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DADDY ON DEMAND

HELEN R. MYERS

DÉJÀ YOU

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**Daddy on Demand / Déjà You:
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Daddy on Demand / Déjà You: Daddy on Demand / Déjà You /
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Daddy on Demand Helen R Myers The unexpected arrival of Collin Masters's three-year-old twin nieces had disrupted everything. Sabrina Sinclair was the only person who could tidy things up! Except now that she's living under his roof, looking after the toddlers, Sabrina is way too close for comfort... Déjà You Lynda Sandoval Running from the memories of the accident that took her fiancé and unborn baby, Erin DeLuca lost herself in the arms of a stranger. But one night had unexpected consequences! Now Nate Walker knows about the pregnancy, he's more than ready to be a daddy to their baby – and a loving husband to Erin...

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DADDY ON DEMAND

He couldn't bear the raw, naked emotion of need.

Despite weeks of iron will and brutal lectures to keep his hands to himself, he crushed her to him and hid his face in the fragrance and silkiness of her hair.

Collin swallowed painfully. "Thank you for being here...for doing this. I couldn't – "

He kissed her as he had in a dream, with tenderness and care, and sighed with relief when she opened to him. When his tongue touched hers, she murmured softly and let herself lean against him.

"Brina...I gotta go potty."

It was Sabrina who eased back and called down the hall, "I'll be right there." Then she looked at Collin and asked softly, "Are you OK?"

He could only offer a barely perceptible nod, and then she was off.

"I don't know if I'll ever be OK again," he finally replied to the empty room.

DÉJÀ YOU

“Just lie here with me?”

Surprise riddled through him.

Erin’s complexion blazed red. “I know it seems weird, but...”

Don’t be an idiot, Nate’s brain warned. *Do not get in bed with this woman*. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m not sure of anything. Except that I don’t feel like being alone right now.” Fumbling and formal, they moved side by side on the bed, her beneath the covers, him on top. For a few agonising moments, they remained that way.

Erin cleared her throat. “May I...may I put my head on your shoulder? Oh, God. Never mind. This was an idiotic idea.”

“Shh.” Nate slid his arm beneath her and urged her head onto his shoulder. “It’s OK. Friends, right?”

“Right.”

He felt her nod, closed his eyes. They might be strangers, and their meeting unconventional, but damned if she didn’t feel absolutely perfect in his arms.

Daddy on Demand

by

Helen R Myers
Déjà You

by

Lynda Sandoval



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**Available in August 2010 from
Mills & Boon® Special Moments™**

Daddy on Demand

by Helen R Myers &

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Sophie's Secret

by Tara Taylor Quinn

Her So-Called Fiancé

by Abby Gaines

Diagnosis: Daddy

by Gina Wilkins

Daddy on Demand

by

Helen R Myers

HELEN R MYERS lives deep in the Piney Woods of East Texas. She cites cello music and bonsai gardening as favourite relaxation pastimes, and still edits in her sleep – an accident, learned while writing her first book. A bestselling author of diverse themes and focus, she is a three-time RITA[®] Award nominee, winning in 1993.

To dear friend and former neighbour

Donna Danley

of

Backwoods Farm

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

You know all of the reasons why.

Chapter One

“Are you alone?”

The tender yet suggestive question posed by the female calling on his cell phone would have put a wicked grin on Collin Masters’s face if he didn’t immediately recognize that it was his sister. Watching elevator floor numbers light up as he descended from his high-rise condo, he replied, “Not for long if there’s any justice in this world. I’m in the elevator on my way to meet someone who has legs more fabulous than her red hair and an appetite for champagne and yours truly.”

“Cancel,” Cassidy Masters replied, all semblance of gentleness vanishing from her voice. “I’m on my way over there.”

Collin adored his kid sister and only sibling, but he didn’t appreciate her ordering him as though he was a member of her USAF chopper crew. “Not remotely funny, Captain Masters. You stay in San Antonio at—” He never could remember which of the Texas bases she was currently stationed at.

“I’m within ten minutes of your building. I borrowed one of the club planes and flew into Addison Airport.”

Although it gave him pause that she was only a few miles north of his location in Dallas, Collin opted for humor. “For your information, this is the first date I’ve been on in weeks. Catch my drift? Lonely boy needs some TLC.”

“Keep Lonely Boy zipped away for another hour or two. This is important.”

“But—”

“Darn your hide—don’t make me say this over the phone!” Cassidy sighed. “I’m being deployed, Collin.”

The news hit him with such a jolt, he thought the elevator had abruptly jerked to a halt between floors. When instead it settled calmly on the ground level and the doors opened, his stomach eased back in place with the rest of his anatomy, but not without aftershocklike jitters.

“Crap. Sis, I’m sorry.”

“It comes with the wings...and it’s not like we didn’t know this could happen.”

A million and one questions flooded Collin’s mind. He allowed only one to be voiced. “When do you leave?”

“Six weeks. Eight tops. Just long enough to get through the training classes I’m not current on, update my shots and get my personal business in order.”

Uh-oh, Collin thought, beginning to feel a new queasiness in his belly. Yes, they had covered this subject before, but that was conveniently tucked away in the part of his brain labeled Denial.

“I take it by your silence that you’re putting two and two together,” Cassidy drawled. “Make the call or calls you need to and I’ll see you at 1850 give or take some traffic.”

She disconnected, successfully avoiding his com-plaint about not understanding military counting any better than he remembered base names. No, he amended, she was just guaranteeing that he wouldn’t have a chance to back out of their deal. He loved her with all of his heart—save what portion wasn’t owned by her precocious daughters, his nieces—but how could he do what she was about to ask of him?

A movement across the lobby caught his attention and he realized that he was standing in the open elevator probably looking like he’d free-fallen down the shaft. Across the lobby, a sweet-faced giant named Sonny—the lobby security guard—watched him with perplexed amusement.

Offering back a sickly smile and weak wave, Collin shut his phone and hit the button that would return him to his floor.

It was closer to twenty minutes before Sonny announced Cassidy’s arrival. By then Collin had called Nicole, canceled their dinner reservations and downed a chilled shot of Grey Goose. Scotch would have been the shock absorber of choice, but he knew it would take more than one to see him

through this meeting, and then there was the breath test concern. Cass had the olfactory senses of a bloodhound and he didn't want her thinking she was leaving her precious three-year-olds in the hands of an irresponsible drunk.

"Oh, who are you kidding?" he muttered catching sight of himself in the hallway mirror with his hair and tie already askew from anxious yanking and raking.

Deployed...his kid sister was heading off to war. This is what he deserved for assuring her that, "You can be anything you want to be," some four years ago upon learning that she was pregnant. The lowlife *sperm donor* that she'd called boyfriend at the time had been urging her to have an abortion because the would-be rock star thought kids would be a turnoff to fans. It sure hadn't hurt legends like Mick, Ozzie and McCartney, but afraid to test that theory, Dave from Denton had fled to parts unknown.

By big belly time, Cassie had finished her master's degree, graduating with honors. By the time the twins were two, she was on her way to flying Pave Hawk helicopters for the U.S. Air Force. To Collin, who could barely bring himself to fly commercial without one hand on the barf bag, his kid sister was amazing. But sitting in any cockpit in a war zone was an idea he'd been refusing to contemplate. Yes, there were many female pilots these days, but as far as he was concerned, the war was supposed to be over before it was Cassie's turn to serve her country on the front lines.

