

2 *in* 1  
GREAT  
VALUE

TRIPLE TROUBLE

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LOIS FAYE DYER

A REAL LIVE  
COWBOY

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JUDY DUARTE

*Cherish*<sup>™</sup>



Judy Duarte

**Triple Trouble / A Real Live  
Cowboy: Triple Trouble**

«HarperCollins»

## **Duarte J.**

Triple Trouble / A Real Live Cowboy: Triple Trouble / J. Duarte —  
«HarperCollins»,

Triple Trouble Lois Faye Dyer Nicholas Fortune was at his wits' end looking after his temporary charges – three tiny baby girls. The answer? A nanny! The triplets quickly stole Charlene's heart. Her sexy boss was definitely off-limits, until he made her another offer – one she couldn't refuse! A Real Live Cowboy Judy Duarte Eldest son JR had come home to Red Rock to live up to the Fortune legacy. Now he wanted Isabella to share it with him. But when a devious enemy targeted both their families, he realised how far he'd go to protect the woman he loved...

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## **TRIPLET TROUBLE**

### **No man should be that gorgeous.**

She tore her gaze away from his smile. Unfortunately, she was immediately snagged by his glossy black hair, thick-lashed brown eyes, tanned skin with a faint beard shadow despite the early hour, handsome features...

Were all the Fortune men this blessed by nature? she wondered. If so, God help the women who caught their attention – because females didn't stand a chance against all that powerful, charming, handsome male virility.

Perhaps she was fortunate that he was her boss and thus off-limits. Never mind the fact that he was also not interested in her.

Because if he ever turned that undeniable charm on her, she'd give in without a whimper.

## **A REAL LIVE COWBOY**

### **Their gazes met and locked.**

Something – pheromones, for one thing – buzzed between them with an intensity that nearly buckled her knees.

Or was that the wine she'd consumed doing a number on her?

Perhaps it was both.

Isabella offered him a lighthearted smile. “If you'll excuse me, I think I'll go to bed.”

“Sleep tight.”

Yeah, right.

She'd set her sights on finding Mr Right – or Señor Right more accurately – but she was afraid that JR Fortune thought he might be that man.

Sure, the city-slicker was handsome – and wealthy.

A very attractive, very appealing man.

But they were as different as night and day.

She'd lost herself and her family roots once, and she wouldn't allow that to happen again.

That's why she was determined to find the right mate.

So what was with her growing attraction to the wrong one?

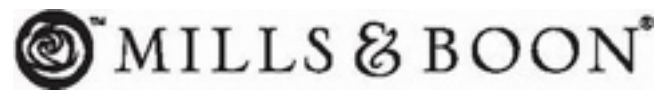
# **Triple Trouble**

By

**Lois Faye Dyer**  
**A Real Live Cowboy**

By

**Judy Duarte**



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## **Triple Trouble**

By

**Lois Faye Dyer**

**Lois Faye Dyer** lives in a small town on the shore of beautiful Puget Sound in the Pacific Northwest with her two eccentric and loveable cats, Chloe and Evie. She loves to hear from readers and you can write to her c/o Paperbacks Plus, 1618 Bay Street, Port Orchard, WA 98366, USA. Visit her on the web at [www.Loisdyer.com](http://www.Loisdyer.com) and [www.SpecialAuthors.com](http://www.SpecialAuthors.com).

For Grant Suh and his proud parents, Steve and Brenda.

Welcome to America and our family, Grant –  
we're so glad you're here.

## Chapter One

Nicholas Fortune closed the financial data file on his computer and stretched. Yawning, he pushed his chair away from his desk and stood. His office was on the top floor of the building housing the Fortune Foundation, and outside the big corner windows, the Texas night was moonless, the sky a black dome spangled with the faint glitter of stars.

“Hell of a lot different from L.A.,” he mused aloud, his gaze tracing the moving lights of an airplane far above. The view from the window in his last office in a downtown Los Angeles high rise too often had been blurred with smog that usually blotted out the stars. No, Red Rock, Texas, was more than just a few thousand miles from California—it was a whole world away.

All in all, he thought as he gazed into the darkness, he was glad he’d moved here a month ago. He’d grown tired of his job as a financial analyst for the Kline Corporation in L.A. and needed new challenges—working for the family foundation allowed him time to contemplate his next career move. And a nice side benefit was that he got to spend more time with his brother, Darr.

With the exception of the hum of a janitor’s vacuum in the hallway outside, the building around him was as silent as the street below. Nicholas turned away from the window and returned to his desk to slide his laptop into its leather carrying case. He was just shrugging into his jacket when his cell phone rang.

He glanced at his watch. The fluorescent dials read eleven-fifteen. He didn’t recognize the number and ordinarily would have let the call go to voice mail, but for some reason he thumbed the On button. “Hello?”

“Mr. Fortune? Nicholas Fortune?”

He didn’t recognize the male voice. “Yes.”

“Ah, excellent.” Relief echoed in the man’s voice. “I’m sorry to call so late, but I’ve been trying to locate you for three days and my assistant just found this number. My name is Andrew Sanchez. I’m an attorney for the estate of Stan Kennedy.”

Nicholas froze, his fingers tightening on the slim black cell phone. “The *estate* of Stan Kennedy? Did something happen to Stan?”

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of unfortunate news.” The caller’s voice held regret. “Mr. Kennedy and his wife were killed in a car accident three days ago.”

Shock kept Nicholas mute.

“Mr. Fortune?”

“Yeah.” Nicholas managed to force words past the thick emotion clogging his throat. “Yeah, I’m here.”

“It’s my understanding you and Mr. Kennedy were quite close?”

“We were college roommates. I haven’t seen Stan in a year or so, but we keep in touch—*kept* in touch by phone and e-mail.” *Like brothers*, Nicholas thought. “We were close as brothers in college.”

“I see. Well, Mr. Fortune, that probably explains why he named you guardian of his children. The little girls are currently safe and in the care of a foster mother, but the caseworker is anxious to transfer custody to you. The sooner they’re in a stable environment the better.”

“Whoa, wait a minute.” Nicholas shook his head to clear it, convinced he hadn’t heard the attorney correctly. “Stan left *me* in charge of his kids?”

“Yes, that’s correct.” The attorney paused. “You didn’t know?”

Nicholas tried to remember exactly what Stan had told him about his will. They’d both agreed to take care of business for the other if anything happened to them. He’d been Stan’s best man at his wedding to Amy and he definitely remembered Stan asking him to look after his bride should anything happen. Even though their conversation had taken place while emptying a magnum of champagne, Nicholas knew his word was important to Stan and he hadn’t given it lightly.

But *babies?* And not just one—*three*.

“The triplets weren’t born when we made a pact to look after each other’s estate, should anything ever happen,” he told the attorney. *And neither of us thought he and Amy wouldn’t live to raise their daughters.* “But I promised Stan I’d take care of his family if he couldn’t.”

“Excellent.” The attorney’s voice was full of relief. “Can I expect you at my office tomorrow, then?”

“Tomorrow?” Nick repeated, his voice rough with shock.

“I know it’s extremely short notice,” Sanchez said apologetically. “But as I said, the caseworker is very concerned that the babies be settled in a permanent situation as soon as possible.”

“Uh, yeah, I suppose that makes sense,” Nick said. He thrust his fingers through his hair and tried to focus on the calendar that lay open on his desktop. “I’ve got a meeting I can’t cancel in the morning, but I’ll catch the first flight out after lunch.” Nicholas jotted down the address in Amarillo and hung up. It was several moments before he realized he was sitting on the edge of his desk, staring at the silent phone, still open in his hand.

Grief washed over him, erasing the cold, numbing shock that had struck with the news. He couldn’t believe Stan and Amy were gone. The couple met life with a zest few of their friends could match. It was impossible to get his head around the fact that all their vibrant energy had been snuffed out.

He scrubbed his hand down his face and his fingers came away damp.

He sucked in a deep breath and stood. He didn’t have time to mourn Stan and Amy. Their deaths had left their three little girls vulnerable, without the protection of parents. Though how the hell Stan and Amy had ever decided he was the best choice to act as substitute dad for the triplets, Nicholas couldn’t begin to guess.

In all his thirty-seven years, he’d never spent any length of time around a baby. He had four brothers but no wife, no fiancée or sister, and his mom had died two years ago. The only permanent female in his immediate family was Barbara, the woman his brother Darr had fallen in love with a month earlier. Barbara was pregnant. Did that mean she knew about babies?

Nick hadn’t a clue. And for a guy who spent his life dealing with the predictability of numbers, in his career as a financial analyst, being clueless didn’t sit well.

But he had no choice.

Despite being totally unqualified for the job, he was flying to Amarillo tomorrow.

And bringing home three babies.

He didn’t know a damn thing about kids. Especially not little girls.

He was going to have to learn fast...

Charlene London walked quickly along the Red Rock Airport concourse, nearly running as she hurried to the gate. The flight to Amarillo was already boarding and only a few stragglers like herself waited to be checked through.

Fortunately, the uniformed airline attendant was efficient, and a moment later, Charlene joined the short queue of passengers waiting to board.

For the first time in the last hour, she drew a deep breath and relaxed. The last three weeks had been hectic and difficult. Breaking up with her fiancé after three years had been hard, but quitting her job, packing her apartment and putting everything in storage had been draining. She’d purposely pared her luggage down to a few bags, since she’d be living with her mother in a condo in Amarillo while she looked for a job and an apartment.

*And a new life*, she told herself. She was determined to put her failed relationship with Barry behind her and get on with her career.

She sipped her latte, mentally updating her résumé while the line moved slowly forward. They entered the plane and her eyes widened at the packed cabin and aisle, still thronged with passengers finding seats and stowing bags in the overhead compartments.

*Thank goodness I used my frequent flyer miles to upgrade to first class.* She glanced at her ticket and scanned the numbers above the seats, pausing as she found hers.

“Excuse me.”

The man rose and stepped into the aisle to let her move past him to reach the window seat.

He smelled wonderful. Charlene didn’t recognize the scent, but it was subtle and clean. Probably incredibly expensive. *And thank goodness he isn’t wearing the same cologne as Barry,* she thought with a rush of relief.

She was trying to get away from Barry—and didn’t need or want any reminder of her ex-boyfriend. Or fiancé. Or whatever the appropriate term was for the man you’d dated for three whole years, thinking he was the man you’d marry, until you’d discovered that he was...ot the man you’d thought he was at all.

Very disheartening.

“Can I put that up for you?”

The deep male voice rumbled, yanking Charlene from her reverie.

“What?” She realized he was holding out his hand, the expression on his very handsome face expectant. He lifted a brow, glanced significantly at her carry-on, then at her. “Oh, yes. Thank you.”

He swung the bag up with ease while she slipped into the window seat. She focused on latching her seat belt, stowing her purse under the seat and settling in. It wasn’t until the plane backed away from the gate to taxi toward the runaway that she really looked at the man beside her.

He was staring at the inflight magazine but Charlene had the distinct impression he wasn’t reading. In profile, his face was all angles with high cheekbones, chiseled lips and a strong jawline. His dark brown hair was short, just shy of a buzz cut, and from her side view, his eyelashes were amazingly long and thick. She wondered idly what color his eyes were.

She didn’t wonder long. He glanced up, his gaze meeting hers.

Brown. His eyes were brown. *The kind of eyes a woman could lose herself in,* she thought hazily. His eyes darkened, lashes half lowering as he studied her.

Charlene’s breath caught at the male interest he didn’t bother to hide. Her skin heated, her nipples peaking beneath the soft lace of her bra.

Stunned at the depth of her reaction, she couldn’t pull her gaze from his.

Despite his preoccupation with what lay ahead of him in Amarillo, Nicholas couldn’t ignore the quick surge of interest when he looked up and saw the woman standing in the aisle.

When he stood to let her reach her seat, she brushed by him and the scent of subtle perfume teased his senses. The sleek fall of auburn hair spilled forward as she sat, leaning forward to slide her purse beneath her seat. She tucked the long strands back behind her ear while she settled in and latched her seat belt.

Finally, she glanced sideways at him and he was able to catch a glimpse. Her thick-lashed eyes were green as new spring grass. They widened as she stared at him.

She wasn’t just pretty. She was beautiful, he realized. And if the faint flush on her cheeks was any indication, she was feeling the same slam of sexual awareness that had hit him like a fist the moment her gaze had met his.

“Everything okay?” he asked when she continued to stare at him without speaking.

She blinked, and just that quickly the faintly unfocused expression was gone, replaced by a sharp awareness.

“Yes.” She lifted one slender-fingered hand in a dismissive gesture. “I had to nearly run to catch the plane. I hate being late.”

Nicholas nodded and would have said more, but just then the plane engines throttled up, the sound increasingly louder as the jet hurtled down the runaway and left the tarmac. He glanced at the woman beside him and found her gripping the armrests, eyes closed.

Clearly, she didn't like to fly. Air travel didn't bother Nicholas, but he waited until the plane leveled out and her white-knuckled grip relaxed before he spoke.

"I'm Nicholas." He purposely didn't tell her his last name. The Fortune surname was well-known in Red Rock and being part of a rich, powerful family carried its own problems. He'd learned early that many people associated the name with a preconceived set of expectations.

"Charlene London," she responded as she took a bottle of water from her bag. "Are you flying to Amarillo on business?" she asked, sipping her water.

"Not exactly." He paused, frowning.

Charlene tucked an errant strand of hair behind one ear with an absentminded gesture. *What did that mean?* "I see," she said.

He laughed—a short, wry chuckle. "I don't mean to be vague. My trip is both business and personal."

"Oh." Curious though she was, Charlene was reluctant to grill him. Somewhere in the coach section of the airplane, a baby began to cry.

Nick stiffened and appeared to listen intently until the cries turned to whimpers. Tension eased from his body and he looked at her, his gaze turbulent.

"My college roommate and his wife died a few days ago and I'm guardian of their daughters. I'm going to Amarillo to take custody of three kids. Triplets." He sighed. "Twelve-month-old triplets."

Charlene's eyes widened with shock. She was speechless for a moment. "You're kidding," she finally managed to get out.

