placed her hand on her stomach. She could understand Zach's desire to be with his child, but it didn't have to be a package deal. Surely they could work out something that was acceptable for both of them without entering into a marriage for all of the wrong reasons.

When she finally did get married, she wanted it all—a home, a family and a husband who loved her. Not the loveless marriage she would be getting if she went along with Zach's plan.

Lost in thought, she jumped at the sudden rap on the door. Before she had the chance to answer, Zach walked in.

"Are you all right, Arielle?"

"I'm fine." At least she had been before he entered the room.

Good Lord, if she'd thought he had looked good last night, it couldn't hold a candle to the way he looked now. Zach wasn't just attractive, he was drop-dead gorgeous.

The pair of jeans he wore today were faded and rode lower on his lean hips than the ones from the night before. And he hadn't bothered buttoning his light blue chambray shirt, giving

her a very enticing view of his chest and ripped abdominal muscles. Memories of him holding her to that chest as they made love, feeling every perfectly defined muscle pressed against her, caused her heart to skip several beats and her breathing to become shallow.

"Arielle, are you sure you're okay?" he repeated, frowning.

"Oh…um, sure." When she started to get up, he shook his head. "Stay right where you are. I know how hard it was for my sister to find a comfortable position, even in the early stages of her pregnancy."

"Some of the teachers at school said that being comfortable will become a very big issue the further along I get," she agreed, nodding.

Walking over to the window seat, he lifted her outstretched legs and sat down, lowering them to his lap. "Lana had a lot of trouble with her feet and legs getting tired," he said, gently massaging her foot. "Does that feel good?"

She could lie and tell him it didn't, but what was the point? He could tell from her serene expression that it did.

"Actually, it feels like heaven," she admitted, closing her eyes as he skillfully rubbed her arch.

"Have you had problems with muscle cramps?" he asked as his hands continued to work their magic.

"Not many." Enjoying his relaxing touch, she'd never realized that a foot rub could chase away tension throughout the rest of her body. "My legs cramped up a few times while I was sleeping,

but that's about it."

He shoved one leg of her sweatpants up and began to gently move his hands over her calf. "How did your brothers take the news about the baby?" he continued conversationally.

His touch caused a sense of euphoria to sweep over her and it took a moment to realize what he'd asked. Opening her eyes, she shook her head. "I haven't told them yet."

"Why not?" He moved to massage her other leg. "I was under the impression that you had a good relationship with them."

"We are very close." His hands moving over her leg made it hard to think and she paused to collect her thoughts. "But I'm almost sure they won't be happy with the decisions I've made lately."

Zach stopped his tender ministrations and a protective sparkle appeared in his dark green eyes. "They wouldn't talk you into terminating the pregnancy, would they?"

"Oh, no. Not that." She knew for certain her brothers would never do something like that. "They'll both be absolute fools over their niece or nephew."

"Then what's the problem?" he prodded, his hands once again moving over her legs with care.

"Instead of moving to Dallas, they'd want me to live with one of them." She sighed. "And as much as I adore both of them, I'd rather eat a big ugly bug than do that."

Zach threw back his head and laughed. "I see you still express yourself in a way that leaves no doubt what you mean."

The sound of his rich laughter sent a tingling sensation skipping over every nerve in her body. His sense of humor was one of many things about him that she'd found irresistible.

Shrugging one shoulder, she smiled. "Well, it's the truth. Luke would want me with him and his new wife, Haley, in Nashville. And Jake would insist that I move into his condo in Los Angeles."

"In other words, you'd have to choose between them?" Zach summarized.

"Not exactly. Either would be fine with me living with the other." She tried to concentrate on what she was about to say, but the feel of his hands smoothing over the sensitized skin at the back of her knee made that very hard to do. "For one thing, Luke and Haley have only been married a couple of months and they need their alone time. Plus they have a baby on the way and I don't think Luke could survive living with two women experiencing mood swings and emotional meltdowns at the same time."

"Oh God, no." Zach gave an exaggerated shudder. "One hormonal woman is enough to contend with, but two would send a man running like hell." He shook his head. "My sister moved in with me for a short time when she was pregnant. Her apartment was being painted. I never knew if what I said would make her angry enough to bite my head off or cause sobbing like her heart was broken." He lowered his head. "It was like living with Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde."