The knock at the door and cheery call, "There's no use hiding, I know you're in there," put an end to his lozenge-size history recap. There was nothing to do but let her in. He did so knowing his slumped shoulders and bowed head was not what she needed to see, but that was the best he could do for the moment.

The sight of his twinkling-eyed sister with her animated mouth wryly curved in a half "this sucks" twist had him opening his arms. Six years older than her thirty-two, he was big brother on every level but in intelligence and bravery. The other difference was that they looked nothing alike. Each resembled one of their parents. She was the original golden girl complete with willowy figure and natural corkscrew curls that she preferred to hide under a hat or helmet, her eyes blue enough to keep the attention of anyone with a pulse. Tall, thin, and cursed with unruly ash-brown hair, his chief attribute was sad, lost-in-the-fog gray eyes. Back in his school days, they'd saved him from far more punishment than he deserved. When a modicum of maturity stuck to him, he concluded his second asset was his wicked imagination, which he suspected ESP'd women of particularly loose morals and no great need for commitment. The gift for smooth talking—buffered by his lingering British accent—once had their maternal grandmother, who'd finished raising him and Cassie, recommending that he become a minister. "I'd be willing to bet five dollars that before you reach thirty, you'd own your own TV network," she'd declared. "That is if some jealous husband doesn't shoot you first." These days he knew there was no mistaking that Cassie had inherited her spunk and frankness from her.

"Crap," he muttered again into his sister's ear as he hugged her tightly.

"Not the four letter word I used when I got the news, but close enough," she replied.

He pushed her to arm's length to study her youthful, but somber face. "Are you scared?"

"Eventually, I'm sure I will be. Probably during the flight over, but hopefully I'll be so tired from the prep stuff that I pass out ten minutes after we take off. Considering that the government uses charter services whose planes have about the wear and tear of dinosaur bones, sleep may prove a double blessing."

That did little to help Collin's growing dread. "Don't they realize that you aren't just a single parent, you have twins?"

"A contract is a contract. Besides, since I was attending Squadron Officer School, I didn't get to deploy with the rest of my squadron, so it's only a four-month tour. That's nothing compared to the guys who are going for six months or a year." Hands on her hips, she shook her head. "Collin, surely you've paid attention to the news? Some of our guys are doing this for the third, fourth and fifth time."

Avoiding a politically correct reply or apology with an indistinguishable mutter, he massaged the growing stiffness at the back of his neck. “Let me make a call or two. I’m sure I can get you infected with hepatitis or something within hours.”

Cassidy finally laughed and shut the door behind her. “I can see that I have my work cut out for me. I’m sorry, Favorite Brother, but I need you to drop the Hugh Grant or Tom Hanks reluctant-and-awkward-hero act and be *my* hero.”

“If only that was possible. Unfortunately, I did everything but sell my soul to a man who makes ten times the ridiculous money I first did with my firm creating advertising campaigns designed to separate people from their hard-earned salaries. The best I can do is promise to have my secretary ship you tons of product samples, few of which you are likely to use in a third world country with severe plumbing problems and little or no electricity.”

This time there was the hint of tears in her eyes as she again hugged him. “Maybe this whole crazy mess is going to be a gift after all. You’ve been pushing me to let go of fears and reach for my dreams for so long, I think you’ve lost sight of your own.”

“My accountant would disagree with you in a heartbeat. Unlike you, he goes orgasmic when he sees reports of my seventy-hour workweeks.”

“You know perfectly well that happiness isn’t about how much money you make. Especially when it comes at the cost of denying yourself someone special to share your success with. Maybe having this time with the girls will finally take off those self-inflicted blinders you wear when it comes to having a real relationship.”

“Pearls of wisdom coming from—” Collin’s heart did another debilitating plunge and he stepped back against the entryway table pressing his right hand to his chest. “No. Oh, no. I know what I promised, but that was when you were delirious in labor—or I was delirious with fear? At any rate, I can’t keep the girls while you’re gone. You’re looking at a man who has never remotely craved an opportunity to change diapers “

“Then you’re in luck. Genie and Addie are well past the diaper stage. They’re in fast-track preschool.”

“Next stop MIT?” As she lasered him with the infamous Masters’s matriarchal look, he held up both hands and rethought his defense. “What was I thinking with a military mom who names her daughters versions of *general* and *admiral*?” He had teased her from day one about Gena and Addison’s names, which he’d turned into those nicknames. But he had little doubt that her three-year-olds were mavericks in the making, the next evolution of all that their gutsy mother was striving to be. That made what she was asking of *him* all the more insane.

“Look at you,” he tried to explain with unabashed awe. “You’re a *pilot*. You navigate thousands of pounds of metal through the air. You’re a walking hero 365 days a year even if you never left the country.” Dropping his hands at his sides, he looked at her helplessly. “What do I have to offer your babies, Cass? On weekends, when there is such a thing on my calendar as downtime, I’ve been known to sleep fourteen hours and wake up in the same position when I first crashed onto the bed.”

“You’ll adapt. Learn to do what I do. Juggle. Manage. The difference is you’ll be doing it with a seven-figure income.”

He bent at the waist and lifted his left knee as though she’d thrown him a sucker punch—or kick. “Ouch, girl.”

Cassidy grimaced. “Sorry. Doesn’t it help that even if you weren’t the next in line to be the kids’ legal guardian that you are the one and only man I adore and trust?”

“Give me your commanding officer’s phone number.” Collin snatched up his cell phone stationed on the kitchen bar. “There are issues about your judgment he needs to know about.”

Unperturbed, Cass stood her ground. “If I didn’t think you could rise to this occasion, I would take the offer of one of my fellow pilots’ wives and leave the girls on base with them. I even asked the kids what they would prefer and do you know what they said?”

“Buy us a suite at Disneyland and sign our guardianship over to the Jonas Brothers?”

“They want ‘Unca Colon.’ Declared in unison might I add.”

Collin almost choked. “Please tell me that you’re talking to an orthodontist about that speech impediment?”

Secretly, however he dealt with a new guilt surge knowing how he’d dropped the ball as “Unca” last Christmas. Instead of spending it with them and Cassie, he’d flown to Tahiti with a redhead whose name he could no longer recall. “Tell them they’ll hate it here. No presents and nothing but oatmeal and algebra. By a tutor who can barely speak English,” he added seeing nothing but advantage in heaping on negatives.

Nonplussed, Cassie replied, “I was thinking more like this could be an opportunity to show them the museums and galleries in the areas. Take them to the botanical gardens over in Fort Worth plus the Dallas arboretum and zoo. Focus on something else besides the corporate bottom line for a change.”

“Forgive my arrogance, but that bottom line is why you get to poke fun at my salary, kiddo.”

“It’s the detriment to you having a *life*. It’s going to blow up in your face one day. I don’t want you to vanish like our parents did when their balloon suddenly burst due to Dad’s bad business deals.”

Since he had a better memory of those shadow people that continued to haunt their past, Collin stiffened. The last thing he wanted to be accused of was emulating their parents in any variation.

“Give me a second...or a week,” he replied. “I’m sure I can think of a better solution for you. One you’ll end up thanking me for.”

That had Cassidy sucking in her cheeks and enunciating her words with particular care. “There is no one else, Collin. And should worse come to worst, at least this way they would already be used to being around you 24/7.”

Her innuendo had him dropping his head on his chest. “I beg you—do not go there.” The prospect of losing her shook him to his core and he quickly tried to hide his fear in humor. “Let’s focus again on my day job that—to paraphrase you—overpays me. What happens to the girls while I’m at the office? Do you realize I could quickly screw up that ‘Road to MIT’ plan of yours?”