"Nope." His expression was part gloom, part stark dread. "I'm not kidding."

"Do you and your wife have children of your own?"

"I'm not married. And I don't have any kids," he added. "The closest I've ever come to having a dependant is my dog, Rufus."

"So you'll be caring for three babies... all by yourself?"

He nodded. "That's about the size of it."

"That's crazy."

"Yeah," he said with conviction. "Insane."

"I'm the oldest of six siblings, two of whom are twins," Charlene said. "If you'd permit a little advice from someone who's been there—you should hire a full-time nanny, and the sooner the better."

Nicholas thought she probably was right—in fact, the more he considered the idea, the more he was convinced. Before he could ask her more questions, however, the woman walking the crying baby up and down the aisle reached their row.

"Excuse me." Charlene stood.

Nicholas wanted to ask her if she knew anything about hiring nannies, but her abrupt request stopped him. He stepped into the aisle to let her pass him. Her shoulder brushed his chest in the slightest of touches, yet his muscles tensed as if she'd trailed her fingertips over his bare skin.

Nick dragged in a steadying breath, but it only served to flood his senses with the scent of subtle perfume and warm woman.

He nearly groaned aloud. He'd dated a lot of women over the years, but he hadn't reacted to a female with the level of gut-deep, instant lust since he was a teenager. He blinked, frowned and ordered his rebellious body to calm down. He couldn't afford to be distracted just now—he had to focus on dealing with Stan and Amy's little girls.

He dropped back into his seat. He expected Charlene to walk toward the lavatories at the front of the first class section, but instead, she waited until the young mother turned and moved back down the aisle.

"Hi," Charlene smiled at the weary mother. "I bet you're exhausted."

*Oh hell.* Nick tensed when the woman holding the baby looked like she was going to cry. He hated it when women cried. Fortunately, the woman didn't burst into tears.

“I’m beyond exhausted,” the woman murmured, patting the wailing baby on the back soothingly. “And so is she,” she added. “I don’t think either one of us has slept more than a half hour at a time for days.”

“Oh my. My little brother did the same thing,” Charlene said, her gaze warm and sympathetic. “He was born several weeks premature and had acid reflux. Poor little guy. It took a while for us to figure out how to handle him so he could fall asleep.”

The young mother’s eyes widened. “You found a solution? What was it?”

“I’d be glad to show you,” Charlene said, holding out her arms.

The woman hesitated, clearly torn about handing her baby to a complete stranger.

“I totally understand if you’re not comfortable with having me hold her, after all, we don’t know each other,” Charlene said reassuringly. “I could try to explain, but it’s much easier to demonstrate.”

The baby chose that moment to wail even louder than before. The unhappy cry seemed to galvanize the mother, because she eased the tiny little girl off her shoulder and passed her carefully to Charlene.

Nick didn’t know much about babies, but every one he’d seen had been cradled or propped against someone’s shoulder. Charlene did neither. Instead, she laid the baby facedown on her arm, the little head in the palm of her hand, and gently swayed her back and forth while smoothing her free palm over the tiny back. The baby’s arms waved jerkily, slowing in time with her cries that quickly gave way to hiccupping sobs, then blessed silence.

Nick stared at Charlene. *Damn. She’s good. Really good.*

He glanced at the baby’s mother and found her expression as surprised as he felt.

“How in the world did you do that?” she whispered.

“Experience,” Charlene murmured, her fingertips continuing to gently rub in soothing circles over the little girl’s back. The pink cotton dress matched the baby’s sock-covered feet, now dangling limply on either side of Charlene’s arm. “I was twelve when my little brother was born.” She glanced down at the baby, fast asleep and seemingly boneless in her arms. “If you tilt her slightly to the right when you hold her, change her diaper or feed her, it helps with acid reflux too. I don’t know if your little girl has that problem, but if she does, the pain can make her so uncomfortable that she won’t be able to fall asleep or stay asleep.”

“Thank you so much.” The words carried a wealth of heartfelt appreciation as she carefully took the sleeping baby from Charlene.

“You’re welcome,” Charlene replied, moving aside to let the mother and child step past her. She watched them move down the aisle and return to their seat in coach.

Nick stood to let Charlene slip into her seat near the window, then dropped into his own.

“Impressive,” he told her. “Very impressive.”

She shrugged and picked up her water bottle to sip. “Basic stuff, if you’ve ever helped care for a baby. Unfortunately, most new moms only find out about the little things to make life easier for them and their baby if they talk to someone who’s coped hands-on with the problem.”

After watching Charlene’s easy confidence with the crying baby before she handed the peacefully sleeping child back to her mother, Nicholas knew he’d found the answer to his urgent need for a nanny. “Makes sense. Experience always counts. I need someone with that level of experience. How about you?” he asked.

“How about me...what?”

“Being the nanny for the triplets. I’ll pay you double whatever the going rate is,” he went on when she shook her head.

“I’m sorry, I really am. But I’ll be looking for a job in Amarillo.”

“What if I offered you a substantial signing bonus—say, twenty-five thousand dollars?”

Her eyes widened. “That’s a very generous offer—and one that guarantees applicants will be standing in line for the position. You’ll have your pick of nannies. You don’t need me.”

“Yes, I do.” Nick was convinced. Charlene didn’t appear to share his opinion, however. “In fact, I’m so sure you’re the only person for the triplets that I’ll add another twenty-five thousand dollar bonus if you stay until their aunt is found and comes to get them.”

She stared at him for a loaded moment. “Their aunt is taking them?”

Nick was surprised she didn’t ask about the money, but if she wanted information about the babies, he’d give it to her. “I don’t have permanent custody of the girls, only temporary care until the estate locates Amy’s sister, Lana. She’s a teacher, and according to Amy, a career volunteer with various organizations overseas, helping children in third world countries. She’s also married.” Unlike me, he thought. A confirmed bachelor with no plans to marry anytime soon. “So the girls will have two parents instead of only me.”

“I see.”

For a brief moment, Nick thought Charlene was going to accept his offer. But then she shook her head.

“I’m sorry, especially since I know how difficult it is to care for more than one baby. But I have plans and I’ve made promises to people. I can’t let them down on such short notice.”

“You’re sure I can’t change your mind?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Too bad.” He pulled a business card and pen from his inner jacket pocket and wrote on the back of the card. “This is my cell phone number, in case you reconsider the offer. I’ll be in Amarillo until tomorrow, when I have reservations to fly the girls back to Red Rock.”

“You aren’t staying in Amarillo very long,” she commented as she took the card, tucking it into her purse without reading it.

“No. I want to take the triplets home as soon as possible and get them settled in. I doubt anything will make this easier for them, but I thought the faster I transfer them, the better.” He pointed at her purse where his card had disappeared. “Call me if you change your mind.”

“I’ll keep your card,” she replied. “But I don’t think it’s likely I’ll change my mind.”

They parted in the terminal, Nicholas heading for the exit and Charlene moving to baggage pickup.

Saying goodbye felt wrong. Charlene had to force herself not to turn around and give him her phone number, ask him to call...lead until he promised to meet her later.

Her level of conviction that Nick was somehow important to her was profound.

*This is crazy.* She held her chin up and kept walking, but her thoughts continued to tumble, one over the other, refusing to leave Nick even as she physically moved farther away from him.

She’d never felt anything approaching the instant attraction that had flared between them, her nerves shaking with need during that first long exchange of glances. Lust and sexual attraction were far more powerful forces than she’d imagined. The time spent sitting next to Nick during the flight had given her new insight into just how intensely her body could respond to the right man. Those moments were forcing her to reevaluate whether she’d ever truly been deeply moved before—including with Barry, she realized with sudden shock.

Yet she’d become engaged to Barry, she reminded herself in an effort to regain control of her emotions. Clearly her wisdom in this area wasn’t infallible. Besides, a man was the last thing she needed or wanted in her life right now. She definitely didn’t need the complication of a man who was about to become an instant father to three little girls.

Still, she’d been impressed with Nicholas’s willingness to take on the babies. She couldn’t help but compare his heroic, stand-up attitude with her ex’s lack of responsibility. She couldn’t imagine Barry in Nicholas’s situation. She seriously doubted Barry would have agreed to take custody of three children. He was adamantly opposed to becoming a parent. It was one of the issues they couldn’t agree on, since she very much wanted children—an issue that, ultimately, had caused her to conclude they were completely mismatched.

Charlene collected her three suitcases and stepped out of the crowd of passengers to pull a jacket from inside the smallest bag. March in chilly Amarillo was a far cry from the warmth of Red Rock, located in southern Texas near San Antonio. Sure enough, when she wheeled her bags outside, she was glad she had the added protection of the coat. She tucked her chin into the shelter of her collar and halted to scan the line of cars crowding the curb.

“Charlene! Over here!” Her mother’s voice carried clearly over the hum and chatter of passengers.

Charlene returned Angie’s enthusiastic wave and hurried down the walkway.

“Mom, it’s so good to see you.” Charlene basked in her mother’s warm hug, breathing in the familiar scent of Estée Lauder perfume.

“It’s been too long,” Angie said, scolding with a loving smile as she stepped back, holding Charlene at arm’s length. Her eyes narrowed as she swept a swift glance over her daughter, from her toes to the crown of her head. “You’re too skinny.”

Charlene laughed. “You always say that, Mom. I’ve lost inches but not pounds—I’ve been working out at the gym.”

“Well, now that you’re home, I’m going to feed you,” Angie declared firmly.

They loaded Charlene’s bags into the trunk. Moments later, Angie expertly negotiated traffic as they left the airport.

“Are you enjoying being in the condo, or do you think you’ll miss having a big yard this summer? You spent hours gardening at the old house, and I know you loved the flowers.” Charlene’s mother had sold the rambler where she and her siblings had grown up after her parents’ divorce three years earlier. Following college graduation and Charlene’s move to Red Rock, Angie had insisted she should be the one to travel for visits to her six children, especially Charlene, since her job as a Health Unit Coordinator at the hospital E.R. kept her so busy. As a result, Charlene had only seen her mother’s condo on two short weekend trips.

“I love condo life,” Angie said with a happy smile. “I still garden, but now I’m planting flowers and herbs in terra cotta pots on the lanai. Of course,” she added. “I still have to mow the strip of grass in my backyard, but it’s tiny compared to the big lawn at the old house.”

Angie’s voice rang with contentment. Charlene knew what a difficult time her mother had had after the divorce, and was immeasurably relieved that she appeared to have adjusted so well.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it, Mom.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and adjusted her Ray-Bans a little higher on her nose to better block the late afternoon sun. “What are you doing with all your free time, now that you’re not mowing grass and pulling weeds?”

“I’ve been busy at work,” Angie began before pausing to clear her throat. “And...I’ve met someone,” she blurted.

Surprised, Charlene looked at her mother and was startled to see a hint of color on her cheeks. “That’s great, Mom. Who is he?”

“His name is Lloyd Weber and he’s an architect for a firm here in Amarillo. We met playing bridge. I joined the group about six months ago.”

“So, you’re dating?” Charlene could hardly get her mind around the image of her mother dating. Not that she objected—in fact, she’d urged her mom to get out and about. Angie was fifty-two and loved people and social interaction; Charlene truly believed her mom would be happier in a committed relationship.

“Well, yes—we’ve been dating for a while.” Angie pulled up in front of the condo building and parked. Her expression reflected concern and a certain trepidation when she unlatched her seat belt and half-turned to meet Charlene’s gaze. “I didn’t tell you before, because...ell, because I wasn’t sure whether Lloyd and I were going to become serious. But two weeks ago he moved in with me.”

Charlene stared at her mother, stunned. “You’re living together?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Here in your condo?”

Angie nodded. “His house is being remodeled before he puts it on the market, and he was staying in a bed-and-breakfast. I told him it was silly to spend all that money when we’re together nearly all the time anyway. I convinced him to move in here.”

“Well, um.” Charlene managed to say. “That’s great, Mom. If he makes you happy, I’m delighted.”

“You’re not upset?”

“Mom, of course I’m not upset.” Charlene hugged Angie. “I think it’s great.” She sat back, laughing at the sheer relief on her mother’s face. “If he’s a great guy who’s being good to you and you’re happy, then I’m thrilled for you.”

“I’m very happy, and he *is* a great guy,” Angie said firmly. “Now come on, let’s get your things inside so you can meet him.”

Charlene followed Angie up the sidewalk, towing a rolling suitcase behind her.

*What am I going to do now?* The question made her feel totally selfish in light of her mother’s transparent happiness. But Charlene’s practical side told her the situation required a change of plans. She couldn’t stay at the condo with her mother and Lloyd during what was surely the honeymoon stage of their relationship.

She needed a new plan. And fast.

*What the hell was I thinking?*

Nick strode away from Charlene and didn’t look back. The airport wasn’t crowded and it was a matter of moments before he reached the exit doors and walked outside. He knew it was the worst possible time to meet a woman who interested him. And Charlene London was too pretty to hire as a nanny.

He was going to have enough problems dealing with the sea change about to happen in his life. He didn’t need to move a sexy, gorgeous woman into his house to complicate life even more.

He spotted a uniformed driver holding a sign with his name in big block letters, and changed direction to reach the black Lincoln Town Car. During the drive to Andrew Sanchez’s office, he scanned a file with information about Stan and Amy’s estate the attorney had asked the driver to give him.

Andrew Sanchez was a rotund, balding man in his mid-fifties. Businesslike and efficient, he still exuded an air of concern and sympathy.

“Do you have family or friends available to help with the triplets?” he asked Nick as they concluded their meeting.

“No, but I’m planning to find a nanny. Until then I have a housekeeper, and she’s agreed to work longer hours until I can find someone.”

“You might want to consider two nannies,” Mr. Sanchez commented. “Those three little girls are dynamos.” He grinned with wry affection. “I’m glad you’re a younger man, because just spending an hour with them at their foster home wore me out. You’re going to need all the energy you can muster.”

Nick nodded. He didn’t tell the older man that he had no clue how much energy one little girl required from a caretaker, let alone three of them at once. “You’re continuing to search for Amy’s sister?”