"Your sister is single?" If his sister could be a single mother,

why was Zach so insistent that they had to be married?

He nodded. “Lana wanted a child, but after several failed relationships, she decided a visit to the sperm bank was the answer for her.” He stopped massaging her legs, but continued to hold them on his lap. “And before you ask, I failed to talk her out of it. But I supported her decision and help out with Derek whenever she needs me.”

“Jake and Luke will be the same way with me.”

“They won’t have to be,” he said, giving her a meaningful look. “I’ll be with you every step of the way.” Before she could comment, he went on, “But what about your brother in L.A.? Why wouldn’t you want to live closer to him?”

“Don’t get me wrong, Jake is a wonderful guy and I love him with all my heart. But living with him would drive me over the edge.” Just the thought was almost laughable. “Besides, I prefer a much quieter lifestyle and I couldn’t have kept up with which one of his women was the flavor of the moment.”

“Moment?” He sounded surprised.

“Jake’s fascination with a woman has never lasted longer than a couple of weeks,” she explained.

“That could present a problem.”

She nodded. “Plus the fact that they still think of me as a child.”

“Hey, give them a break, darlin’.” He grinned. “I pretty much think along the same line when it comes to my sister.”

She sighed. “Your sister has my heartfelt sympathy.”

"So why did you decide to move to Texas?"

Gazing into his questioning green eyes, she wondered how much she should tell him. She'd been cautious about revealing her relationship with Emerald Larson to anyone. Who would believe she'd gone from a struggling preschool teacher, barely making ends meet, to an heiress with a bottomless bank account and a thriving business? She had never openly discussed her financial affairs with anyone but her brothers.

"I was presented with an opportunity to run my own preschool and I took it," she responded, settling on an honest but sketchy answer to his question. "And Premier Academy just happened to be in Dallas."

Zach stared at her wanting to ask more about her acquisition, but thankfully her stomach chose to rumble, reminding both of them that it was lunchtime.

"Uh-oh, we'd better get you something to eat before you get sick again," he stated, lifting her legs from his lap and rising to his feet. He held his hand out to help her up from the window seat. "What would you like me to make? Pasta or hamburgers?"

"You're going to cook?"

"I can handle things," he said, nodding his head. "Mattie's stocked the kitchen for my visit."

"Why don't we have something easy for lunch," she suggested when her stomach made its presence known again. "A sandwich would work."

"Need something pretty quick, huh?"

"I'm hungry enough to gnaw the legs off the table," she detailed as she walked into the kitchen and went straight to the refrigerator for a package of roast beef and some cheese.

"My cook in Dallas is going to love having you around," he said, laughing as he handed her a loaf of bread from the pantry. "Nothing makes her happier than feeding people."

Arielle stopped piling the sliced meat on two pieces of bread. "I won't be around for her to feed."

"Sure you will." She watched him remove the milk from the fridge, then reach into the cabinet for a couple of glasses. "Once we're married, you'll be living there, remember?"

She shook her head. "It's never going to happen, *remember?"*

His low masculine chuckle caused her heart to skip several beats. "Like I told you last night, never say 'never,' darlin'."

Chapter Four

On Monday afternoon, Zach sat beside Arielle in the obstetrician's waiting room, thumbing through a magazine. He wasn't the least bit interested in reading about or looking at pictures of maternity clothes. But since Arielle had been giving him the silent treatment ever since their helicopter flight to Dallas, it gave him something to do while they waited for her to be called to see the doctor.

Over the weekend, they seemed to have reached a truce of sorts and instead of arguing about their upcoming marriage, they had—as if by unspoken agreement—stopped talking about it completely. He still had every intention of making her his wife as soon as possible. Nothing she could say or do was going to change that.

"Arielle Garnier?"

Zach glanced up to see a nurse standing at the door leading back to the examination rooms. "Looks like it's our turn, darlin'," he said, rising to his feet, then offering his hand to help Arielle out of her chair.

Frowning, she placed her hand in his, stood and turned to face him. "It's my turn, not *ours,* and I'd rather you stay here while I'm with the doctor."

"You've made that very clear, darlin'. And I've made it just as clear that I'm going with you." He placed his hand to the small

of her back and started guiding her across the waiting room.

Her body language and stormy expression indicated that he would hear all about this once they left the doctor's office. But if she thought that was enough to intimidate him, she was sadly mistaken. Nothing was going to keep him from seeing the first images of his child.