Cassidy spread her arms wide. “You can’t delegate even an iota or work from home? Then ask someone in this granite fortress who they would recommend as a nanny.”

“There are—let me count.” He did the math. “Four children in this building. ‘Children’ being a euphemism, since one is in college. In fact she confided to me in the elevator last week that she is taking pole dancing as a college elective.”

“Oh, she was just flirting with you. The ninety-year-olds want to fatten you up and the little girls hear that voice and they want you to be their knight in shining armor.”

He wasn’t knight material, but it was a waste of time to argue with his sister. “The point being that the other three are products of split-custody agreements and only visit on odd weekends, and increasingly only on holidays.”

“Ask at the office.”

“You think I would hand over the care of your precious darlings to total strangers?”

Cassidy crossed her arms over her chest. “Faster than your brain registers eye candy. Look, I know you have to work, but surely somewhere in your vast circle of acquaintances and associates there’s someone who can refer a person good with kids, who can keep them growing while they’re away from their lessons and friends in San Antonio.” Suddenly her eyes widened and she snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it! Your ex. I think she’d be perfect.”

Ex? “I don’t have an *ex*,” he grumbled. “You know I never date anyone long enough to call her ‘girlfriend,’ just to avoid the unpleasantness of said nomenclatures.”

“I mean your *ex-employee*. The assistant you fired.”

“Sabrina.” Her name came off his tongue as quickly as her image flashed before his eyes, but his physical response to that was like getting a puncture wound in his lungs. The coughing fit that followed soon had Collin bending at the waist. “I did not fire her,” he wheezed.

“Right, that would have been the compassionate thing to do. Or to tell her the truth—that you were hot for her. But, no, you exiled her to the basement of your building to be a secretary to—who is that fossil down there?”

“Norbit, the head of Reference and Research.”

“Yeah, yeah, the glorified file clerk. Bet he cuts his own hair and wears thick glasses with black plastic frames and carries his meals to work in a construction-worker type lunch box.”

It annoyed him to no end that she could deduce character types so well. “Star Trek, to be factually correct, and he can do the Spock finger greeting on command.”

“Be still my heart.”

“He’s also phenomenal at Trivial Pursuit.”

“Stop gushing or I’ll have to change my daughters’ names to something other than Masters.”

Tempted to laugh, Collin instead muttered, “See if I ever confide in you again. You’re not supposed to use confidences against a person.”

This entire conversation was the reason why he’d begun to put longer breaks between their phone calls and limited most of their communication to text messaging once a week. It was easier to hide from her probes into his personal life—in other words his happiness—even if it risked losing what was left of his family.

“I’m so worried,” she drawled. “How much does she love her new job?”

He almost tried countering with “She who?” but knew it would make him look more foolish, so he simply confessed. “She quit.”

“Smart woman.” Shoving her dropped flight bag out of her way with her foot, Cassie strolled into the living room. “I grew fond of chatting with her when I would call your office and you were tied up with some so-called meeting or presentation.”

Collin’s gaze drilled into her back. “There’s nothing *so-called* about my appointments.”

“You just pray that Donald Trump hasn’t gotten wind that she’s on the market and goes groveling after her. I could cope better being overseas knowing she was watching my girls.”

“Excuse me, a minute ago I was the hero. Now everything hinges on her?”

Cassie shot him an unrepentant grin. “Remember Gran’s favorite quote? ‘Don’t ask a question that you don’t want an answer to.’”

Sabrina Sinclair stood before the door of the apartment she shared with her latest roommate, Jeri Swanson, and frowned at the key that no longer fit in the dead bolt. She might be in dire need of getting off her feet after having completed a twelve-hour shift at work, but this was the door to Apartment 314 and the lock had worked fine when she left here at six this morning. Hoping that her airhead roomie hadn’t already taken off with her latest boyfriend for another night of clubbing, she knocked on the door.

“Jeri? It’s me. Are you in there?”

“No, she is not, and you might as well get going, too.”

The voice calling up to her from the bottom of the stairwell had Sabrina backtracking to look over the shaky wooden railing, down at the elderly woman below. “Mrs. Finch? Is something wrong?”

“Don’t play innocent with me. I told you that I wouldn’t put up with any more tall tales regarding the rent.”

Although three stories away from the frail but feisty woman’s shaking and arthritis-bent finger, Sabrina reared back. “But Jeri paid it yesterday. I had to get to work early for inventory and she took my money to add to what she owes and paid you.”

“Did she now? Maybe that’s what she told you, but I haven’t seen a cent of the \$900 you two owe me, or the other \$450 still due from last month. So today I changed the locks on the door right after she left—which you might be interested to know was barely an hour after you did.”

A sickening feeling overcame Sabrina and she gripped the railing. Jeri wasn’t by nature a morning person; that’s why she preferred waiting tables at a dinner-only steak house—when she worked. In better circumstances, Sabrina would never have accepted her as a roommate to begin with, let alone trusted her to take care of the rent money, since Mrs. Finch hinted strongly that she preferred cash. Now it appeared that her trust had indeed been badly invested.

Her throat raw with the growing need to scream or cry, Sabrina asked, “Did she say where she was going? When she’ll be back?”

“Don’t know, don’t care, and you’re a dumber duckling than I first suspected if you wait for her, or waste another thought on that one. From the racket her and her man friend made, I don’t think their problem was anything that a drying-out spell in the Dallas County Jail wouldn’t fix.”

“I see.” And Sabrina did. Once again she had erred on the side of The Golden Rule and been burned. There was nothing to do but apologize again—this time profusely—and start over. She needed to get inside and get into a hot bathtub to ease her aching body, then get some sleep in order to plan how to repair the damage done to both her landlady and herself. “Mrs. Finch, if you’ll let me in, I promise you that I will work extra overtime and have the rent paid up within two paychecks, and I assure you that Jeri won’t be allowed in here again.”

“Nope. Done with the lot of you. Tired of promises. Tired of the noise and the trouble. You get out of here now or I’ll call the police on you.”

“But my things are in there.”

“No they aren’t. Your friend took your personal stuff and I’m keeping the furnishings as part of the rent owed. I’ve been walked over for the last time.”

As if things couldn’t get worse, midway through that pronouncement, a handsome, well-dressed man with wavy, ash-brown hair stepped beside Mrs. Finch and tilted back his head to gaze up at her.

“Oh, Lord,” Sabrina whispered.

Collin Masters? What on earth could compel him to come here—and why now for pity’s sake? Hadn’t he caused her enough humiliation and grief?

“May I be of some assistance?”

She didn’t buy his wide-eyed innocence for a second, or that pretense of concern even if it did sound more sincere with his pedigreed accent. Hoping he hadn’t heard everything, Sabrina started down the stairs at record speed ignoring the protests from her aching limbs. “No, you cannot. This is a private conversation.”

Ignoring her, Collin turned his thousand-watt charm onto Mrs. Finch. “Am I to understand there’s a matter of rent due?”

The diminutive woman’s eyes lit with hope as she leaned toward him to conspiratorially share. “A total of \$1,350.”

“Wait a minute!” As Sabrina reached them, she skidded on the dirt-slick linoleum floor and had to brush her already untidy hair out of her eyes. “You said you’re keeping my furniture,” she told Mrs. Finch. “That should come off the debt.”

“If I can sell any of the discount junk, I’ll be lucky if it covers the expense of the locksmith and a cleaning woman to make the place presentable again.”