The attorney nodded. “I’ve hired a detective agency to look for her. They told me they can’t give us a time frame, since she’s out of the country, but at least Amy’s e-mail files gave us the name of the mission organization in Africa that employed her. It’s a place to start hunting.” He sighed. “The e-mail records on Amy’s computer indicate her sister stopped communicating a month or so ago. Also that Amy had been trying to contact her but had no success.”

“Any idea why?”

“Lana and her husband apparently resigned their positions with the relief agency where they were employed. But we don’t know where they went after that. And given that the two are working in a remote area of Africa, well...” Sanchez spread his hands and shrugged. “It’s anyone’s guess where they’ve gone or how long before they surface. As I said, the detective agency warned me they can’t guarantee a time frame for locating the couple.”

“Let’s hope they find her soon. I have to believe Amy’s sister and her husband will be better at caring for three little girls than I am.”

“The important thing is that you’re willing to try.” The attorney shook his head. “The interim foster home where the girls are staying is a good situation, but they can’t stay there indefinitely. They’ll be much better off with you while we’re searching for their aunt.”

“I hope you’re right.” Nick wasn’t convinced.

It was after 6:00 p.m. before the attorney and Nick finished going over the will and other documents.

“I took the liberty of booking a room for you in a nearby hotel,” Sanchez told him as they pushed back chairs and stood. “I understand the triplets are in bed for the night by 7:00 p.m. I thought you might want to wait until morning to see them.”

“I appreciate it.” Nicholas held out his hand. “Thanks for everything.”

“You’re welcome.” The attorney’s clasp was firm. “Let me know if there’s anything else I can do for you. And I’ll notify you as soon as I receive any information as to the whereabouts of Amy’s sister.”

Nick walked to the door. “It seems odd to pick up the girls and leave Amarillo without saying goodbye in some way.”

“I know.” The attorney nodded. “But their wills were very specific. As the closest living relative, Amy’s sister will organize a memorial service so friends can pay their respects when she returns.”

“I’m damned sure neither of them ever thought they’d die together and leave the kids,” Nick muttered, almost to himself.

“No one ever does.” Sanchez shook his head. “It’s a hell of a situation. We’ll just have to do the best we can and search diligently for the children’s aunt.”

“Right.” Nick said goodbye and left the office to climb into the town car once more.

The conversation with Andrew Sanchez had driven home the unbelievable fact that Stan and Amy were gone. Nick barely noticed the streets the limo drove down as they headed toward the hotel.

Despite his conviction that Charlene wasn’t the best choice for an employee on a purely personal level, he definitely believed her experience made her the perfect woman to care for Stan’s daughters. Before he unpacked his bag in the hotel room, he called his office in Red Rock and asked his assistant to run a preliminary employment check on Charlene London.

*Just in case*, he told himself, *she called and said yes to the job offer*. He knew the fact that she hadn’t given him her contact number made the likelihood a million-to-one shot—but he was a man who believed in luck.

And he was going to need a boatload of luck to get through the next few days, or weeks, or however long it took before the triplets’ aunt showed up to claim them.

## Chapter Two

The following morning, the same limo driver picked Nick up promptly at 9:00 a.m.

“We’re here, sir.” The driver’s voice broke Nick’s absorption in memories and he realized they were parked in front of a white rambler with a fenced yard and worn grass. It looked lived-in and comfortable.

“So we are,” he muttered.

“Mr. Sanchez told me to wait and drive you all to the airport when you’re ready, sir.”

“Good, thanks,” Nick said absently, focused on what awaited him within the house.

A round young woman in jeans and green T-shirt answered his knock, a little girl perched on her hip.

“Hello, you must be Nick Fortune. I’m Christie Williams. My husband and I are...were friends of Stan and Amy. We volunteered to be temporary foster parents for the girls. Come in.”

She held the door wide and Nick stepped over the threshold into a living room, the green carpet strewn with toys. Two babies sat on the floor in the midst of the confusion of blocks, balls, stuffed animals and brightly colored plastic things that Nick couldn’t identify. The girls’ black hair and bright blue eyes were carbon copies of the child on Christie’s hip, who stared at him with solemn interest.

A woman in a gray business suit rose from the sofa as he entered.

“Mr. Fortune, it’s a pleasure to see you.” She stepped forward and held out her hand, her grip firm in a brief handshake. “I’m Carol Smith, the caseworker. As you can see, the girls are doing well.”

Nick nodded, murmuring an absent acknowledgment, his attention on the two little girls seated on the floor. Both of them eyed him with solemn, bigeyed consideration. They were dressed in tiny little tennis shoes and long pants with attached bibs, one in pale purple, one in pink. He glanced at the baby perched on the foster mother’s hip. She wore the same little bibbed pants with tennis shoes, only her outfit was bright yellow.

“They’re identical?” He hadn’t expected them to look so much alike. If it wasn’t for the color of their clothes, he wouldn’t be able to tell them apart.

“Yes, they are,” Ms. Smith replied. “It’s quite rare, actually. In today’s world, many multiple births are the result of in vitro procedures and the children are more commonly fraternal twins or triplets. But Jackie, Jenny and Jessie are truly identical.”

“I see.” *Great. How am I going to tell them apart?*

“Fortunately, Amy had their names engraved on custom-made bracelets for each of them. She and Stan didn’t need to use them, of course, but any time the triplets had a babysitter, the bracelets were immensely helpful,” the foster mother added. “This is Jackie.” She shifted the little girl off her hip and handed her to Nick.

Taken off guard, he automatically took the child, holding her awkwardly in midair with his hands at her waist.

Jackie stared at him, blue eyes solemn as she studied him, her legs dangling. She wriggled, little legs scissoring, and Nick cradled her against his chest to keep from dropping her.

She responded by chortling and grabbing a fistful of his blue polo shirt in one hand and smacking him in the chin with her other. Startled, Nick eyed the little girl who seemed to find it hilarious that she’d found his chin. She babbled a series of nonsensical sounds, and then paused to look expectantly at him.

He looked at the foster mother in confusion. “What did she say?”

The woman laughed, her eyes twinkling. “I have no idea. She’ll be perfectly happy if you just respond in some way.”

“Oh.” Nick looked down into the little face, still clearly awaiting a response. “Uh, yeah. That sounds good,” he said, trying his best to sound as if he was agreeing with an actual question.

Jackie responded with delight, waving her arms enthusiastically and babbling once again.

Five minutes of this back and forth and Nick started to feel as if he were getting the hang of baby chat.

“Do they know any real words?” he asked the two women after he’d taken turns holding each of the little girls and had exchanged similar conversations with Jenny and Jessie.

“Not that I’ve heard,” Christie volunteered. “But at twelve months, I wouldn’t expect them to, necessarily.”

Nick nodded, watching the three as they sat on the floor, playing with large, plastic, red-and-blue blocks. Jenny threw one and the square red toy bounced off his knee. He grinned when she laughed, waving her hands before she grabbed another block. She tossed with more enthusiasm than accuracy and it flew across the room. Clearly disappointed, she frowned at him when he chuckled.

“They’re going to be a handful,” he murmured, more to himself than to the two women.

“Oh, they certainly will be—and are,” Christie agreed. “Have you hired a nanny to help you care for them?”

“Not yet. I called a Red Rock employment agency this morning, but they didn’t have anyone on their books. They promised to keep searching and call the minute they find someone.” Nick glanced at his watch. “I have reservations for a noon flight.”

“You’re going to fly the girls back to Red Rock?”

Nick switched his gaze from the girls to Christie. Her facial expression reflected the concern in her question.

“I’d planned to.” He didn’t miss the quick exchange of worried looks between the foster mother and social worker. “Is there a problem with taking the girls on an airplane?”

“I’m just wondering how you’re going to juggle all three of them, let alone their luggage, stroller and the carry-on bags with their things.” Carol Smith pointed at the corner of the living room closest to the outer door. The area was filled with luggage, a large leather shoulder bag, toys and three ungainly looking children’s car seats. A baby stroller for three was parked to one side.

“All of that belongs to the girls?” Nick rapidly considered the logistics, calculating what needed to be moved, stored, checked at the gate before the flight. “I can load their things into the back of the limo and get a redcap at the airport.”

“Well, yes, you can,” Christie agreed. “But Jessie has an ear infection and is taking antibiotics plus Tylenol for pain, and I’m not at all sure the pediatrician would approve of her flying. And even if he okayed the trip, you’d still have to take care of all three of them on the flight, all by yourself.” She eyed him dubiously.

“Is that an insurmountable problem?” he asked.

“For one person, it certainly could be,” Carol Smith put in. “Especially when one of them needs a diaper changed or if they all are hungry at once.”

“Is that likely to happen?”

“Yes,” the two women said in unison.

“I see.” Nick really was beginning to see why the women seemed dubious. Maybe they were right to be apprehensive about his ability to care for these kids. Just transporting three babies was going to be much more complicated than he’d anticipated. On the other hand, he’d organized and directed programs for large companies. How hard could it be to handle three little kids?

“You two have a lot more experience at this than me. Do you have any suggestions?”

“If I were you,” Christie said firmly, “I’d rent a car and drive back to Red Rock. And I’d hire someone to make the trip with me, because I can’t imagine any possible way you can do this without at least one other person to help.”

Nick instantly thought of Charlene and wished fervently that he’d gotten her phone number. But he had no way to contact her, *and besides*, he thought, *she’d sounded definite when she’d turned down his offer of employment as the girls’ nanny.*

He ran his hand over his hair, rumpling it. “Unless one of you is prepared to volunteer, I’m afraid I’m on my own.”

“Is there a family member who could fly here and drive back to Red Rock with you?”

“Maybe.” He considered the idea, realizing that he had no other choice. “But it will take time to locate someone, and they probably couldn’t get here until tomorrow at the earliest. I’d like to get the girls home and settled in as soon as possible.”

The three adults had identical frowns on their faces as they observed the triplets who were happily unaware of the life decisions being considered.

Nick’s cell phone rang, breaking the brief silence. He glanced at the unfamiliar number in his Caller ID and nearly ignored it. Instinct, however, had him answering the call.

“Hello.” The female voice was familiar. “This is Charlene London.”

While eating dinner with her mother and Lloyd, Charlene had felt distinctly like a fifth wheel.

She liked Lloyd and it was clear the man adored Angie. Her mother also clearly felt the same about the charming, gray-haired architect.

Which delighted Charlene. But it left her with a serious problem. Her plan to live with her mother while she searched for a job and an apartment of her own was no longer plausible. But Angie was sure to object if she abruptly changed her plans, and Charlene strongly suspected Lloyd would feel as if his presence had forced her from the condo. *He really is a nice man*, she thought, smiling as she remembered the besotted look on his face when he’d gazed at Angie over dessert.

She knew any one of her sisters or brothers would welcome her into their homes, but they all led crowded, busy lives. She really didn’t want to choose that option, either.

What she really needed was an instant job—and a place to live that wouldn’t make her mother or Lloyd feel guilty when she left.

“I could take Nicholas’s job offer,” she murmured to herself. Having retired to her bedroom early, she donned her pajamas. “But that means going back to Red Rock.”

She didn’t want to return to Red Rock. She wanted a new start, far enough away so there was no possibility she would run into Barry and his friends while shopping, dining out, running errands, or any of the dozens of activities that made up her normal life.

She slipped into bed and spent an hour trying to read, but her concentration was fractured as she continued to mull over her changed situation.

The antique clock in the hallway chimed midnight. Charlene realized she’d spent the last hour lying in the dark, unsuccessfully trying to sleep. She muttered in disgust and sat up to switch on the bedside lamp. It cast a pool of light over the bed as she tossed back the covers and padded barefoot across the carpet to retrieve Nicholas’s card from her purse.

The phone number on the back of the card was written in decisive, black slashes. Charlene flipped the square card over to read the front and gasped, feeling her eyes widen.

“Nicholas Fortune?” She stared at the logo on the business card. “He’s a member of the Fortune family?” Stunned, she considered the startling information.

Nicholas’s status as part of the prominent family eliminated many of her concerns. There was little likelihood she’d run into Barry if she worked as a live-in nanny for one of the Fortunes. The two men moved in far different circles. Which put a whole new slant on the possibility of going back to Red Rock, she realized.

It also explained why he’d offered a two-part employment bonus. Fifty-thousand dollars was probably small change for one of the Fortunes.

She tucked the card carefully into her purse and turned out the light. Working for Nicholas could turn out to be the opportunity she’d been looking for.

On the other hand, how would she deal with her attraction to him? Would she end up sleeping with him if she lived in his house to care for the babies?

She frowned, fingertips massaging the slight ache at her temples.

Surely she could handle living in close quarters with a handsome, sexy man for a few weeks, she told herself. And, given Nick's good looks and probably wealth, he no doubt had beautiful women by the dozens waiting for him to call.

No, it wasn't likely she needed to worry about Nick making a pass at her. The real question was, could she maintain a purely professional attitude toward him?

When she thought about the bonus he'd offered, she could only conclude she needed to set aside any emotional elements and make a purely practical decision.

The following morning, she waited until she'd showered and broke the news to her mother and Lloyd over breakfast before calling Nicholas.

"Hello."

The deep male tones shivered up her spine, and for a brief second she questioned the wisdom of agreeing to work for a man as attractive as Nicholas Fortune. Then she reminded herself just how badly she needed this job. "If it's not too late, I'd like to take you up on your offer of the nanny position," she said briskly.

"You're hired. How soon can you be ready to leave?"

"Almost immediately—I didn't unpack last night. What time is your flight?"

"Change of plans. I'm not flying the triplets back to Red Rock, we're driving."

"Oh."

"Give me your address and I'll pick you up as soon as I have the car loaded."

Charlotte quickly recited her mother's address and said goodbye. For a moment, she stared at her pink cell phone.

*Have I just made a colossal mistake?*

At the sound of his deep voice, she'd felt shivers of awareness race up her spine and tingle down her arms to her fingertips.

Then she remembered Barry, and her body instantly calmed as if the reaction to Nicholas had never happened. She wasn't ready to be attracted to another man. All she had to do was remind herself of her poor judgment and disappointment with Barry and she was safe, she realized with relief.