The nurse motioned for them to enter a small room at the back of the office. There she recorded Arielle's weight, then took her temperature and blood pressure. "The doctor will be in shortly," she estimated, smiling as she walked to the door. "If you'd like, you can have 'Dad' help you onto the examination table. Then go ahead and pull your top up to just below your breasts and your pants down to just below your tummy."

As the woman closed the door behind her, an odd feeling spread throughout Zach's chest. Although he'd thought of little else since learning that Arielle was carrying his child, something about the nurse calling him "Dad" made it a reality.

"For the last time, I would prefer to see the doctor without an audience," Arielle protested, her tone reflecting her outrage.

Turning to face her, he cupped her soft cheeks with his hands. "It's all right, darlin'. I know you're probably self-conscious about your stomach," he said, making certain his tone was sympathetic, even if he didn't quite understand why she was uncomfortable about it. "But that's to be expected. You're pregnant. And there's nothing I'm going to see now that I haven't already." Kissing the tip of her nose, he smiled. "Now, let's get you on that table, ready

to find out what we're having—a bouncing baby boy or a sweet baby girl."

She gave him one last belligerent glare, before allowing him to help her up onto the examination table.

"Didn't the nurse tell you to expose your stomach for this?" he asked, reaching for the bottom of her maternity top.

To his surprise, she slapped the back of his hand. "I'll wait until the doctor comes in."

"Okay," he uttered, quickly releasing the hem of the garment. Zach knew better than to press the issue if he wanted to keep his head resting comfortably between his shoulders.

"My nurse told me you brought the baby's father with you for the ultrasound, Arielle," a woman wearing a white lab coat announced when she walked into the room. Closing the door behind her, she smiled and stuck out her hand. "Good afternoon, I'm Dr. Jensen."

He shook her hand. "Zach Forsythe."

"Nice to meet you, Zach." She walked to the other side of the examining table and, looking down at Arielle's rounded stomach, shook her head. "My goodness, I think you've blossomed even more since last week at your regular appointment." Gathering an instrument that looked a lot like a microphone, she reached for a tube of clear gel. "If either of you have any questions during the procedure, please don't hesitate to speak up. I like for the dad to be just as involved as the mom throughout the pregnancy and delivery."

There was something about Dr. Jensen that instilled confidence and he could understand why Arielle had chosen the woman to deliver their baby. “At the moment, I can’t think of anything. But I’m betting that changes, real quick,” he said, smiling.

Dr. Jensen nodded and, turning her attention to Arielle, asked, “How have you been feeling? Anything we need to address before we get started?”

Zach watched Arielle shake her head as she lifted her maternity top, then hooked her thumbs in the elastic waistband of her slacks and lowered them below her slightly rounded stomach. “I still have to make sure I eat something when my stomach gets empty, but otherwise, I’ve felt pretty good.”

“That’s not all that unusual,” the doctor assured her, squeezing a generous amount of the gel onto Arielle’s stomach. She held the instrument poised over the clear blob. “Are you both ready to see your little one for the first time?”

“Y-yes,” Arielle answered, her voice reflecting an anticipation as strong as his own.

“Will we be able to find out whether to decorate the nursery in pink or blue?” Zach asked.

The doctor smiled. “Probably not this time, but it won’t be too much longer.”

Nodding, Zach reached out and took Arielle’s hand in his. When she gripped his hand tightly, he knew she appreciated his support.

"Ready whenever you are," he said, his gaze never wavering from Arielle.

When the doctor began moving the scope around Arielle's stomach, a fuzzy, twitching image immediately popped up on the monitor. Zach wondered what the hell he was supposed to be looking at. But the more Dr. Jensen moved the wand around, he noticed what might possibly be an arm or a leg.

The woman pointed to the screen. "See, there's your baby's head and back." She moved the instrument to the other side of Arielle's stomach. "Let's see if we can detect the sex from this angle." Her sudden frown caused Zach's heart to grind to a halt. "What's this?" she asked, adding to his anxiety. "It certainly explains why you're a bit larger than normal."

"I-Is something wrong?" Arielle murmured, sounding as if she might burst into tears.

Zach lightly squeezed her hand in an effort to lend her every ounce of strength he possessed. "I'm sure everything is fine, darlin'."