The hurt heaped onto injury stole Sabrina’s breath and she pressed her hand against her chest as she protested. “That’s not true or fair!” No doubt Jeri had her grandmother’s pearl earrings and her grandfather’s pocket watch, but what of family photos that had no price as far as she was concerned? Her personal papers?

“Allow me.” Collin reached into his suit jacket and pulled out his checkbook.

Keeping her gaze on Collin's moving pen, Mrs. Finch told Sabrina, "What's fair is being free of any more excuses from you and having to tolerate your partying friends. If they'd have spent less on liquor, you wouldn't be in this mess."

"I'll make the check out for \$1,500," Collin said writing fast. "Does that sound fair to you, Mrs. Finch?"

The woman was part bloodhound; before Sabrina could open her mouth, she sighed and whimpered. "I suppose it will have to do. There's the lost sleep and, being a widow woman, the constant fear someone will murder me in my bed, but that comes with the situation, doesn't it?" Then beaming at Collin, she added, "You're such a dear man. Exactly who are you?"

"A friend."

"No, he's not!" Sabrina glared at Collin before realizing her protest fell on deaf ears. Redirecting her attention to her landlady, she appealed to her compassionate side as a grandmother and mother. "Mrs. Finch, we're talking about my birth certificate, my school records and tax receipts. You're certain that was all taken?"

Accepting the check, the woman nodded. "Looks like a first-class case of identity theft to me, sweetie. You sure are a lousy judge of character."

With a killing look toward Collin, Sabrina muttered, "Tell me about it."

Pocketing the checkbook and pen, Collin extended his hand to her. "Let me get you somewhere so you can think clearly."

Wanting badly to slap away his hand, she felt the cold draft called *reality* still her. Mrs. Finch had accepted his money. Now she was indebted to a man she despised.

"This can't be happening," she whispered.

"I'm sorry." Placing a hand at the small of her back, he gestured to the front door. "My car is outside. I can follow you to wherever you would like to go or drive you and bring you back to your car after we eat and talk."

Her numbness made her slow to react, but she shook her head. "I can't."

"Well, you certainly can't stay here."

"No...but I don't have a car anymore."

"Excuse me?"

It should have bothered her that Mrs. Finch was standing by soaking all of this in, too, but what value did pride have under these circumstances? "The lease ran out and I turned it in." She looked at him with a last feeble surge of resentment. "Thanks to *you*, I couldn't afford it any longer."

"Now just a moment...I didn't make you quit your job. If you remember correctly, I didn't even lower your salary. You left all on your own."

"Stanley Norbit has foul breath and was stalking me daily through that dungeon. He's creepy."

While Collin couldn't see himself inviting old Norbit to his apartment for a dinner party, the eccentric man's work ethic and performance was second to no one. "He may be a bit socially stunted, but he's never let me down when I had an eleventh-hour request."

"Try wearing a bra and shave your legs and then talk to me."

"I respect my tailor too much to do that to him."

Not at all amused by his attempts to make light of her latest catastrophe, Sabrina began to storm out of the building, but stopped at the front door to make herself clearly understood. "I would apply as a mortician's apprentice before I would work for someone like him again. But first and foremost, you made me the laughingstock of the firm, and you never realized that. You don't go from working on the top floor for the executive vice-president and wind up in the basement for a joke of a department head, who until then, ran a one-man operation. Not without everyone speculating as to why and drawing their own obnoxious and humiliating conclusions."

Sabrina kept her chin raised, though fully aware that in dusty and tattered jeans, an oversize T-shirt recently used while painting her apartment and scruffy sneakers, she resembled a bag lady,

not an executive's assistant. Seconds away from long-repressed tears, she summoned the last of her dignity and declared, "I promise you, Mr. Masters, I will pay you back every cent of what you gave Mrs. Finch, but now, *please* leave me alone."

Collin followed her out of the building. "At the risk of you slinging that cowhide version of a bowling ball at me, may I ask what you're going to do without a place to stay, clothes to change into and money? I'll wager you don't even have enough cash in that purse to buy yourself a hot dog."

Not even change to feed a parking meter—if she had a car.

Standing in the shadow of the ancient building, surrounded by the towering glass-and-steel high-rises that was today's Dallas, and its future, Sabrina didn't need a stronger sign that *her* future lay in his hands. It was an amber day full of glittering leaves and enough wind to finish pulling her hair out of her loose ponytail. She quickly rewound the elastic band around the honey-gold mass and tried to come up with a game plan. There was little she could do for the rest of the dust and grime after a day's work of supervising restocking shelves—and doing plenty of that labor herself—at Bargain Bonanza's main warehouse. Every morning as she dressed, ignoring aches and exhaustion, she had to remind herself that she was a "manager," and that would look good on her résumé. But with the economy what it was, she wondered when she would be able to risk hunting for a job that actually used her brains more than her questionable brawn.

Collin ventured closer and studied her face. "You've grown very quiet. Do I need to worry about catching you in a dead faint? When did you last eat?"

"I guess sometime around..." She remembered buying some vending-machine sandwich that she'd heated in the break room's microwave. Then she'd been called to some delivery paperwork problem in the warehouse. When she returned, a cashier trainee, who regularly snatched up any and all snacks or leftovers, was devouring her sandwich. One look at his grease-covered lips around her ham-and-cheese melt had killed Sabrina's appetite.

"There's a great bistro near where I live," Collin said, carefully directing her to his black Mercedes parked directly in front of the building. "It's open until people quit ordering, but should be relatively quiet at this hour." He added almost gently, "I'll bet they can make anything you could want."

Humiliated by the reflection that she saw in his car's window, Sabrina tried her best to make him leave by being her least gracious. Casting him a sidelong look, she countered, "And what do *you* want?"

Holding up an index finger to beg her patience, Collin got her seated inside, then trotted around the front of the glistening mechanical indulgence, and climbed in behind the camel brown steering wheel. "Right now a triple Scotch would be sheer bliss."

"No one asked you to write that check. What happened, did that Wynne, Wooster, what's his name that you hired after dumping me make a pass at you?"

"Geoffrey Wygant is an excellent assistant and you'll be happy to know is in a twenty-year relationship with his partner, Duke."

The last Duke she'd known was a rottweiler on a farm neighboring her parents' place in Wisconsin. Homesickness mixed with her shame and she shook her head with abject misery. "Excuse me. I shouldn't have said that. I was just—"

"Dealing with shock and low blood sugar." Collin spun the Mercedes into traffic and turned a sharp right at the next corner. "Geoff happened to be the first applicant since you who could spell as well as the kids on *Are You Smarter Than A Fifth Grader?* Most impressive is that he possesses an unbeatable knack for matching clients to restaurants."

So much for her favorite bathtub fantasy where Collin Masters admitted his mistake and came with flowers and the keys to a white Porsche to beg her to come back. No matter how many magazines she read or how much Internet surfing of dating Web sites she tried at her brothers' prodding, Sabrina could never compete with such experience and élan. She choked on a bitter laugh and ended up coughing.

“I’m serious.”

“It’s not that,” she wheezed for the second time. “I think I’ve lost the ability to breathe and think at the same time. Congratulations,” she added, hoping she sounded sincere. “Truly. I wish you a long and happy working relationship.” But that meant that she was back to square one regarding the reason for his intrusion into her miserable life.

As though reading her mind, Collin said abruptly, “Okay, to keep you from jumping out into traffic, I’ll answer your question about why I’m here. Cassidy is being deployed.”

“Oh, no!”

And here she thought things couldn’t get any worse. Not only did she like his sister, she had come to understand how close Collin was to his only sibling. This had to be his worst nightmare come true. At least she could work through her situation. What if...?