Reassured, she set her nearly full suitcase on top of the bed and tucked her pajamas into it. A quick trip into the bathroom to collect her toiletries, and she was ready to face her mother and Lloyd.

Squaring her shoulders and drawing a deep breath, she slung her purse over her shoulder, picked up her two bags, and headed downstairs.

Across town, Nick wrestled with the complexities of fastening three car seats into the SUV the rental company had delivered. Fortunately, the vehicle was big enough to have a third seat section and had enough room for an adult to sit between two of the triplets, if necessary.

At last, the babies' car seats were securely locked in place and the bags and boxes filled with the triplets' clothes, toys and food were packed into the back of the SUV. The girls were buckled into their seats, each with a treasured blanket and a favorite stuffed toy in her arms, and their foster mother tearfully kissed them good-bye. Nick had a brand-new appreciation for the details of traveling with three babies when he finally pulled away from the curb.

Fortunately for him, the girls all fell asleep within minutes of driving off.

*The motion of the car must lull them to sleep. Good to know.*

If they had trouble sleeping at his house, he realized, he could always drive them around his neighborhood.

But he knew figuring out this clue about the babies wasn't enough to make him a reliable substitute parent. If he and the triplets were going to survive until the attorney located Amy's sister, he'd need all the help he could get.

Charlene London was his ace in the hole. He was convinced she had the expertise that he knew damn well he lacked.

He hoped to hell he was right, because he was betting everything on her ability to handle the triplets. If he was wrong, this road trip was going to turn into a nightmare.

Nick's relief at the triplets falling peacefully asleep didn't last long. The girls all woke when he reached the address Charlene had given him and the SUV stopped moving. They immediately began to loudly protest being buckled into their car seats. Charlene said goodbye to her mother and friend in the midst of chaos.

Ten minutes after pulling away from the curb, Nick was no longer convinced he'd found the magic bullet to lull the babies asleep. They cried and fussed nonstop, despite the motion of the SUV.

Several hours of driving south and many miles later, Nicholas turned off the highway into a rest stop and parked. The sun shone brightly, but the afternoon air was still chilly. He left the engine running and the heater on to keep the interior as comfortable as possible for Jenny and Jackie while Charlene changed Jessie's diaper. The little girl lay on the leather seat, kicking her bare legs with obvious delight while Charlene stood in the open V of the door. Despite the churning little legs, Charlene deftly removed, replaced and snugly fastened a clean disposable nappy.

"I've done my share of tailgating at football games, but this is a new experience," Nick commented as Charlene pulled down Jessie's knit pants and snapped the leg openings closed.

"You're in a whole new world, Nick." She lifted the little girl into her arms, tickling her. Jessie chortled and Charlene laughed. They both looked up to grin at him.

Nick shook his head. Crazy as it seemed, he could swear their faces held identical expressions of feminine wisdom and mystery. "I'm not sure I'm ready for a new world," he murmured as he took the diaper bag from Charlene and returned it to the storage area in the back of the SUV. "I'm getting some coffee," he said, louder this time, so Charlene could hear him. "Want some?"

"Yes, please, I'd love a cup."

Nick crossed the patch of grass between the curb where he'd parked the SUV and the concrete apron surrounding the low-roofed building housing the restrooms. Volunteers manned a small kiosk on one side and offered weary travelers coffee and cookies.

By the time he slid behind the steering wheel again, Charlene had Jessie fastened into her car seat and was buckling her own safety belt. She took the foam cup he held out to her and sipped.

"How bad is it?" he asked, unable to look away from the sight of the pink tip of her tongue as she licked a tiny drop of coffee from the corner of her mouth.

"Not too bad."

He lifted an eyebrow but didn't comment.

"Okay, so it's not Starbucks," she conceded with a chuckle. "But it's coffee and I need the caffeine. I was awake late last night and up early this morning. I really, really need the jolt."

Nick glanced at his watch as they drove away from the rest stop. "The attorney told me the girls are in bed and asleep by seven every night. You're the expert, but I'm guessing it might be a good idea to find a motel earlier rather than later so we can keep them on schedule, if possible."

"I think that's an excellent idea." She glanced over her shoulder at the triplets' drowsy faces. "If we stop earlier, we'll have time to feed them, give them baths, and let them play for a little while before tucking them in for the night."

The motel Nick pulled into was just off the highway. Behind the motel, the tree-lined streets of a small town were laid out in neat blocks, and fairgrounds with an empty grandstand were visible a dozen or so blocks away. Nick was familiar with the motel chain and, as he'd hoped, the staff assured him they could accommodate the needs of three babies.

With quick calculation, he asked for two connecting rooms—one for the girls and Charlene, and one for him. He hoped the babies would sleep through the night.

Not for the first time, he thanked God Charlene had agreed to be the girls' nanny. If he could manage to ignore the fact that she was a beautiful woman, she made the perfect employee.

“If we both carry the girls in first, I can transfer the luggage while you keep an eye on them in the room,” he told Charlene when he returned to the SUV. “We’re on the ground floor, just inside the lobby and down the hall.”

He handed her a key card. “Why don’t you carry Jessie, I’ll take Jackie and Jenny.”

After unhooking the girls and handing Jenny to Nick while he held Jackie, Charlotte lifted Jessie and followed Nick into the motel.

“Our rooms are through there.” He led the way toward the hallway on the far side of the lobby.

Distracted by her view of his back, Charlene forgot to reply. Beneath the battered brown leather jacket, powerful shoulder muscles flexed as Jackie and Jenny squirmed in his hold. The jacket ended at his waist and faded Levis fit snugly over his taut backside and down the long length of his legs.

*Get a grip, she told herself firmly. Stop ogling the man’s rear and focus on the job—and the babies.*

“Have you got the key?”

Nick’s question startled her and she realized he’d halted outside a room.

Feeling her cheeks heat and hoping he hadn’t caught her staring at his backside, she quickly slid the key card through the lock slot and opened the door.

“After you.” Nick held the door while she carried Jessie inside.

“Nice. Very nice.” She halted at the foot of the queen-size bed and glanced around, taking in a round table with three chairs tucked into one corner near the draped window.

Nick swept the room with a quick, assessing gaze. “Yeah, not bad. The connecting room is ours too.” He bent and carefully set Jackie on the carpeted floor, then Jenny. Straightening, he took another key card from his back pocket and crossed the room to open the door to the room on the side. “They’re exactly the same,” he said after briefly looking. He returned and halted next to Jackie, bending to remove a handful of bedspread from her mouth. “Hey,” he said gently. “I’m not sure you should be chewing on that.”

“She’s probably hungry.” Charlene set Jessie on her diaper-padded bottom next to Jackie, and handed both girls a small stuffed bear each. Both beamed up at her and Jackie instantly shoved a furry bear leg into her mouth. “Hmmm, make that she’s *definitely* hungry.”

“I’ll bring up the bag with their food before the rest of the luggage. Anything else you need right away?”

“If you could bring up the diaper bag too, that would be great.”

He nodded and left the room.

“Well, girls, let’s see what we can do to make you comfortable.” Charlene laughed when Jessie blew a raspberry before smiling beatifically. “Are you going to be the class clown?” she teased.

Jessie gurgled and tipped sideways before righting herself and reaching for Jackie’s bear.

“Oh no you don’t, kiddo.” Charlene made sure each little girl had their own stuffed animal before calling the front desk. The clerk assured her he would arrange to have three high chairs from the restaurant sent to the room immediately. He also confirmed that Nick had requested three cribs during check-in and that someone would be delivering and setting them up within a half hour.

Satisfied that arrangements were under way, Charlene barely had time to replace the phone in its cradle before Nick returned with the box containing baby paraphernalia and two bags.

For the next two hours, neither she nor Nick had a moment to draw a deep breath. The high chairs were delivered while he was bringing in the luggage. Later, Charlene and Nick spooned food into little mouths, wiped chins and sticky fingers and tried to keep strained carrots from staining their own clothes.

Neither of them wanted to tackle eating dinner in the restaurant downstairs while accompanied by the triplets, so they ordered in. Nick insisted Charlene eat first, and she hurried to chew bites of surprisingly good pasta and chicken while he lay on the carpet, rolling rubber balls to the triplets. By the time Charlene’s plate was empty, all three babies were yawning and rubbing their eyes.

The two adults switched places—Nick taking Charlene’s chair to eat his steak, Jessie perched on his knee while Jackie played on the floor at his feet. Charlene toted Jenny into the bathroom and popped her into the tub to scrub the smears of strained plums and carrots from her face and out of her hair.

By the time she had Jenny dried, freshly diapered and tucked into footed white pajamas patterned with little brown monkeys, Nick had finished eating.

“Hey, look at you,” he said to Jenny. “What happened to the purple-and-orange face paint?”

Charlene laughed. “She even had it in her hair.”

“I think they all do.” Nick rubbed his hand over Jessie’s black curls and grimaced. “Definitely sticky.”

“I’m guessing that’s the strained plums,” Charlene said. She handed Jenny to him and lifted Jessie into her arms. “Will you watch her and Jackie while I put Jessie in the tub?”

“Sure—but I can bathe her if you’d like a break. I’m sure I can manage.”

“No, I’m fine. Besides,” she perched Jessie on her hip and started unbuttoning and unsnapping the baby’s pants and knit shirt, “I’m already wet from being splashed by Jenny. One of us might as well stay dry.”

Nicholas wished she hadn’t pointed out that she’d been splashed with bathwater. He’d noticed the wet spots on her T-shirt and the way the damp cotton clung to her curves in interesting places. He was trying damned hard to ignore his body’s reaction—and he was losing the battle.

“Uh, yeah. Okay, then. I’ll keep these two occupied out here.” He perched Jenny on his lap and she settled against him, her lashes half-lowered, apparently content to sit quietly. Nick bent his head, breathing in the scent of baby shampoo from her damp curls.

Something about the baby’s warm weight resting trustingly in his arms and the smell of clean soap touched off an onslaught of unexpected emotion, followed quickly by a slam of grief that caught him off guard. The sound of splashing and gurgles from the bathroom, accompanied by Charlene’s murmured reply, only heightened the pain in Nick’s chest.

*Stan and Amy must have fed and bathed the girls every night. Stan probably held Jenny just like this.*

How was it possible that Stan and Amy were gone—and their children left alone? In what universe did any of this make sense?

It didn’t—none of it, he thought. His arms tightened protectively around the baby.

He was the last person on earth who should be responsible for these kids; but since he was, he’d make damn sure they were cared for—and safe. As safe as he could make them.

*Which means I have to rearrange my life.*

He was a man who’d avoided the responsibilities of a wife and family until now. He enjoyed the freedom of being single and hadn’t planned to change his status anytime soon; but now that surrogate fatherhood had been thrust on him, he would make the most of it.

While Charlene bathed Jessie and Jackie, Nick considered his schedule at work and the logistics of fitting three babies and a nanny into his house and life.

He was still considering the thorny subject when the triplets were asleep in their cribs and he had said good-night to Charlene before disappearing into the far bedroom. He lay awake, staring at the ceiling above his own bed while he formulated a plan.

He’d just drifted off to sleep when one of the babies cried. By the time he staggered into the room next door, all three of them were awake and crying. Charlene stood at one of the cribs, lifting the sobbing little girl into her arms.

“I’ll take Jessie into your room to change her diaper and try to get her back to sleep. I think she’s running a bit of a fever—probably because of the ear infection. Can you deal with the other two?”

“Sure,” Nick mumbled. Charlene disappeared into her room. He patted the nearest baby on the back but she only cried louder. “Damn,” he muttered. “Now what do I do?”

He picked her up and she burrowed her face into his shoulder, her wails undiminished. Feeling totally clueless, Nick jiggled her up and down, but the sobbing continued unabated. Willing to try anything, he grabbed her abandoned blanket from the crib mattress and handed it to her. She snatched it and clutched it in one hand, sucking on her thumb. She still cried but the sound diminished because her mouth was closed.

Which left him with the baby still standing in her crib, tears streaming down her face, her cries deafening.

Nick's head began to pound. He leaned over and snagged the abandoned blanket, caught the little girl with one arm and lifted her to a seat on his hip. Then he lowered the two onto the empty bed, his back against the headboard. He managed to juggle both babies until he could cradle each of them against his chest, their security blankets clutched tightly in their hands. The first baby he'd picked up was crying with less volume, but the second one still made enough noise to wake the dead.

Vaguely remembering a comment his mother had made about singing her boys to sleep when they were little, Nick sang the only tune that came to mind. Bob Seger may not have intended his classic, "Rock And Roll Never Forgets" as a lullaby, but the lyrics seemed to strike a chord with the babies.

The loud sobs slowly abated. Nick felt the solid little bodies relax and gradually sink against his own. When the girls were limp and no longer crying, he tilted his head back to peer cautiously at them.

They were sound asleep.

*Thank God.* He eyed the cribs, trying to figure out how to lower each of the babies into their bed without waking one or both of them.

He drew a blank.

"Aw, hell," he muttered. He managed to shift one of the little girls onto the bed beside him before sliding lower in the bed until he lay flat. Then he grabbed a pillow, shoved it under his head and pulled the spread up over his legs and hips. "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

The sheets were still warm from Charlene's body, and the scent of her perfume clung to the pillow, teasing his nostrils. He gritted his teeth and tried not to think about lying in her bed as he slid into sleep.

Nick woke the following morning with a kink in his neck and the sound of gleeful chortles accompanying thumps on his head from a tiny fist. He slit his eyes open. He was nose-to-nose with a tiny face whose bright blue eyes sparkled with mischief below a mop of black curls.

He forced his eyes open farther just in time to see a second little girl as she wriggled out of his grasp and crawled toward the edge of the bed with determined speed. He grabbed a handful of her sleeper just in time to keep her from tumbling headfirst onto the floor.

The quick movement corresponded with a hard yank on his hair.

"Ow." He winced, pried little fingers away from his head and sat up. "You little imp." The tiny wrist bracelet told him this triplet was Jackie. "I'm gonna remember this," he told her.

She grinned, babbled nonsensically and began to crawl swiftly toward the end of the bed.