"Oh, there's nothing wrong," Dr. Jensen confirmed, turning to them with a wide grin. "I'm just wondering how you will keep up with two toddlers when they start walking."

"Two?" Arielle echoed, her eyes round with shock.

"Twins?" Zach croaked at the same time.

Dr. Jensen laughed as she pushed the print button on the side of the monitor. "The way the first baby was lying, I couldn't see the second one until I changed sides. But yes, you're definitely

having twins."

At that moment, Zach couldn't have forced words past the lump clogging his throat if his life depended on it. He was not only going to have a child, he was going to have two. Unbelievable.

His chest felt as if it had swelled to twice its normal size. Words couldn't express what he was feeling, and, leaning down, he covered Arielle's parted lips with his for a brief but intense kiss.

"Do twins run in either of your families?" the doctor inquired as she wiped the excess gel from Arielle's stomach with a handful of tissues. She didn't comment that both of them were breathing as if they'd run a marathon by the time he lifted his head and Zach figured the woman was used to displays of emotion after learning the results of an ultrasound.

Clearly in a state of shock, Arielle stared at him as if urging him to answer Dr. Jensen's question. "Arielle has twin brothers," he responded, finally getting his vocal cords to work. "But to my knowledge there aren't any twins in my family."

The doctor tilted her head. "Well, there are now." She picked up Arielle's chart and made a notation. "I see neither of you anticipated a multiple birth."

"I…uh, suppose I knew it was a possibility, but…" Looking utterly stunned, Arielle's voice trailed off as she rearranged her clothes and sat up on the side of the exam table.

"Are both of the babies okay?" Zach thought to ask as his

brain began to function again.

"Actually, everything looks very good." Dr. Jensen smiled. "Both fetuses appear to be a good size and I'd estimate the right weight for this stage of their development."

Helping Arielle down from the table, he asked the doctor, "Is there anything special that we should or shouldn't be doing?"

Dr. Jensen shook her head. "As long as you feel like it, Arielle, there's no reason you can't enjoy your normal activities, including sexual relations."

He caught Arielle's warning glare and wisely refrained from commenting on the doctor's stamp of approval for their making love. But he didn't even try to stop his wide grin.

Dr. Jensen started for the door. "I'll see you in three weeks for your regular appointment and of course, if you have any problems or questions before then, don't hesitate to give me a call."

Zach and Arielle walked together down the hall to the elevator. They remained silent on the ride to the lobby and he figured she was coming to terms with the idea of having twins.

"How long will it take you to pack an overnight bag?" he asked as he helped her into the back of his limousine.

"Why would I need to pack?" she questioned, when he slid into the seat beside her.

"Because I'm moving you into my place." It was more important now than ever that Arielle took good care of herself.

"No, you're not." She shook her head. "I'm going to go home,

change into a circus tent and call my brothers to tell them the news about the baby…babies." She suddenly emitted a nervous giggle. "Oh my God, I'm having twins."

"Yes, you are, darlin'." Giving instructions to his driver to take them to her apartment, he put his arm around her shoulders. He could tell she was still overwhelmed by the news and now wasn't a good time to press her on the issue of moving in with him. "We'll spend the night at your apartment and move you into my home tomorrow morning."

"No, we won't. You're going to drop me off at my place and then go home to yours while I call my brothers. End of discussion." She sounded quite adamant, but he noticed that she wasn't scooting away from him, was allowing him to hold her close to his side.

"Sorry, darlin', but I told you that I would be with you every step of the way." He kissed the top of her head. "And that means from here on out, we'll be doing whatever needs to be done together. Everything from doctor appointments to breaking the news to your brothers that we're going to have twins."

By the time they arrived at her apartment, the fact that she was going to be the mother of twins had sunk in and she was regaining some perspective. "I think it might be better if I'm the one to break the news to my brothers." Removing her cardigan sweater, she walked over to hang it in the entryway closet, hoping Zach would take the hint that she needed a little time alone. "While I make the call from my bedroom, please make yourself

comfortable. I'll only be a few minutes." She'd given up on him going home.

"I'd rather you stay right here and make the call on the speakerphone." He shrugged out of his suit coat, loosened his tie and released the button at the neck of his white oxford cloth shirt, then walked over to place his hands on her shoulders. "I promise I'll keep quiet as long as they don't give you too much flak." He used his index finger to raise her chin until their gazes met. "But I reserve the right to break my silence at any time if I think they're upsetting you."