“I’m so sorry,” she added quickly.

“Thanks.”

Collin pulled into the restaurant’s parking lot and handed the vehicle over to an eager valet. There wasn’t time to talk again until they were seated in a quiet corner booth by the bar and they’d ordered drinks. “Everything is excellent here, but if you’re really hungry—and you look like you could use four, even seven courses—the prime rib would turn an acorn-loving squirrel into a carnivore.”

She was about to insist that he add the cost to her IOU, then recognized how petty that would appear, so she nodded. “Thank you. Then the prime rib it is.” Her mouth watered just saying the words. Thank goodness the waitress had already brought a loaf of bread and whipped butter with herbs and promised to quickly bring Collin’s salad choices for them. Then she saw the condition of her hands.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to go wash up a bit.”

“Of course. Wait a minute—you aren’t going to sneak out on me, are you?”

Did he really think she had suddenly thought of anywhere else to go, or could afford to turn down such a dinner? Struggling not to forgive him completely, she gestured to her condition. “I’ve been rummaging my way through a super warehouse since dawn. Even if you had managed to transpose my head onto someone in a *Girls Gone Wild* video and it got back to my family in Wisconsin, I don’t think I would be upset enough to turn down this meal.”

“I’ll keep that I mind for the future should I need additional leverage.”

Trying not to smile, Sabrina made a hasty retreat for the ladies’ lounge. She sucked in her breath when she saw her appearance in the mirror behind the sink. The view under those lights was worse than she anticipated. Not one for the made-up look, the mascara and lip gloss she had put on first thing this morning had long worn off by sweat and nervous lip gnawing. As for her hair... all she could say for it was that it was relatively clean. She quickly grabbed a brush from her purse and gave her shoulder-length mop an energetic workout until the results were closer to a glossy if limp cape. Rinsing her face, she touched up her lashes and lips, but resisted anything else. It would seem too obvious to do more. Besides, she was trying to save him from losing his appetite, nothing else. Nothing at all.

“So how is Cassie taking this?” she asked slipping back into the booth.

Collin was already half through his Scotch. “Oh, she’s the stiff-upper-lip sort. You know she’s besotted about flying up in the skies with pigeons, ducks and whatnot. This is the downside of that.”

“But the babies...”

“It’s been a few months since you’ve seen pictures.” He immediately reached for his billfold and flipped it open to a photo of the girls in miniature versions of Mommy’s flight suit standing in the doorway of their mother’s Pave Hawk surrounded by the grinning crew.

“Oh—how darling! They look more and more like her.”

“Well, Gena adores inheriting the curls to where she screams if someone comes near her with scissors, so Cass is rethinking the blessing in that. On the other hand if Addie keeps demanding hers be cut off, Cass has threatened to have what’s left of the mop mowed into a Mohawk.”

Sabrina smiled and took a sip of her wine. “So who is Cassidy entrusting them to while she’s gone? That has to be the world’s hardest decision.”

“It is.” Collin spun his glass between his hands repeatedly. “I’m glad you feel the same way I do.”

“Excuse me?” Something about his fixation on his drink and the fidgeting had Sabrina drawing a conclusion that sent her stomach into doing new flip-flops. “Oh, my—not you!”

“That was flattering. Who else would you expect?”

Granted they were all the other had relative-wise, but there had to be other options. “Didn’t you once say during a phone call to some client that your idea of a perfect Sunday was sleeping until noon and having girlfriends wearing panties labeled Monday through Saturday?”

“I’m in advertising, Ms. Sinclair. I say things to make clients feel better about themselves, their product and their ideas. The better they feel, the more lucrative the account, which—might I remind you—made it possible to pay you handsomely until you quit.”

“We’re talking about your own flesh and blood.”

Collin continued to work his glass like a worry stone. “Some adjustments will have to be made, of course. In fact, considering your passionate opinions, you’ll undoubtedly approve of Cassidy’s recommendations.”

“I’m almost willing to bet my next paycheck that I will.”

Laughing mirthlessly, Collin replied, “It’s you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Cass demanded that I hire you to help me. To move in with us.”

If the wineglass had been between her fingers, Sabrina would have snapped it into orbit. “She *didn’t*.”

“She’s been a fan of yours from day one. Surely you sensed that?”

“She was nice to me and I appreciated that. You’d be surprised how many of your snooty callers aren’t capable of being civil to anyone they deem lesser than themselves.”

Frowning, Collin replied, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Frustration just made her all the hungrier and Sabrina beheaded the loaf of bread with one strong whack of the serrated knife. “Because I assumed by the way they acted that they were more valuable to you than I was. Tell Cassie thanks, but she’s wrong. I’m not cut out for the job.”

Clearing his throat, Collin continued. “She thinks of you as remarkably levelheaded and reliable. Hindsight being what it is, I can’t argue there.”

What had he objected to? That she was too sunny and glass-half-full for his cynical self? Considering the condition of the world these days, people like her were in short supply. But since he’d just performed a knight-in-shining-armor rescue, she bit back the impulse to tell him as much.

“Please thank Cassidy for me,” Sabrina said spreading butter onto her bread. “Tell her that she’ll be in my thoughts and prayers, but I couldn’t possibly accept.”

“You could, but you won’t.”

She leveled her gaze on him. “Can’t.” But seeing anxiety in his eyes, she immediately undermined herself by asking, “When does she leave?”

“Before Thanksgiving if not sooner. There’s some training courses she’s compelled to take. I don’t suppose you’d at least be willing to go shopping with me after we eat and help me pick out bunk beds and girly things like sheets and towels and whatever will make the second guest room seem less of the white space than it currently is?”

“Me? I can’t see that I’d be much help to you.”

“Remember the phone call I asked you to make when Addison felt jilted after her mother was unavoidably scheduled for an overnight flight and was late getting home? You had Addie convinced

that there'd been an FAA computer glitch shutting down the entire southern part of the U.S. Not even Santa could have gotten through had it been Christmas Eve. Frankly, I should have put you into the company's intern program then and there."

"So why didn't you? I was qualified. I have my degree."

"Because...I don't remember."

"Liar."

Collin reached for his glass, found it empty and sighed. "So I am. What if I promise to tell after Cass comes back?"

Sabrina took a sip of her wine, but decided she would leave it unfinished. If she was feeling halfway tempted by his offer, that was proof the drink was going straight to her head.

"What you just did for me back at Mrs. Finch's," she began, "that was kind and generous, but you can't just crush a person's dreams, then in the second you find yourself in a bind, expect me to forget the offense."

"Nor should you. This would be a good time to talk salary."

As he did, Sabrina grew increasingly conflicted. What he offered would not only guarantee that she could pay him back in a matter of weeks, but she could also save for a new place before his sister's return. She doubted many nannies saw that kind of income unless they worked for one of Hollywood's elite.

"What haven't I said that would explain why I'm not getting some positive response from you?" Collin asked when she remained silent.

Their attentive waitress brought Collin another drink and Sabrina waited for her to leave before summoning the courage to speak the rest of her mind. "All right," she began. "If I take this job, I'd like to know the truth about why I lost my position. Not later. Now."

Collin slumped against the high-backed booth. "I see utter and complete failure in my future—and a likely trip to the E.R."

"I've never committed bodily harm in my life."

"Trust me, there's a first time for everything."

So it was worse than she thought? What could she possibly have done?

Looking everywhere but at her, he continued, "Okay. I want a promise that you won't file legal action, or let what I say impair your decision."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"The girls really need you and, therefore, I promise to act the perfect gentleman throughout."