"Oh no you don't. Come back here." He hauled her back, then threw the spread back and stood, a wiggling little girl tucked beneath each arm. He lowered them each into a separate crib and grinned when they stood on tiptoes, reaching for him. "No way. You're trapped now and I'm not letting you out."

"Good morning."

He glanced over his shoulder. Charlene stood in the open doorway to the adjoining room, hair tousled, eyes sleepy. She was dressed in jeans and a pullover knit shirt, Jessie perched on one hip.

Nick was abruptly aware he was wearing only gray boxers.

"Morning." He gestured at the girls in their cribs. "I'll give you a hand with their breakfast as soon as I'm dressed. I'm going to jump in the shower."

She murmured an acknowledgment as he left the room.

Both adults were sleep-deprived and weary, but the triplets seemed little worse for their middle-of-the-night activity. By the time they were fed, dressed and strapped in their car seats, Nick was beginning to wonder if he should hire four or five nannies instead of one or two.

The trip from Amarillo south to Red Rock was just over five hundred and fifty miles. In normal circumstances, pretriplets, Nick could have driven the route in eight or nine hours with good road conditions and mild weather. But traveling with three babies on board drastically changed the time frame. After numerous stops to change diapers and feed the little girls, they finally reached his home in Red Rock in late afternoon of the second day.

Charlene stepped out of the SUV and stretched, easing muscles weary from sitting for too many hours. The SUV was parked in the driveway of a Spanish-style two-story stucco house on a quiet residential street in one of Red Rock's more affluent neighborhoods. She knew very little about this part of town; her previous apartment had been southeast, across the business district and blocks away.

In fact, she thought as she glanced up and down the broad street, with its large homes and neatly trimmed lawns, she didn't remember ever having been in this part of Red Rock before.

Good, she thought with satisfaction. Her belief that it would be unlikely she might run into Barry or his friends seemed to be accurate.

She turned back to the SUV and leaned inside to unhook Jessie from her seat belt.

"I called my housekeeper this morning," Nick told her as he unbuckled Jackie on the opposite side of the vehicle. "Melissa promised to come by and fill the fridge and pantry with food for the girls. She said she'd wait for the delivery van with the baby furniture too."

Surprised, Charlene's fingers stilled and she stopped unbuckling Jessie's seat belt to look at him across the width of the SUV's interior. "I didn't realize you'd made arrangements—but thank goodness you did."

Nick's gaze met hers and she felt her breath catch, helpless to stop her body's reaction to him.

"We were lucky last night," he said. "The hotel was prepared to accommodate babies. Trust me, there aren't any high chairs or cribs stored in my attic." He lifted Jackie free and grinned. "I'm not sure what we would have done with these three tonight if the store hadn't agreed to deliver and set up their beds today. The only thing I've got that comes close to cribs are a couple of large dog crates in the garage."

Charlene laughed, the sudden mental image of the three little girls sleeping in boxy carriers with gates was too preposterous.

"Exactly," Nick said dryly. He shifted Jackie onto his hip and unhooked Jenny from her seat.

*He's much more comfortable with the babies after only a day.* Charlene was impressed at how easily he'd managed to extricate Jenny from her seat while holding Jackie.

She quickly gathered the girls' blankets, stuffed animals and various toys from the floor mats where the girls had tossed them and finished unbuckling Jessie to lift her out of the car. She slung a loaded tote bag over her shoulder and bumped the car door closed with one hip.

"I'll unload the bags after we get the girls inside," Nick told her, gesturing her ahead of him to the walkway that curved across the lawn to the front entry. "Ring the doorbell," he said when they reached the door. "Melissa should be here—that's her car parked at the curb."

Charlene did as he asked and heard muted chimes from inside the house. Almost immediately the door opened.

"Hello—there you are." The woman in the doorway was small, her petite form sturdy in khaki pants, pullover white T-shirt and tennis shoes. Her dark hair was frosted with gray and her deep-brown eyes sparkled, animated behind tortoise-shell-framed glasses. "How was the trip?"

"Exhausting," Nick said bluntly. "Melissa, this is Charlene London. Charlene, this is Melissa Kennedy, my housekeeper. Charlene's going to take care of the girls, Melissa."

“Nice to meet you.” Melissa’s smile held friendly interest. Charlene’s murmured response was lost as Jenny wriggled in Nick’s arms, her little face screwing up into a prelude to full-blown tears. Nick stepped inside and handed Jackie to the housekeeper before he cuddled Jenny closer.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” He carried the sobbing little girl down the hall.

Charlene followed him into the living room, Melissa bringing up the rear with Jackie.

As often happened with the three little girls, when one of them began crying, the other two soon followed. Charlene rubbed Jessie’s back in soothing circles and slowly rocked her back and forth. She only cried harder. Melissa murmured to Jackie and gently patted her back, but Jackie’s sobs increased until they matched her sisters’ in volume.

“Jessie needs a diaper change.” Charlene raised her voice to be heard over the combined cries of the three babies.

“Can you and Melissa handle them while I bring in the bags from the car?” Nick asked, looking faintly frazzled.

“Of course,” Charlene responded with easy confidence.

Nick didn’t look convinced but he didn’t argue with her.

“Did the delivery crew set up the cribs, Melissa?” he asked.

“Yes, and the changing tables and dressers too. I put away the diapers and the other supplies in their room, and I had the men carry the high chairs into the kitchen,” she replied.

“Good.” Nick gently patted Jenny’s back with one hand as he strode across the living room toward the stairway, located just inside the front door. “Let’s get them upstairs and I’ll bring in the diaper bags.”

Charlene followed Nick and Melissa up the open stairway, with its wooden railing. The second-floor hallway branched to the right and left. Nick turned left and soon disappeared into the third room, Melissa and Jackie a step behind.

Charlene brought up the rear with Jessie, slowing to glance briefly into the first two rooms as she passed. One held a white, wrought-iron bed, the floor carpeted in light green Berber. The other was a bathroom, fitted in pale wooden cabinets with green marble tops.

The house was lovely but the sparse furnishings clearly stated that this was a bachelor’s home. Downstairs in the living room, she’d noted a large plasma television mounted on one wall, with shelves of electronic equipment beneath. CD cases were piled in stacks on the shelves between stereo speakers. A low, oak coffee table sat in front of a dark-brown leather sofa and a matching club chair and ottoman, angled next to the hearth of a river rock fireplace and chimney. There was no other furniture in the room, leaving an expanse of pale wooden floor gleaming in the late afternoon sunlight that poured through skylights and windows.

She’d glimpsed a dining room through an archway, but again, saw only the minimum of furniture in a table and chairs. She wondered how long Nick had lived in the house, since it appeared to be furnished with only essentials.

She carried Jessie into the bedroom and paused, feeling her eyes widen as she took in the room. It was large, with plenty of space for three white-painted cribs. Two dressers and changing tables matched the cottage-style cribs, and two rocking chairs with deep-rose seat cushions were tucked into a corner. Despite the number of pieces of furniture, the room didn’t feel crowded.

Clearly, Nick hadn’t skimmed on furnishings here.

“I had the men put the third dresser, changing table and rocker in the empty bedroom down the hall,” Melissa said to Nick. “I thought it would be too crowded if all of the furniture was in here.”

“We might have to move two of the cribs into other rooms. If one of the girls cries, the other two chime in. Maybe they’d sleep better if we split them up.” He looked at Charlene. “What do you think?”

“We could leave them together for tonight and see how they do. You can always move them tomorrow, if sharing a room doesn’t work out.”

Nick nodded decisively. “We’ll try it.” Gently, he lowered the now quiet Jenny onto the carpet. “I’ll go bring up their bags.”

Charlene slipped the canvas tote off her shoulder and lowered it to the floor before kneeling and setting Jessie down next to it. She took a tissue from the bag and wiped the damp tears from Jessie’s cheeks before handing the baby her blanket and a stuffed bear.

In Melissa’s arms, Jackie’s sobs had slowed to the occasional hiccup. She stretched out her arms and babbled imperiously.

Charlene wondered if she could use that combination of regal commands and pleas on Nick. Would he respond with hugs and kisses, as he did with the triplets?

She nearly groaned aloud.

The image of him rising from her bed at the motel, rumpled and sleepy, seemed to have permanently engraved itself on her brain. Try as she might, she couldn’t forget how his big, powerful body had looked, clad only in gray boxers, as he’d walked across the room.

Jackie’s chattering increased to shriek level and Charlene realized she had no idea how long she’d been standing still, staring unseeingly at the baby. She glanced quickly at Melissa, but the other woman was focused on Jackie, laughing as she jiggled her in her arms.

“I bet the queen of Hollywood divas, whoever she may be this week, doesn’t make as much noise as this little girl,” Melissa commented as she met Charlene’s gaze. The housekeeper’s eyes twinkled with amusement.

Mentally sighing with relief that Melissa appeared oblivious to her distraction, Charlene shoved the memory of Nick’s powerful thighs and broad chest into the back of her mind. She ordered the image to stay put—and desperately hoped it would obey.

## Chapter Three

Jackie shrieked again and Charlene laughed out loud. “Yes, your royal highness,” she said teasingly, retrieving the pink blanket with Jackie’s name embroidered across one corner and passing it to Melissa.

“Isn’t that clever?” Melissa said admiringly, as Jackie hugged the blanket and beamed at Charlene. “I wondered how Nick planned to tell one baby’s things from another.” She ran a fingertip gently over the bracelet on Jackie’s wrist. “But everything has their names on it, including the little girls themselves.”

“I thought their parents came up with a brilliant solution,” Charlene agreed. “Though I assume they could tell their daughters apart.”

Melissa’s face sobered. “Such a terrible thing to have happened, isn’t it? How awful to lose both parents at such a young age.”

“Yes,” Charlene agreed, her heart wrenching as she looked at Jessie and Jenny tugging on their stuffed bears. *So innocent—and thankfully, too young to grasp the enormity of their loss just now.*

Nick strode into the room, pulling two large rolling suitcases and carrying a backpack slung over one shoulder, all stuffed to overflowing with the triplets’ clothing and toys. “I put your suitcase in the room across the hall,” he told Charlene, shrugging the backpack off his shoulder.

“Thank you,” she murmured, delighted to know the lovely room with the white wrought-iron bed and green carpet would be hers during her stay.

In the ensuing bustle of changing diapers and tucking away tiny clothing into dresser drawers, Charlene was too busy to dwell on the triplets’ orphaned status.

Melissa was a godsend, helping with the girls as Charlene and Nick fed and bathed them, then tucked all three into bed. The adults returned to the living room and collapsed, Nick in the leather club chair, Charlene and Melissa on the comfortable sofa.

“They’re wonderful,” Melissa told Nick. “But oh, my goodness.” She sighed, a gust of air stirring her normally smooth hair, where one of the triplets had rumped and dampened it while the little girl splashed in her bath. “Talk about energy. What you two need to do is find a way to collect some of that for yourself. You’re going to need it.” She looked at Charlene. “Do they sleep through the night?”

“They did last night. I’ve got my fingers crossed, hoping we’ll have another quiet ten hours or so.”

“I hope they do too.” Melissa pushed herself up off the sofa. “I’d better get home. Ed will be wondering what happened to me.”

Nick started to shove up out of the chair but she waved him back. “No, no—don’t get up. I can see myself out. You should take advantage of this moment of quiet. Who knows how long it will last?”

“Good point,” Nick agreed, settling into the chair, the worn denim of his jeans going taut over muscled thighs as he stretched out his long legs. “We should make the most of this rare minute. It could be the last one of the night.”

“Exactly.” Melissa grinned at him, eyes twinkling, before she turned to Charlene. “I’ll see you in the morning—about eight?”

“Eight works for me. I’m looking forward to it,” Charlene replied with heartfelt warmth. After watching Melissa’s efficient, comfortable and unflappable handling of the babies over the last couple of hours, Charlene was convinced the housekeeper was going to be an enormous help in caring for the triplets.

“Goodnight, then, you two. I hope you get some sleep. I left my purse and keys in the kitchen. I’ll just collect them and let myself out the back,” she said. She moved briskly across the living room but stopped in the doorway. “I forgot to tell you, Nick, I left Rufus with Ed today so you could get the girls settled in before they meet him. I’ll bring him back with me tomorrow.”

“Good thinking,” Nick told her. “Dealing with the triplets was chaotic. Adding an excited hundred-and-twenty-five-pound dog into the mix would have made it crazy.”

Melissa chuckled and waved a quick good-night as she disappeared.

A moment later, the sound of her car engine reached the two in the living room.

“I take it you have a *big* dog?”

“Oh, yeah,” Nick said dryly. “Rufus is a chocolate Lab. Thankfully, he’s very mellow and loves kids, so he should be fine with the triplets.”

“As long as he likes them, they’ll probably think he’s wonderful.” Charlene yawned, suddenly exhausted. “I think I’ll head upstairs.” She unfolded her legs and stood, aware of aching muscles from the long car ride. “I could sleep for at least twelve hours straight. I’ve never understood how sitting in a car and doing nothing can make me tired.”

“It was a long trip,” Nicholas agreed, getting out of the chair. He rolled his shoulders and stretched. “Did Melissa show you where everything is—towels, coffee for tomorrow morning, et cetera?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“If you need anything, just ask. If I don’t already have it in the house, I’ll get it.” He eyed her, his gaze intent. “I’m damned grateful you agreed to take on the triplets, Charlene. I know it’s not an easy job. There’s no way I could do it by myself.”

“You’re doing very well for a man who’s never had children of his own,” she told him. “And I confess, I’m relieved Melissa will be helping. She’s good with the girls and nothing seems to faze her.”

“She’s pretty unshakeable,” Nick said. “I normally work long hours, and she keeps the house together and makes sure there are meals in the fridge.”

“How long has she worked for you?” Charlene asked, curious.

“Since a few days after I moved to Red Rock. The employment agency sent over three women and I hired Melissa on the spot.”

“Sounds like it was the right decision. Well...” She tugged her white cotton T-shirt into place, suddenly self-conscious. The room was abruptly too intimate in the lamplight and Nick loomed much too large, and much too male. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Sleep well. I have to go to the office for a meeting tomorrow, but I won’t leave until Melissa arrives.”