Where was all this concern almost four months ago when she discovered he was gone and cried for days feeling like such a fool? Or a few weeks later when she realized she was pregnant with no way of contacting her baby's father?

The heat from his hands permeated her shirt and sent an excited little shiver up her spine. Trying to ignore the way his touch made her feel, she advised, "I'm a big girl, Zach. I can take care of myself."

"You don't have to, Arielle. Not anymore." Her breath caught when he took her in his arms, but it was the look on his handsome face that sent her heart racing. "From here on out, that's my job. And believe me, I have every intention of taking it very seriously. I give you my word that I'll do everything in my power to protect you and our babies. And if I have to, I'll have no problem taking on both of your brothers to keep that promise."

She could have asked him who was going to protect her from

him, but he chose that moment to lower his head and cover her mouth with a kiss so poignant it brought tears to her eyes. At first, it seemed just a kiss to seal his vow to take care of her and their babies, but as his lips moved over hers, it quickly evolved into so much more.

As Zach tasted and teased, she tried her best to suppress her reaction to him. She started to push against his chest, but just like the first night at his ranch, her will to resist evaporated like morning mist on a hot summer day and she melted against him.

She briefly wondered how she could succumb to his charm after all that had happened. But as he parted her lips with his tongue and began a tender exploration, she quickly forgot the past and lost herself to the mastery of his caress.

Heat coursed through her at the speed of light as he coaxed and demanded that she respond, drawing her into his sensual web. A tingling sensation spread throughout her entire body as he slowly moved his hands down her back to the tail of her oversize shirt.

He slipped his hands beneath the gauzy lavender fabric, then up along her ribs to cup her breasts. She knew she should call a halt to things right away and regain her senses. Nothing had changed between them. She still wouldn't complicate matters by agreeing to get married, or moving into his home. But when Zach rubbed her overly sensitive nipples through the satin and lace of her bra, all rational thought deserted her and she leaned into his embrace.

"I think before this goes any further, we'd better make that call to your brothers," Zach said, nibbling tiny kisses along her jaw to the hollow just beneath her ear. "Otherwise, there's no telling when we'll get around to it."

He continued to tease her with his thumbs. When she realized what he'd said, her cheeks heated and she started to back away from his electrifying touch. But to her dismay, he slipped his hands from her breasts and around to her back to hold her to him.

"We'll pick up where we left off after we make the call," he whispered, sending a wave of goose bumps sliding over her body.

She shook her head. "That wouldn't…be a…good idea."

"Sure it would, darlin'." He nuzzled his cheek against her hair then took a step back. "Now, why don't we make this a conference call and tell them at the same time?"

Still feeling a bit lightheaded from Zach's drugging kiss, Arielle nodded and, dialing Jake's number first, put him on hold while she called Luke. When she had both of her brothers on the line, she switched the phone to speaker, sank down onto the couch beside Zach and took a deep breath.

"I have some news to share and I decided to tell you both at the same time."

"Will this explain why you cry every time I've talked to you for the past few months?" Jake asked, sounding uncharacteristically serious.

"And the reason you've avoided talking to me?" Luke added, his tone stern.

"I'm sorry, Luke," she apologized, feeling guilty. She'd known how concerned her brothers were, but she wasn't sure how to tell them that she was in the same predicament as their mother all those years ago. "You know how much I love both of you. I just had some things that I needed to work out."

"You know we'd have done everything in our power to help," Jake reminded her.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed Zach nodding his approval, feeling the same way about his own sister. "I know you would have, but this was something I had to work through on my own."

"So you've done that and you are ready to tell us what's been going on?" The more serious of the two men, Luke never wasted time getting to the heart of the matter.

"Yeah, don't keep us in suspense," Jake urged.

Taking another deep breath, she asked, "How do you feel about being uncles to twins in about six months?"

The silence that followed proved that this was not what her brothers had expected.

"I know this comes as a—"

The first to recover, Jake interrupted her. "You're pregnant…"

"With twins," Luke finished, sounding more formidable than she'd heard in a long time.

"Who's the father?" Jake demanded.

"And how do we contact him?" Luke asked, sounding just as

determined as his twin.

"Yeah, we'd like to have a little talk with the bastard," Jake spat, going into "big brother" mode.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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