"Maybe being a full decade younger than you makes you think that I lack the ability to meet your standards in maturity—"

"Okay, so I'm laughable in that vein and should have stopped while I was ahead."

"But if I accept a job, professionalism is guaranteed," she said, folding her hands primly before her.

Collin had been slowly shaking his head since she began speaking and didn't stop when she did.

"What is your problem?" she snapped.

"The truth is...the only reason I did what I did was...I found you too tempting to be around."

Sabrina couldn't believe her ears. "You didn't just say that?"

"Speaking that once in one's lifetime should be sufficient punishment. Sort of like dousing charcoal with lighter fluid."

"But you made my life hell and ruined any chance I had for advancement by shoving me into a cellar where you knew I would have to quit."

"Guilty."

Instead of calling him the few choice names that flashed neon bright in her mind, Sabrina grabbed her purse and began to wriggle out of the booth.

"Wait! You promised."

“Oh, don’t worry. I won’t slug you with this bag. I just wish I had known sooner what a lowlife you can be.”

“A coward when it comes to serious relationships and commitment, maybe, but I take exception to ‘lowlife.’ I once bent the entire frame on my car to avoid squashing a teensy squirrel. And remember how you cooed that I have current photos of my nieces in my billfold?” Collin urged her back into the booth. “Sabrina, does it matter at all that I have hated myself every day since?”

“No. You’d say anything to be rescued from having to care for those children on your own.” But inside, Sabrina’s heart was pounding. Like the most repressed lonely heart, her mind had locked in on one phrase: “*I found you too tempting to be around.*”

What was wrong with her? She hadn’t fallen for him or his so-called charisma, and knew exactly what an incorrigible flirt he was. Most of all she didn’t need a man in her life to feel fulfilled.

Raising her chin, she looked him straight in the eye. “If you’d been direct and honest with me, we could have saved each other a great deal of humiliation and embarrassment. Under further consideration, I’ll take the job—not only to help Cassidy with her babies, but also to make *my* point. As far as I’m concerned, you *are* entirely resistible.”

Chapter Two

“They’re too young for bunk beds.”

Rushing ahead of Sabrina to hold open the door to the furniture store for her, Collin thought of several replies he could make. So far on the drive from the restaurant to here, she had criticized or rejected ninety percent of his ideas for changing the third bedroom in his condo. While willing to take the heat for the offense that put him at the top of the food chain in her opinion, he was about to send out a “systems overload!” alert.

“You don’t know my sister’s kids,” he said with increased emphasis. “They’re three going on graduate school.”

“Three means their bones are still soft, and many a child that age sleeps restlessly or wakes in the middle of the night needing the bathroom, or in this case, missing her mommy. A fall from the top bunk could be dangerous, even fatal.”

“Why didn’t Cassie say anything about that? I’m sure I mentioned the idea to her. I think.” Collin rubbed his forehead as doubt set in. The truth was it seemed like a month since his sister had sent his comfortable existence into chaos and panic, and no, he didn’t remember anything they’d discussed regarding the kids other than the fact that she would be gone for four months.

“She must have a million and two things on her mind,” Sabrina said stopping in the doorway. “As a woman and mother, she’s used to multitasking, but she could have missed that one thing.” Then looking beyond him into the store, her expression changed. “Oh, I am not dressed for this or prepared for them.”

Glancing over his shoulder Collin spotted three eager salespeople standing beyond the store’s foyer watching them. “You’re fine. Besides, they don’t care, they’re just anxious to make a commission.” Once she did enter, Collin came up behind her and whispered in her ear. “Anyway, exactly what experience in child care do you have, Ms. Expert on Bunk Beds? I suppose you babysat during high school. That’s not exactly a degree in pediatrics or child psychology.”

“I fell out of my plain, old, twin-size bed at four and almost lost my eye when I knocked my face on the edge of the night table.” Sabrina indicated the scar below her right eye. “See?”

Collin peered down at her high-cheek-boned face and milkmaid complexion. “See what? Your skin is flawless.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t admit it now just to be disagreeable. I didn’t even wear makeup today because I knew I’d get dusty and go crazy feeling my skin get all yucky.”

Amused at her irritability, Collin opened the second door of the glass-encased entryway. “You’re welcome.”

Sighing, Sabrina passed him. “Thank you for the compliment—and the door.”

This woman was more self-deprecating and modest than he had remembered, and Collin filed away that tidbit of new information. “You really fell out of bed? So this whirling dervish persona has been a lifelong thing?”

“I have three older brothers. I was always being left behind and hated it. I had to learn to speed up if I didn’t want to be left out of things.”

Brothers, thought Collin, all older and probably protective where baby sister was concerned. More reasons to keep his thoughts in check—and his hands to himself.

“Bet you didn’t have to try too hard to be included. But back to the bed problem... don’t they make those beds that can stand alone while the kids are young, yet can be stacked as they grow up?”

“I suspect you can ask her,” Sabrina said of the woman who was approaching them. “Oh, I wish you’d have let me stay in the car.”

“Darling, you look *fine*,” Collin declared in a normal street voice. “Anyone with a clue as to what kind of day you’ve had with trying to prepare the condo and talking colors with painters and

whatnot will commiserate completely. Ah, the cavalry,” he added beaming at the saleswoman who was within hearing distance.

“Good evening. I’m Brenda. What can I do to help you?”

“We need a bedroom suite for twin girls.”

As he hoped, the woman turned to Sabrina and dropped her gaze to her tummy. “Oh, how lovely for you. Congratulations!”

Sensing Sabrina was about to correct her, he quickly grabbed her hand and squeezed. “Thank you very much. Um...we’re receiving a ton of baby things already and thought we’d skip the crib part and prepare for the toddler-to-teen stage. Do you by chance have white bunk beds we can keep separated until the girls are old enough to cope with the height thing?”

“Of course, sir. Let me show you—and how insightful of you to already be cognizant of child safety. You’d be surprised at how many first-time parents overlook that in their excitement to create the perfect room for their new family.”

“Isn’t he wonderful?” Sabrina slid him an adoring smile, all the while twisting his pinky until he was forced to release his grip on her hand.

“Remind me not to underestimate your strength again.”

“Pardon?” the saleswoman asked.

Collin cleared his throat. “I was just telling Sabrina to be careful maneuvering around all of this furniture. She’s refused to quit her warehouse managerial job yet and I fear doing way too much and staying on her feet too long.”

The saleswoman nodded knowingly. “You do look amazingly small for carrying twins. If you don’t mind my asking, how far along are you?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be showing at all if I hadn’t indulged in dessert tonight,” Sabrina replied through gritted teeth. “Stop exaggerating, Collin, *dear*, and let’s get this done or I’ll go wait in the car, hugging the barf bag.”

Despite the woman’s worried look, he laughed uncomfortably, “Don’t frighten the poor woman with all of these beautiful furnishings, darling.”

Sabrina grabbed his sleeve and held him back until he found himself gazing into her flushed face and blazing eyes. He’d never seen her closer to eruption—or more provocative.

“Call me ‘darling’ one more time and so help me, I *will* get sick,” she whispered fiercely.

“Whatever you say...dear.”

It was forty-five minutes later when they finally exited the store. By then Sabrina was certain she’d sweated through her clothes. Collin had taken some secret glee in making it seem that the furniture was for their children and she could have, should have taken one of several opportunities to correct the situation—and make him look the fool. Now she was the fool for not exposing him, she thought, shivering as they walked to his Mercedes.