She nodded. “Good night.”

His answering good-night was a low male rumble. Charlene looked back when she reached the stairway and found him staring after her, his expression brooding. She hurried up the stairs, faintly breathless from the impact of the brief moment her gaze had met his.

*He’s your employer*, she reminded herself as she brushed her teeth in the white-and-green bathroom that opened off her bedroom, *stop lusting after him*.

Apparently, however, the emotional, hormonal part of her was in no mood to listen to the practical, rational command. She fell asleep and dreamed of making love with a man who looked very much like Nick Fortune.

Just as she stretched out her arms, her fingertips mere inches away from the bare chest of her dream lover, a loud wail yanked her awake.

Charlene sat bolt upright, disoriented as she stared in confusion at the dim outlines of bed and dresser in the strange room.

The sound of crying from the triplets’ room abruptly scattered the lingering fog of sleep and she tossed back the bedcovers to hurry next door.

“Oh, sweetie,” she soothed, lifting Jackie from her crib. “Sh.” She patted the little back while the baby’s sobs slowed to hiccups. “What’s wrong?”

Jessie rolled over in her crib and sat up. In the third crib, Jenny pulled herself to her feet to clasp the rail. Jackie chose that moment to burst into sobs once more and, as if on cue, Jessie and Jenny's faces crumpled. They burst into tears as well.

The combined sound of their crying was deafening and impossible to ignore. Charlene wasn't surprised when Nick staggered into the room.

"What's wrong?" His voice was gravelly with sleep. He wore navy boxers, his broad chest and long legs bare.

Despite the earsplitting noise of three crying babies, Charlene still noticed that Nick looked as good undressed as he did in faded jeans and T-shirts.

"Jackie woke me, then her crying woke the other two." Charlene crossed to the changing table, gently rocking the still sobbing Jackie while she took a fresh diaper from the drawer. "I think she needs a diaper change. Can you pick up Jenny and Jessie—maybe rock them for a few minutes?"

"Sure." Nick shoved his fingers through his hair, further rumpling it, and lifted Jenny from her crib.

The low rumble of his voice as he murmured to the two babies was barely audible as Charlene quickly changed Jackie's diaper. By the time she snapped the little girl's footed sleeper and tossed the damp disposable nappy into the bin, their crying had subsided into silence. She tucked Jackie against her shoulder and turned, stopping abruptly.

Nick sat in the cushioned rocking chair, a little girl against each bare shoulder, their faces turned into the bend of his neck where shoulder met throat. His broad hands nearly covered each little back, fingers splayed to hold them securely. His hair was rumpled, his eyes sleepy.

Charlene didn't think she'd ever seen anything half as sexy as the big man protectively cradling the two sleeping babies. She felt her heart lurch.

*Don't go there, she ordered herself. Do not notice how sexy he is. Remember you swore to avoid men for at least six months after breaking up with Barry.* That was only two weeks ago.

She couldn't remember ever feeling this attracted to her ex-fiancé, but that didn't change the fact that she was determined to never, ever, get involved with her employer.

She moved softly across the room and eased into the empty rocking chair. Jackie stirred, lifting her head from Charlene's shoulder. Charlene quickly smoothed her hand over the baby's silky black curls, gently urging her to lay her head down once more, and set the rocker in motion. Within seconds, Jackie was relaxed, her compact little body feeling boneless where it lay against Charlene.

"Is she asleep?" Nick's murmur rasped, velvet over gravel.

"Yes," Charlene whispered. "What about your two?"

He tipped his head back to peer down at first one, then the other, of the two little girls. "They seem to be." He looked up at her. "Think it's safe to put them back in bed?"

"We can try. Let me put Jackie down and then I'll take one of yours." At his nod, Charlene stood and crossed to Jackie's crib, easing the sleeping baby down onto her back and pulling the light blanket over her before she returned to Nick.

"Which one do you want me to carry?" she whispered.

"Jenny." He leaned forward slightly.

Charlene bent closer to lift the sleeping baby, her hands brushing against his bare skin. He was warm, his skin sleek over the flex of muscles as he shifted to help transfer the little girl to her, and a shiver of awareness shook her. She was aware his head turned abruptly, could feel the intensity of his stare, but she wouldn't, couldn't, allow herself to meet his gaze. Instead, she cradled Jenny in her arms and turned away to carry the little girl to her crib, tucking her in and smoothing the blanket over her sleeping form. Behind her, she heard the soft sounds of Nick tucking Jessie into the third crib.

Nick followed her to the doorway, waiting in the hall as she paused to look back. The room was quiet—no movement visible in any of the three cribs to indicate a restless child.

"I think they're out for the count," Nick murmured behind her.

“Yes, I believe you’re right,” she whispered, before stepping into the hall and easing the door partially closed. “Let’s hope they stay that way for the rest of the night.” She gave him a fleeting glance. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Once again, she felt his stare as she walked down the hall and into the safety of her room. She closed the door and collapsed against it, the panels cool against her shoulders, left bare by the narrow straps of her camisole pajama top.

There was no way she would ever become involved with her boss. She’d sworn a solemn oath after she’d learned about her father’s affair with his secretary that had ultimately destroyed her parents’ marriage. She’d never forgiven him, but for the first time, tonight she had an inkling as to what may have caused her father to stray. If he’d felt anything like the sizzling heat that swamped her every time she got close to Nick Fortune, then maybe, just maybe, she should stop being so angry at him. Maybe he’d literally been unable to help himself.

*Or not*, she thought, still not completely convinced.

But in any event, she had to find a way to insulate herself against the powerful attraction she felt. Especially since it appeared Nick didn’t have to do anything, or even say anything, to make her nerves sizzle and her body heat up.

Apparently, he just needed to breathe in her presence.

Groaning, she climbed back into bed and pulled the sheet and blanket over her head.

The triplets were still fast asleep in their cribs upstairs when Charlene tiptoed down the stairs and into the kitchen just before eight the following morning.

Nick glanced over his shoulder and took down another mug from the open cupboard. “Morning,” he said. “Coffee’s nearly done.”

Charlene breathed in the rich scent filling the kitchen and nearly groaned. “Bless you.”

Nick’s grin flashed, his eyes lit with amusement. He poured the rich brew into their mugs at the same moment that a knock sounded on the back door.

“That’ll be Melissa,” Nick told Charlene. He grabbed his computer case and crossed the kitchen to pull open the door.

A huge chocolate Labrador retriever leaped over the threshold and planted his paws on Nick’s shoulders, whining with excitement, his tail whipping back and forth.

“Ouch.” Melissa stepped inside, moving sideways to avoid getting hit. “That tail of yours is a lethal weapon, Rufus.” She waved her hand at the travel coffee mug and leather case in Nick’s left hand. “On your way out to work, boss?”

“Yeah.” Nick rubbed Rufus’s ears. “That’s enough. Down, boy.” The Lab dropped back onto four paws but continued to wag his tail, pink tongue lolling as he stared adoringly up at Nick. “I’ll check with the employment agency today,” Nick said, looking over his shoulder at Charlene, “and find out if they’ve lined up applicants for a second nanny.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed that they have—then maybe we both can start getting more sleep.”

Nick grinned, his eyes lit with rueful amusement as his mouth curved upward to reveal a flash of white teeth. Charlene suspected she was staring at him like a hopelessly lovestruck teenager, but she couldn’t bring herself to look away.

No man should be that gorgeous.

“I’ll tell them we’re staggering from sleep deprivation. Maybe they’ll take pity on us,” he said.

“We can only hope,” Charlene said, tearing her gaze away from his smile. Unfortunately, she was immediately snagged by his glossy black hair, thick-lashed brown eyes, tanned skin with a faint beard shadow despite the early hour, handsome features... Were all the Fortune men this blessed by nature? she wondered. If so, heaven help the women who caught their attention—because females didn’t stand a chance against all that powerful, charming, handsome male virility. Perhaps she was fortunate that he was her boss and thus off-limits, not to mention he was also clearly far more

sophisticated than she. Never mind the fact that he was also not interested in her. Because if he ever turned that undeniable charm on her, she'd give in without a whimper.

It's a pitiful thing when a woman has *no* resistance to a man, she realized with wry acknowledgment.

"So long, boss," Melissa's voice yanked Charlene out of her thoughts. "Have a good day."

"Good luck with the triplets." Nick bent to give Rufus's silky ears one last rub before disappearing through the door.

Charlene echoed Melissa's goodbye before pouring herself another mug of coffee. "The coffee's fresh," she told Melissa. "Want some?"

"Sure, why not." Melissa slid onto a stool at the counter.

Charlene handed her a steaming cup and took a seat opposite her.

"Are the babies still asleep?" Melissa asked.

"Yes." Charlene glanced at the digital clock on the microwave. "They're sleeping in, probably because they were awake several times last night."

"I was telling my Ed about the triplets just this morning—" Melissa began.

Whatever she was about to say was lost as someone rapped sharply on the back door.

Charlene looked inquiringly at Melissa.

"That's probably LouAnn," Melissa said as she left the counter and crossed the room.

Charlene barely had time to wonder who LouAnn was before Melissa pulled open the door. She felt her eyes widen.

"Good morning, Melissa." The throaty rasp seemed incongruous, coming as it did from a woman who Charlene guessed weighed at best a hundred pounds, maybe a hundred and ten at the most.

"Hi, LouAnn." Melissa gestured her inside. "We're just having coffee. Want some?"

"Of course." LouAnn followed Melissa to the counter, her bright blue gaze full of curiosity and fixed on Charlene. "And who are you, dearie?"

"I'm Charlene, the nanny." Charlene tried not to stare, but the silver-haired woman's attire was eyepopping. She wore a turquoise T-shirt with a bucking horse and rider picked out in silver rhinestones. The black leggings below the T-shirt clung to her nonexistent curves and hot-pink, high-top tennis shoes covered her feet. Skinny arms poked out of the loose short sleeves of the shirt, and both hands boasted jewelry that dazzled. Charlene was pretty sure the huge diamond on her left hand was real, and more than likely, so was the sapphire on her right. Not to mention the large diamond studs that glittered in her earlobes. She was tan, toned and exuded energy that fairly vibrated the air around her pixie frame.

"Nanny?" LouAnn's penciled eyebrows shot toward the permed silver curls of her immaculate, short hairdo. "Why does Nick need a nanny?"

"Have a seat, LouAnn, and we'll fill you in." Melissa pulled out a chair next to hers and across the island's countertop from Charlene. "Charlene, this is Nick's neighbor, LouAnn Harris."

"Pleased to meetcha." LouAnn hopped onto the tall chair, crossed her legs and beamed at Charlene. "You might as well know you're likely to see a lot of me. I'm a widow. I live alone and my son and daughter live too far away to visit me often, so I tend to get bored. I was delighted when Nick moved in here and hired Melissa—we've known each other for at least twenty years. My, you're young, aren't you?"

"Uh, well..." Charlene looked at Melissa for guidance. The housekeeper grinned, her eyes twinkling. Clearly, she wasn't bothered by the neighbor's bluntness. "I suppose I am, sort of," Charlene replied, taking her cue from Melissa.

LouAnn snorted. "No 'sort of' about it, honey. Compared to me, you're a child. But then, I'm seventy-six, so most everyone *is* younger." She sipped her coffee. "I have to get me a coffeemaker like Nick's. Your coffee is always better than mine, Melissa."

“That might be because I grind the beans. Nick has them sent from the coffee shop he used to go to in L.A.,” Melissa explained to Charlene.

“I thought it was the coffeemaker.” LouAnn leaned forward and lowered her voice to a raspy whisper. “It looks like it belongs on a space ship.”

Charlene laughed, charmed by LouAnn’s warm camaraderie.

LouAnn grinned at her, winked, and turned back to Melissa. “Now, tell me why Nick needs a nanny. I thought he was a confirmed bachelor with no interest in kids.”

“He is—and he doesn’t, or didn’t, pay attention to children,” Melissa agreed. “At least, he had no interest in children until recently. It’s a sad story, really.”

When she finished relaying a condensed version of the situation, LouAnn clucked in sympathy. “How terrible for those poor little girls. And how lucky for them—and Nick—that you were willing to step in and help,” she added, reaching across the marble countertop to pat Charlene’s hand.

“It was fate,” Melissa said firmly. “That’s what I think.”

“Three little ones—all the same age.” LouAnn shook her head. “How are you all coping?”

“Except for a serious lack of sleep, fairly well, I think.” Charlene looked at Melissa. “Sometimes it’s chaos, of course, but the girls seem to be doing okay. Jessie has an ear infection at the moment, so she’s a little cranky. But by and large, they’re very sweet little girls.”

“I can’t wait to see them. How old are they?”

“They’re a year—uh-oh.” The sound of one of the girls, chattering away upstairs floated down the stairway and into the kitchen. “I think you’re about to meet the dynamic trio.” Charlene slipped off her chair and headed for the door.

“I’m coming up with you,” LouAnn announced, joining Charlene.

Melissa brought up the rear as the three women left the kitchen.

Nick had a long list of priorities for the day, but as he backed his Porsche out of the garage and drove away, he wasn’t focusing on the work waiting for him at the Fortune Foundation. Instead, he was distracted by the memory of Charlene coping with the babies in the middle of the night.

The picture of her in the bedroom, lit only by the glow of a night-light, was seared in his memory. Her auburn hair had been rumped from sleep, her long legs covered in soft-looking, blue-and-white pajama bottoms. Jackie had clutched the neckline of the brief little white tank top Charlene wore, pulling it down to reveal the upper curve of her breasts.

Even half-asleep, he’d been damn sure she wasn’t wearing anything under that top. He felt like a dog for looking, and hoped she hadn’t noticed.

He’d known having the beautiful redhead living in his house was bound to cause difficult moments, but he hadn’t been prepared to be blindsided by a half-naked woman when he was barely awake.