It had been a lovely Indian Autumn day in Dallas, but the nights held the bite of fast-approaching winter. Also fatigue from her relentless schedule lately didn’t help.

“Sorry, why don’t you take my jacket?” Collin asked, starting to remove it.

But that would leave him in shirtsleeves. As annoyed as she was with him, she couldn’t do that to him. “Thank you, but if you’ll turn up the heater once we’re in the car, that should be fine.” Besides, the idea of being surrounded by his masculine scent the whole drive to his home was more than she wanted to bear.

“Consider it done, but we’ll head to a mall next and get you some warmer clothes.”

Groaning inwardly at the mere idea of another stop, Sabrina replied, “I appreciate the gesture, but if you’ll give me an advance on my salary, I’ll do it tomorrow after work.”

“You can’t return to that place. Besides, they’re delivering the beds and dressers tomorrow. Plus you need to be on the phone warning your credit card companies, your bank and the DMV of potential identity theft.”

Stopping midstep, Sabrina covered her face with her hands. The mess her life was in rushed back at her with the devastating results of a tornado. She should never have accepted his offer. Bothering her parents in Wisconsin was out of the question; they still worked their two-hundred-acre farm, but she should have called her oldest brother Sayer, who plucked up businesses and property in trouble like some people haunted garage sales. The problem was that he would have sent her a one-way ticket home and she would never be let off a leash for the rest of her unmarried life. Her brother Seger didn't need the burden any more than her parents did, what with a second child on the way and his construction business suffering due to the economy. As for Sam, well, he was Sam—sweet, devoted to their parents, and denying himself a life to keep the family farm intact. No, she'd done the right thing to handle this herself regardless of the headaches involved. Only how could she fulfill new commitments when she hadn't completed the old ones?

“What?” Collin asked hovering beside her. “I'm just trying to be helpful. You're usually the pragmatic one. How can the idea offend you? Consider it part of the package.”

No longer the trusting ingenue she'd been when she first ventured beyond the safe haven of her family and college, she dropped her hands and surmounted a strong defense. “Why? So you can continue embarrassing me in front of salespeople? Did you hear that woman back there? She thought I looked pregnant.”

“No she didn't, she said—”

“I was there, Collin, I *know* what she said!”

His lips twitching, he replied, “Well, your mood does make you act like you're... *with child*.”

Throwing back her head, Sabrina screamed into the night.

“Fine, fine.” Glancing around with chagrin, Collin urged her to the car. “Home we go. I'm sure there's an unopened package of pajamas from a Christmas past that I can offer you. If not, will a Dallas Cowboys' jersey signed by all of the cheerleaders do?”

Sabrina yanked the car door out of his grasp and slammed it, almost knocking him off balance.

As Collin climbed into the driver's side, she said in a defeated tone, “Thank you for the offer. On second thought, it would be wiser to purchase a few items tonight. Because I really need to go into work in the morning and give notice.”

“How can you do that? I told you—”

“I remember the furniture and the calls, okay? There's just the small technicality that this is still my employer.”

“Who worked you like a slave because they were saving money by having you do management and the work of two others.”

Sabrina almost regretted telling him as much as she had about conditions at the place during dinner. “That's beside the point. I owe them two weeks' notice if I'm going to ask for a referral down the road.”

“I'll give you a referral—as my assistant. This way you don't need them.”

“That's not ethical.”

“Let me tell you something—if you were going to be fired, they wouldn't think twice about showing you to the door without notice. That's what the severance check is for. It clears their conscience.”

He was probably right, but it just wasn't the way she was brought up, or the way she wanted to think the world was. She had asked her boss, the district manager, to allow her to hire one or two more people, but he'd point-blank told her it wasn't going to happen.

“I'll think about it,” she told Collin.

It was close to an hour later when, empty-handed, she returned to the car. She gave him a look through the passenger window that warned him not to utter a word until she spoke. He leaned over and pushed open the door.

“Can you please come inside?” she asked, sounding even more defeated than she had earlier.

“What’s happened now? Don’t tell me that they wouldn’t accept the credit card. There’s no balance on the account. I rarely use it.”

“Thanks. So that’s why they think I stole it. Either you come in and assure them that I didn’t, or I will sleep in an orange jumpsuit in a holding cell tonight.”

It was when she motioned over her shoulder with her thumb that he saw the security guard that had accompanied her and was standing watching them.

“Good grief.” Collin hurried out of the car and locked it with his remote. “We definitely have to talk to your obstetrician about those hormones, darling.”

Passing an openmouthed Sabrina, he went to assure the security guard.

At least this time it was only an additional fifteen minutes of humiliation for Sabrina to endure, but enough was enough. “Please can we just go somewhere that I can get to sleep?” she asked him.

Collin got them back to the high rise. Conversation was kept to a minimum because she didn’t trust herself to speak without having a total meltdown. All she could think was what had she gotten herself into? What had she done to deserve all of this?

As he escorted her into the lobby, they were greeted by the night security guard.

“Evening, Mr. Masters.” When he spotted Sabrina, his gaze darted back to Collin. “Sir? Everything okay?”

With formal politeness, Collin announced, “This is Nanny Sabrina. Ms. Sinclair. Sabrina, this is Sonny Birdsong, not only the best security guard in the city but, if you start your day in a bad mood, his whistling will make you think you’re in an Audubon wildlife sanctuary.”

Chest swelling from that praise, Sonny nodded. “Welcome, ma’am. If I can be of any assistance while you’re toting the little ones, don’t hesitate. I must admit, I’m looking forward to having a few more young faces around.”

“You’re very kind...Sonny. So you’re updated about what’s about to happen? Will I need to sign in with every going and coming? What are your regulations?”

“If I could take a copy of your driver’s license, that would be perfect for now.”

Immediately digging into her purse, Sabrina crossed over to the counter to make that available to him. Thanking him when he returned it to her, she added, “Are there city buses in this part of town or do residents rely on cabs? The reason I ask is that I was hoping to take the twins on short field trips appropriate to their ages.”

Sonny eagerly reached for a flyer. “This is the DART bus schedule and I’ll be happy to assist you if you need help with strollers or anything.”

“That’s so good of you. I think the girls are beyond strollers, but I will rely on your expertise regarding the parks and—Oh! Is the farmer’s market still tourist-shopper friendly?”

“We have several residents who shop there daily, and one chef who resides here and is also a regular shopper there.”

“Wonderful. I’ll ask about where his establishment is located tomorrow. By the way we’re expecting furniture deliveries tomorrow.”

The dark-haired man with the dimple in his right cheek replied, “I’ll direct them to the freight elevator and alert you as they head up.”

“Bless you. You’ve already reassured me a great deal.”

Sonny blushed and slid Collin a self-conscious look. “Any time, miss. Have a good evening. Good night, Mr. Masters.”

Waving, Collin waited for the elevator doors to shut. Only then did he muse, “I wondered how long it would be before you made a pet out of him. You’ll be having everyone in the building nosing around you like a litter of pups within a week.”

“If it weren’t for those two little girls and your sister, I would tell you to take a flying leap into the Trinity River, Mr. Employer.”

Collin looked taken aback. “What animosity! If you weren’t smaller than my sister, I’d be worried. All I was pointing out was that you’re a fixer and a caretaker, a natural mommy. Most women would be flattered by such a compliment.”

“Maybe I didn’t see what you said as a compliment. I may not have worked for you all that long, but you’re a fairly easy read, *boss*.”