*Which was stupid of me, he thought with disgust. She’s living in my house. I knew she’d be getting out of bed if one of the triplets woke during the night.*

And as long as he was being brutally honest, he had to admit the pajamas she wore hadn’t come close to being blatantly suggestive. Nevertheless, Charlene’s simple pajama bottoms and tank top would stop traffic on an L.A. freeway.

Maybe he wouldn’t have felt as if he’d been hit by lightning when he saw her in those pajamas if she were a woman with fewer curves.

*Or maybe, he thought with self-derision, if she’d been wearing a sack I’d still have been interested.*

He knew he was completely out of line. He just didn’t know how to turn off his body’s response to her. Not only was she his employee, she was too damned young for him. His office assistant had telephoned with results of a preemployment background check before he’d left his hotel to drive to the triplets’ foster home. The report not only confirmed Charlene had a spotless employment record, it also told him she’d graduated from college only three years earlier.

A brief mental calculation told him that if she'd gone to college immediately after high school, then graduated after four or five years before working for three more years, she most likely was twenty-five or twenty-six years old.

And he was thirty-seven. Too old for her.

Unfortunately, his libido didn't appear to be paying attention to the math.

He'd reached the office while he'd been preoccupied with the situation at home, and swung the Porsche into a parking slot. He left the car and headed for his office, determined to put thoughts of the curvy redhead at home, busy with his new instant family, out of his mind.

He quickly scanned the pink message slips the receptionist had handed him and tossed the stack on his desktop. He rang his brother Darr while he plugged in his laptop and arranged to meet him for lunch at their favorite diner, SusieMae's. Then he closed his office door and tackled an inbox filled with documents and files.

Nick gave the waitress his and Darr's usual lunch order and she bustled off. SusieMae's Café was crowded, but he had a clear view of the door, and saw his brother enter.

Darr swept the comfortable interior with a quick glance, nodding at acquaintances as he crossed the room and slid into the booth across from Nick.

"Where have you been?" he demanded without preamble. "I left two messages on your machine. You never called back."

"You didn't say it was an emergency." Nick shrugged out of his jacket and eyed his brother across the width of the scarred tabletop. "Was it?"

"Not exactly. I wanted to know if you'd talked to Dad or J.R. lately."

"I haven't." Nick took a drink of water. "Why?"

"Because I called and neither one answered. Come to think of it," Darr frowned at Nick, "none of you called me back."

Nick grinned. "Probably because we all assumed you were too busy with Bethany to care if we called you or not."

"Huh," Darr grumbled.

Nick noticed his younger brother didn't deny the charge.

"How's Bethany doing?" he asked. He felt distinctly protective toward the petite, pregnant blonde, especially since Darr was in love with her. When the two married, she'd become Nick's sister-in-law. As far as he was concerned, Bethany Burdett was a welcome addition to their all-male family.

"Good." Darr leaned back to let their waitress set plates and coffee mugs on the tabletop in front of them. "She's good."

Nick didn't miss the softening of his brother's face. He was glad Darr had found a good woman. Bethany made him happy, and he seemed content in a way Nick hadn't seen before.

"You didn't answer my question, where have you been?"

Nick waited until the waitress left before he spoke. "I made a trip to Amarillo. I've been pretty busy since I got back."

"Yeah? What were you doing in Amarillo?" Darr took a bite of his sandwich, eyeing Nick over the top of a double-decker bacon-and-tomato on wheat.

"I picked up Stan's kids." Nick saw Darr's eyes widen. "Three of them," he added, smiling slightly at the shock on his brother's face. "They're all girls—only a year old. Triplets."

Darr choked, set down his sandwich, grabbed his coffee and washed down the bite in record time. "What the hell? Why? What happened?"

Nick lost any amusement he'd felt at his brother's dumfounded expression. "He and Amy were in a car accident—neither one of them made it out alive." Saying the words aloud didn't make the truth any less surreal.

The shock on Darr's face made it clear he was just as stunned as Nick had been at first hearing the news.

“Both of them?” He shook his head in disbelief when Nick nodded. “They were so young. You and Stan are the same age, right?”

Again, Nick nodded. “And Amy was a year younger.”

“And you have custody of their babies?” Darr queried,

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because Stan’s will named me guardian if Amy’s sister Lana couldn’t take them.” Nick took a drink of coffee, hoping to erase the lump of emotion in his throat. He still hadn’t come to terms with the abruptness with which Stan and Amy had disappeared from the world. “So they’re with me until the attorney locates Lana.”

“Where is she?”

“No one knows.” Nick stared broodingly at his plate, holding a sandwich and chips. “She and her husband work in Africa and Amy seems to have lost track of them a few months ago.”

“Damn.” Darr eyed him. “Who’s taking care of the kids while you work?”

“I hired a nanny,” Nick replied. “And Melissa’s working longer hours while I’m at the Foundation during the day.”

Darr stared at him. Nick took a bite of his sandwich.

“And?” Darr prompted when Nick didn’t elaborate.

“And what?”

“Don’t give me that. You’re stalling. What else aren’t you telling me?”

“The nanny I hired works full-time. Her name is Charlene. She’s a redhead and she’s great with the triplets.”

Darr lowered his coffee mug to the table without taking his gaze from Nick’s face. “She’s a babe, isn’t she.”

It wasn’t a question. Darr knew him too well to be fooled.

“Yeah. She is.” Nick shoved another bite of sandwich into his mouth.

“Full-time,” Darr said consideringly. “What hours does she work?”

“She’s pretty much on call twenty-four hours a day.”

“So...he’s living at your house?”

“Yeah.”

“Sleeping down the hall from you?”

Nick nodded, saw the glint appear in Darr’s eyes and bristled. “Yes, *down the hall*. She has her own bedroom. What the hell did you think, that she was sharing mine?”

Darr shrugged. “It did cross my mind. Face it, Nick, you’ve never been slow with the ladies. You said she’s pretty—and she’s living in your house...” He spread his hands. “Sounds like a no-brainer to me.”

“Well, it’s not,” Nick snarled, restraining an urge to wrap his hands around his brother’s neck and choke that grin off his face. “She works for me. Have you heard of sexual harassment? She’s off-limits.”

“Too bad.” Darr lifted his coffee mug and drank. “So,” he said, setting the mug down and picking up his sandwich, “just how good-looking is Charlene?”

*Too beautiful.* Nick bit back the words and shrugged. “Beautiful.”

“On a scale of one to ten?”

“She’s a fifteen.”

Darr’s eyes widened. “Damn.”

“And she’s too young,” Nick continued.

“How young?”

“She’s twenty-five.”

“Thank God.” Darr pretended to wipe sweat off his brow in relief. “I thought you were going to tell me she’s underage and jailbait.”

“Might as well be,” Nick growled. “She’s twelve years younger than me. That’s too damned young.”

Darr pursed his lips. “Let me see if I’ve got this straight. You’re cranky because you’ve got a nanny you can’t make a move on because you’re her boss and she’s younger than you.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Nick conceded.

Darr grinned. “Maybe you should fire her. Then you can date her.”

“I can’t fire her—and I don’t want to,” Nick ground out. “She’s good at her job. If she wasn’t helping me take care of the girls, I’d be screwed.”

“So hire someone else—and then fire her.”

“Yeah, like she’s likely to go out with me after I’ve fired her.” Nick rubbed his eyes. They felt as if there was a pound of sand in each of them. If he didn’t get some sleep soon, he’d need more than the saline eyedrops he’d been using in a vain attempt to solve the problem. “There’s no solution that’s workable. Believe me, I’ve considered all the angles.”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

“Stop being so damned cheerful,” Nick growled.

“Aren’t you the one who told me there’s always another girl just around the corner? Wait a week and there’ll be another corner, another girl. If things don’t work out with the redhead, why do you care?”

*Because I’ve never met anyone quite like her.*

Nick didn’t want to tell Darr that Charlene was unique. He was having a hard enough time accepting that he’d met a woman who broke all the rules he’d spent thirty-seven years setting.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said with a slight shrug, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. “Have you heard anything new about the note Patrick got at the New Year’s Eve party? Or about the ones Dad and Cindy received?”

“No.” Darr didn’t appear thrown by Nick’s abrupt change of subject. “That’s one of the reasons I wanted to talk to Dad and J.R.—to ask if they’ve learned anything more.”

The Fortune family had gone through a series of mysterious events over the last few months, starting with the cryptic note left in Patrick Fortune’s jacket pocket during a New Year’s Eve party. The strange message—“One of the Fortunes is not who you think”—baffled the family, even more so when they learned the same message had been left anonymously with Cindy Fortune and William, Nick and Darr’s father.

Patrick had called a family conference at Lily Fortune’s home on the Double Crown Ranch in February, on the very day Red Rock had been hit with a freak snowstorm.

Darr hadn’t been present at the gathering, since he’d been snowed-in with Bethany in her little house. But Nick had brought him up to speed on everything that happened, including the family’s assumption the notes were the precursor to a blackmail demand. So far, however, no such demand had been made. But two subsequent fires—one that burned down the local Red Restaurant, and a second that destroyed a barn at the Double Crown—were suspicious. And potentially connected to the mysterious and vaguely threatening notes.

“Let me know if you reach Dad and J.R.,” Nick said. “Meanwhile, I had a message from Ross Fortune when I got back to the office today. We set up a meeting to discuss the notes and fires. Has he contacted you?” Nick and Darr’s cousin was a private investigator with an agency in San Antonio. His mother, Cindy, had convinced the family they should hire him to check into the cryptic threats.

“Not yet,” Darr said, “but I heard he’s in town. The Chief said he called and asked for copies of the department’s report on the fire at Red.” Darr pushed his empty plate aside and leaned his elbows on the tabletop, his voice lowering. “This isn’t for public knowledge, but I’m sure my boss agrees with us—he has serious reservations as to whether the fire was accidental.”

“What about the barn that burned at the Double Crown?”

“He didn’t want to talk about that one—I suspect he believes I’m too close to the subject, since it happened on Lily’s ranch.”

“Do you have a gut feeling as to his opinion?”

“Yeah. I’m convinced he believes the Double Crown fire wasn’t an accident, either.”

“I hope to hell Ross’s investigation gets some answers,” Nick said grimly. “You or someone else could have died in those fires.”

“Bethany damn near did,” Darr said darkly, his features hardening. “She was barely conscious when I found her on the bathroom floor at the restaurant. She could have died of smoke inhalation.”

“We have to find out who’s behind these threats to the family before someone loses their life,” Nick said. “I hope Ross is good at his job.”

“When are you talking to him?”

“Tomorrow afternoon at one.” Nick glanced at his watch. “I have a meeting in a half hour. Gotta get back to the office.”

Darr nodded and both men dropped money on top of the check.

“Thanks, guys,” their waitress called after them as they left the booth and headed for the exit.

Nick shrugged into his jacket as he stepped outside, a brisk breeze cooling the air, although the sun beamed down, warm against his face.

“Let me know what Ross has to say tomorrow,” Darr said, pausing on the sidewalk. “I have the day off, but I’m not sure what Bethany’s plans are or if I’ll be home, so call my cell phone.”

“Sure.” Nick stepped off the curb. “Tell Bethany hello from me.”

“Will do.” Darr headed down the block to his vehicle.

Nick climbed into his Porsche, the powerful engine turning over with a throaty, muted roar when he twisted the key. The low-slung car had only two seats—room for the driver and one passenger.

“Too small,” Nick murmured as he backed out of the slot. “I need to get an SUV.” Or a minivan. He shuddered. He didn’t think he could bring himself to drive a minivan—even for the triplets. Minivans were mommy cars. For a guy who loved fast cars and powerful engines, a minivan was a step too far, vehicle-wise.

He made a mental note to go SUV shopping on his lunch hour tomorrow. Charlene could use it to drive the babies during the week and he’d use it on the weekends if he needed to take the little girls anywhere.

If anyone had told him two weeks ago that he’d be contemplating buying a vehicle to transport babies, he would have laughed at the sheer insanity of the idea.

He didn’t do kids. Never had. And kids hadn’t been part of his plans for the future.

There was some kind of cosmic karma at work here. Nick couldn’t help but wonder what fate planned to hit him with next.

## Chapter Four

Nick returned to the office, where he forced himself to concentrate on meetings. By the time he reached home that evening, he'd almost convinced himself he'd overreacted that morning.

Surely he'd overestimated the power of his attraction to Charlene.

The neighborhood was quiet, the street lamps casting pools of light in the early darkness when he slotted the car into the garage and got out, tapping the panel next to the inner door to close the garage door smoothly behind him. He unlocked the door leading from the garage into the utility room and passed through, stopping abruptly in the open doorway to the kitchen when he saw Charlene. She stood at the stove across the room, her back to him as she poured steaming water from the stainless steel teakettle into a mug. A box of tea sat on the counter next to the cup. Her hair was caught up in a ponytail, leaving her nape bare above a short-sleeved green T-shirt tucked into the waistband of faded jeans. She wore thick black socks and she looked comfortable and relaxed, as if the kitchen were her own.

*Coming home after a long day at work and finding a pretty woman in my kitchen is kind of nice.*

The thought surprised him. He'd never really understood married friends when they insisted that walking into a house that wasn't empty was one of the great things about being married. He liked his privacy and didn't mind living alone. In fact, he thoroughly appreciated the solitude of his quiet house after a day spent in meetings.

But finding Charlene in his kitchen, clearly comfortable and making herself at home, felt good.

*Of course,* he thought wryly, *maybe I'd feel differently if she was a girlfriend with marriage on her mind and not the nanny.* Maybe her employee status erased the natural wariness of a bachelor when confronted with an unmarried, attractive woman puttering in his kitchen.

*Whatever's going on here,* Nick thought, *I'm definitely glad to see her*

Before he could say hello, Rufus bounded in from the living room, his nails clicking against the tile floor. Woofing happily, he charged. Nick quickly lowered his leather computer bag to the tile and braced himself. The big dog skidded to a halt, reared onto his back legs, planted his front paws on Nick's shoulders and tried to lick his face.

"Hey, stop that." Nick caught Rufus's head in his palms and rubbed his ears.

"Hi." Charlene looked over her shoulder at him. She set the kettle on the range and carried her mug to the island where a notebook lay open beside her laptop computer. "I thought I heard your car pull into the garage. How was your day?"

"Busy," he said, releasing Rufus and bending to pick up his computer bag. The big dog followed Nick to the island and flopped down next to Charlene's chair. "How was yours?"

"Busy."

He laughed at her dry, one-word response. "Yeah, I bet it was. How did it go with the girls?"

"Fine." Charlene spooned sugar into her tea and stirred. "Jackie bonked her chin on a chair rung and has a new little bruise. Jessie smeared oatmeal in her hair and had to have a second bath this morning barely an hour after her first one. And Jenny..." She paused, her eyes narrowing in thought. "Come to think of it, Jenny had a fairly quiet day."

"That doesn't sound possible."

"I know," she laughed. "But she doesn't seem ill, so I'm happy—but surprised—to report that although I've only known them for three days, there's a possibility that maybe one of them has an uneventful day on occasion."

"Well, that's a relief."

"Did you talk to the employment agency today?"

“Yeah, they might have three candidates for me to interview soon. They’re running background checks and verifying references for each of the women.” Nick turned on the tap and washed his hands, turning to lean against the counter as he dried them. “What did Melissa make for dinner?”

“Lasagne, french bread and salad—she left a plate for you in the fridge and the bread is in the pantry.” Charlene set down her mug and shifted to stand.

Nick waved her back. “Stay where you are, I’ll get it.” The stainless steel, double-door refrigerator was only a step away. He located the plate and salad bowl, took a bottle of dressing from the inner-door shelf and let the door swing closed behind him as he walked back to the counter. He peeled the plastic wrap off the lasagne and slid it into the microwave to heat, tapping the timer before closing the door.

“What do you want to drink?”

He glanced around to see Charlene at the fridge, glass in hand.

“Ice water sounds good, thanks.”

He heard the clink of ice and the splash of water behind him as he walked to the island and pulled out one of the low-backed stools. The microwave pinged just as he finished pouring vinegar and oil dressing on his salad and he returned to the counter, grabbing a knife and fork from the cutlery drawer. Charlene set his glass of water down next to his salad bowl and returned to her seat as he carried his steaming plate back to the island. He sat across from Charlene and folded his shirt cuffs back, loosening and tugging off his tie.

“Tell me about the triplets,” he said. “How did Melissa survive the day?”

“She said she’s going to cancel her gym membership. Evidently, lifting and carrying three babies for eight hours is more fun than weight lifting with her trainer.” Charlene laughed. “Seriously, she’s great with them, and they seem to like her as much as she likes them.”

“I thought they would,” Nick commented. “She’s good with Rufus, and dealing with him seems to be a lot like having a toddler in the house—he makes messes, demands food regularly, requires massive amounts of attention and sometimes wakes me up in the middle of the night.”

“So, what you’re saying,” Charlene said dryly, arching one eyebrow as she eyed him, “is that three little girls can cause as much havoc as a hundred-and-twenty-five-pound dog?”

“Pretty much,” Nick agreed, grinning as she shook her head and frowned at him. The effect was ruined by the small smile that tugged her lips upward at the corners. “As a matter of fact, I can pick him up. I doubt I could juggle all three of the girls at the same time.”

“You could, if you had a baby carrier,” she said promptly.

“What’s a baby carrier?”

“It’s sort of a canvas backpack that an adult wears over their shoulders. The child is buckled into it so you can carry them on your chest or your back. Some are made for younger babies, but you can also get one to use for toddlers.”

“Ah!” he said, nodding. “Remind me to get one of those. Then, if either of us ever has to take all three of the girls somewhere alone, we won’t risk dropping one of them.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan,” Charlene agreed. “I met your neighbor LouAnn today.”

“Did you?” Nick grinned and lifted an eyebrow. “What did you think of her?”

“She’s a very interesting woman.”

He laughed outright. “Got that right. She’s a character. I hope I have that much energy when I’m seventy-something.”

“Me too,” Charlene agreed, smiling as she remembered LouAnn playing on the floor with the triplets. “She’s wonderful with the babies. I’m not sure who had more fun playing peekaboo, her or the girls.”

Nick chuckled, the sound sending shivers of awareness through Charlene’s midsection. As he ate, they discussed the wisdom of keeping all three girls in the same bedroom.

Charlene sipped her tea, staring with fascination as Nick tipped his head back slightly and drank from the water glass. He'd unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt when he removed his tie earlier, and the strong, tanned muscles of his throat moved rhythmically as he swallowed. There was something oddly intimate about sitting in the cozy kitchen with him as he ate and they discussed his children.

"...What do you think?"

"Hmm?" She realized with a start that he'd been speaking while she'd stared at him, mesmerized, and felt embarrassed heat flood her cheeks. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. What do I think about...?"

His expression was quizzical. She suspected he noticed her pink cheeks, but she was determined not to become flustered. So she met his gaze with what she hoped was a serene look.

"I asked if you thought it was a good idea to give the girls a week or so together before we decide if they need to sleep in separate bedrooms."

"I think it makes sense to see whether they continue to wake each other, as they did last night." Charlene didn't want to remember the intimacy of the babies' darkened bedroom and the mental image of Nick wearing navy boxers and nothing else. Resolutely, she focused on the other bedrooms she'd seen during the tour of the house Melissa had given her that afternoon. "There's certainly plenty of room if you decide to have them sleep apart. Do you know if their parents had their cribs in separate bedrooms or if they all slept in the same room?"

Nick paused, his expression arrested. "The foster mother had the beds in two small bedrooms but I never thought to ask what the arrangements were at Stan and Amy's." He put down his fork with a thunk. "I should have asked," he said with disgust. "It never even occurred to me."

"If you have a phone number, I can try to reach her tomorrow," Charlene offered, touched by the sheer frustration on his face as he thrust his fingers through his hair and raked it back off his forehead.

"I'd appreciate that. I have her contact information in my desk in the den. Remind me to look it up before I leave for the office in the morning, will you?"

"Of course." Charlene sipped her tea and considered what she knew about the triplets' situation while Nick ate the last few bites of his lasagne. "Did the attorney have any estimate as to how long it might take to locate the babies' aunt?"

"No." Nick rose to carry his empty china and dirty cutlery to the sink. He turned on the tap. "He asked me to let him know if I remembered anything Stan or Amy may have said that would help find her. So far, all I've come up with is going through the photographs."

"Photographs? Does the investigator need a picture?"

"No, he has one." Nick slotted his rinsed dishes and utensils into the rack of the dishwasher and closed the door. "But Amy loved taking photographs—so did Stan—and Amy almost always jotted little notes on the back of the pictures. I'm sure some of the holiday photos they sent included her sister. I'm hoping there might be something in one of Amy's notes that will help locate Lana."

"That's a great idea," Charlene said, encouraged at the possibility of finding a clue.

"I hope it's a productive one, but who knows whether I'll learn anything new." He shrugged. "Still, it's one place we haven't looked yet, and given how little information the investigator has, any small piece might make a difference. When I moved in, I shoved the photo boxes into the back of a closet upstairs. I thought I'd bring one downstairs tomorrow night and start looking."

"I'd be glad to help you search through them," she offered.

"Thanks, but I should warn you, I've never organized the pictures. All the photos I have are tossed in a couple of boxes, and the ones from Stan and Amy are mixed in with all the rest. There might be hundreds of pictures to look at. My mom divided family photos a few years ago and gave me a carton full."

“I’ll still volunteer,” she said. “Did the attorney search the triplets’ house for an address book? I keep a notebook with family and friends’ addresses and phone numbers in a drawer by the phone. And in a computer file too,” she added as an afterthought.

“Sanchez and the investigator both checked Amy’s home computer but didn’t find anything helpful. They also looked for an address book at the house,” Nick said. “They didn’t find one. Whether she carried one with her is unknown because they didn’t find her purse at the accident scene. They’re assuming it was probably lost or destroyed, if she even had it with her.”

“What about old letters from her sister? Didn’t Amy keep correspondence?”

“Yes, but the last letter Amy received from Lana was several months ago—just after Thanksgiving. The investigator tried contacting her using the phone number at that residence, but she’s no longer living there. The landlord didn’t have any forwarding information.”

“So, what will he do now? Surely she just didn’t disappear?”

“I’m guessing the agency will send someone to Africa to interview the landlord in person, talk to her former employer, et cetera. It’s hard to investigate someone’s whereabouts from halfway around the world—on another continent,” Nick said grimly.

“Yes, I’m sure it is. Who knew it could be so difficult to locate someone?” she murmured. “This is a real wake-up call for me. I should think about what personal files and paperwork to organize in the remote chance I might suddenly disappear. I’ve never given any thought to the subject before now.”

“Most people don’t,” Nick said, a slightly gravelly edge to his deep voice.

“Of course,” she agreed, her tone softening. “It must have been a shock to get that phone call. Had you known each other a long time?”

“Since college.” Nick’s expression shuttered.

Charlene sensed his withdrawal. His expression didn’t invite further questions. Without further comment, she logged off her computer and closed it before picking up her mug and walking to the sink.

“It’s late. I think I’ll try to get some rest while the triplets are all asleep.”

“Not a bad idea.” Nick yawned. “I need to let Rufus outside before I come up.”

“Good night.”

He murmured a response and Charlene left the room. She heard the click of a latch behind her and paused, glancing back. Nick was turned away from her as he held the door open for Rufus. The big dog trotted through and Nick followed, his tall frame silhouetted against the darkness by the kitchen light spilling through the open door.

She was struck by how very alone he looked, standing in the shaft of golden light, facing the black night, before she turned away and climbed the stairs.

*He’s your boss, she reminded herself firmly. He’s also older, more experienced. There is absolutely no reason for you to assume he’s lonely. He’s charming and probably wealthy, given his family ties, and no doubt has a little black book filled with the phone numbers of numerous women who’d be happy to keep him company.*

Fortunately, she didn’t lie awake thinking about Nick. Being wakened by the triplets several times the night before, combined with her long day, made her tired enough to fall asleep almost the moment her head hit the pillow.

Unfortunately, Charlene wasn’t allowed to remain asleep for long.

The first cry woke her just after 1:00 a.m. She tossed back the covers and fumbled for her slippers with her bare toes but couldn’t find them. Giving up the search, she hurried across the hall to the triplets’ room.

Jessie was standing up in her crib, holding on to the railing with one hand, the other clasping her beloved blanket. Although the room was lit by only the dim glow from the plug-in Winnie The Pooh night-light, Charlene could see the tears overflow and trickle down Jessie’s flushed cheeks.

“Sh, sweetie,” Charlene murmured, crossing the room and lifting the little girl into her arms. “What’s wrong?”

Jessie burrowed her face against Charlene’s neck. The heat coming from the little body was palpable.

“You’re running a temperature,” Charlene murmured, realizing the ear infection was no doubt responsible for the rise in body heat. Jackie and Jenny appeared to be sound asleep. Charlene sent up a quick prayer that they would remain so as she quickly carried Jessie out of the bedroom and into the room next door. Her sobs were quieter now, muffled as her damp face pressed Charlene’s bare throat. Charlene rubbed her hand soothingly over the small back.

Earlier that day, Melissa had helped Charlene move a changing table and rocking chair into the empty bedroom next to the triplets’ room. The babies still refused to fall asleep unless they were all in the same room—they fretted and worked themselves into a state if the adults tried to separate them. Nevertheless, Charlene was determined to find a solution to their waking each other in the night. If one of them cried, the other two inevitably woke, and the loss of sleep for everyone was a problem that desperately needed solving.

Charlene managed to ease Jessie back, putting an inch or so between them, just enough to unzip her footed pajamas. The pink cotton was damp, as was the diaper beneath.

“Let’s change your clothes before we get your medicine,” she said, lowering Jessie to the changing table.

The little girl whimpered in complaint and when Charlene stripped off the damp pajamas, Jessie’s little mouth opened and she wailed.

In the bedroom next door, one of the other triplets protested and then began to sob. Charlene groaned aloud. The sound was bound to wake Nick.

She took Jessie’s temperature with a digital ear thermometer, relieved when it registered only a degree above normal. As she quickly replaced Jessie’s wet diaper with a dry one and tucked her into clean pajamas, Charlene fervently wished the employment agency would find a suitable nanny applicant soon. If the triplets had two nannies—herself and another—then maybe Nick wouldn’t feel required to get up at night when the babies woke.

And she wouldn’t be confronted with seeing him in the pajama bottoms he’d started sleeping in after that first night when he’d staggered into the triplets’ bedroom in navy boxers. He might believe he’d found a modest alternative to underwear, but as far as she was concerned, the low-slung flannel pants only made him look sexier.

The low rumble of Nick’s voice as he talked to the babies carried through the wall separating the rooms and Charlene was certain both Jackie and Jenny were awake.

“Come on, sweetie,” she murmured to Jessie, lifting her.

She left the room and paused in the doorway of the triplets’ bedroom. Nick had Jackie in one arm and Jenny in the other. Both babies were sobbing, blankets clutched in tiny fists.

“Jessie’s temperature is up again. I’m taking her downstairs to get her medicine out of the fridge.” Charlene had to raise her voice to make sure Nick could hear her over the crying babies. His brief nod told her he’d understood, and she headed downstairs, leaving him to cope with the two fractious little girls.

As she pulled open the refrigerator door and took out the prescription bottle, she heard Nick come down the stairs and go into the living room. Jackie and Jenny were still crying, although the volume wasn’t quite as loud as before.

Jessie’s sobbing had slowed to hiccups and intermittent outbursts. Charlene managed to unscrew the lid from the bottle and fill the eyedropper with the proper dose of pink medicine while balancing the little girl on her hip.

“Open up, sweetie.” Fortunately, the medication was strawberry flavored and Jessie’s mouth immediately formed an O. Just like a little bird, Charlene thought. Jessie’s lips closed around the dispenser and Charlene emptied the pink liquid into her mouth. “Good girl, you like that don’t...”

A sudden blast of music from the living room startled Charlene and she jumped, nearly dropping the bottle. Jessie’s eyes grew round, her little body stiffening in Charlene’s grasp.

“What in the world?”

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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