“All men are,” Collin replied with a sigh. “We need medals and sports jerseys and tool belts before we’re even remotely interesting to a woman, otherwise we’re considered as shallow as most wallets. Sonny doesn’t know how lucky he is. He’s got the uniform *and* the gun. And before you let your head get turned, let me inform you that my cleaning lady, Graziella, has him in her sights for her eldest daughter Isabella.”

Staring in disbelief, Sabrina replied, “Is everything fodder for your audience-of-one comedy routine?” Sabrina told herself she would not cry, but this day had pushed her last button and she had run out of thick skin. The tears started welling in her eyes before she could turn away to hide them.

“Wait a minute. There are No Crying Clauses in our contract.”

Feeling and hearing shifting beside her, she looked over to see him fumbling in pockets.

“Please stop,” he continued with increased unease. “I don’t have a hanky or tissue. Would it help if I took back every compliment and tease? I can also say ‘Sorry’ in four languages.”

Despite everything, Sabrina had to smile. “I’d forgotten that you weren’t just a little crazy, you’re seriously crazy.”

Collin shrugged, his expression suggesting he didn’t see that as a problem. “I was only trying to keep up your spirits.” More gently he asked, “Are you going to be all right?” He began to reach out to stroke her hair as it fell forward hiding her face from him, then quickly dropped his hand.

“For someone who came home from work and realized she’d lost her entire adult and independent life? Yeah. Or rather I will be. Don’t forget, I come from stoic farmers.”

“Yes, with three protective brothers,” Collin added under his breath. “We will *not* forget that again.”

They arrived at his floor, ending her chance to wonder about his last comment. What she had to focus on now was getting a quick tour and some desperately needed sleep. She was dead on her feet and that filling but wonderful meal was making it difficult for her not to yawn.

As she entered the spacious high-rise condominium, Collin locked up behind them. Joining her at the other end of the foyer, he gestured self-consciously. “*Mi casa, su casa*.” Stepping forward he nodded toward the kitchen. “Graziella is pleased with the microwave, but I can’t say whether the dishwasher or oven have ever been turned on. As for the refrigerator...well, there are mostly wines in there at the moment, since I tend to eat out rather than cook—or else bring home takeout.”

“Is that going to continue?”

“My eating? I certainly hope so.”

Sabrina slid him a sidelong look. It wasn’t fair that his English accent made everything seem deeply considered and intelligent even when intentionally ridiculous. “I mean shouldn’t you consider spending dinnertime with the girls? You know, establish family time, a schedule?”

Collin’s eyebrows lifted in genuine surprise. “Hadn’t given that much thought to it. You see? You’re already invaluable. Well, I suppose I could ask Graziella to make us something. Although, she has eight children, plus her parents now live with her and her husband.”

“Then she has more than enough to do. I’ll do the cooking.”

“You can cook?”

“Yes, sir, you hired a bargain. I can also bake, crochet...and butcher a chicken or duck for you if you’ve a mind for fresh poultry or fowl.”

Urging her into the living room, Collin pointed toward the French doors that led to the balcony. “Pigeons rest on that railing. Don’t let me find them on the dinner table. Sometimes we talk.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“When you’re brainstorming ideas for a demanding client, one uses the audience that’s available.”

He did a slow 360-degree turn. “Should be roomy enough for two active children. Large-screen TV and all the equipment for games and videos. Great view of the city.”

Sabrina had begun biting her lips as she passed the chrome and glass coffee table murmuring, “Sharp corners and so much glass.” The balcony concerned her the most, though. “There’ll be no running, and the view will be mostly closed drapes unless there’s a childproof lock put on those balcony doors.”

“The barrier is shatterproof and steel—and the railing well over their heads. No way they can fall through. Are you just covering that you’re afraid of heights?”

“Afraid, no. Mindful, yes. And you’ll thank me when we return those children back to their mother without casts or stitches.”

Upon arriving at the far side of the condo, she saw that her room would be right beside the children’s, across the hall from the condo’s second bathroom. There were no windows in the children’s room or hers, and only a small one high up in the bathroom.

Collin’s master suite was on the far side of the condo. She didn’t ask for, nor did he offer a tour, but considering that this had to be at least a two-thousand-square-foot living space, the layout gave her considerable relief. Until the girls arrived, she would still feel awkward staying here alone with him, but the doors had locks and she didn’t have to worry that every word could be overheard if she was on her cell phone.

She placed her purchases on the lush cream-colored carpet beside the queen-size sleigh bed and wondered who or what had inspired this much decorating when the third bedroom that would be the girls’ was empty? A sleigh bed had always been a fantasy of hers, although this one was bare of linens or blankets. The bone-colored walls were also bare, but at least there was a large armoire for storage and a good-size closet.

“I’ve never gotten around to finishing things on this side,” he told her. “The only reason that I got this far was from thinking maybe Cassie would visit. She and the babies could have all snuggled in the bed and still had room for a puppy.” He shrugged. “Alas, no visit.”

“And no puppy. Should we look for one after the girls arrive?” She meant that mostly to pay him back for all of his teasing her, but she also thought she’d sensed a flash of loneliness in him.

“Maybe the stuffed toy variety,” he drawled, moving on. “I’ve plenty of linens in the main hallway closet by my room. I’ll get you a set and a blanket. Keep that credit card I gave you and pick up whatever else you feel is right for here and for the girls’ room.”

“Thanks,” Sabrina said to his back.

What about towels and supplies in the bathroom? she wondered.

While he was gone, she went to check, and sure enough there was an assortment of dark blues and greens as far as towels were concerned, and adequate toiletries, but things like no-tearing shampoos and a first-aid kit were definitely lacking. Sabrina concluded that a shopping list was a must-do in the morning.

Returning to the bed, she sank onto the mattress only to jump up, reminded of her day working in a grimy warehouse. But how she yearned to curl up on that pristine bed—covers or not. Today’s ordeal was taking its toll; nevertheless, she couldn’t deny that things could have ended much worse.

Inevitably, however, her mind returned to Collin’s admission about being attracted to her. While he’d seemed genuinely chagrined at the admission, she could never let herself forget what an actor he could be. Regardless, as her gaze settled on her work- and cold-roughened hands with her chipped nails, she grimaced and thought herself a bigger fool than ever. Maybe she might have imagined herself a possible temptation when she’d worked as his assistant, but there was no possibility of that now.

Sabrina had begun taking the labels off her purchases and was neatly folding them for storage in the armoire when Collin returned. He'd shed his jacket and tie along the way. She saw his gaze drop to the lace-and-satin bits of fabric and he all but dropped the stack of linens and blankets onto the bed before backing toward the doorway as though recoiling from a pit viper.

"The sheets are Egyptian cotton. You know me, spare no expense in spoiling the most important person in your life."

"Your self-indulgence is my good fortune," she replied with a smile. "I'll sleep like a baby."

"Good." His gaze fell to her lingerie again, and then he shook his head. "Well, I'd better let you get to that then. Oh—" he drew something out of his shirt pocket—"your personal key to the front door."

Sabrina considered the shiny brass instrument on her palm. Seconds ago it had rested against his heart. "I want you to know I appreciate the trust this represents. I won't let you down."

"The only thing I was always sure of—am sure of—is that I have no cause for concern in that department." For an instant their gazes met and held, then he blinked and continued. "There's another key with security. That's Sonny, and Dempsey Freed, who is usually the night guard. Sonny is working extended hours to cover for Dempsey, who apparently couldn't resist stepping into an altercation on the street this morning and needed some emergency dental surgery."

"Poor man! Was he protecting one of the building's residents?"

"More like fighting off a junkie trying to remove the copper numbers on the front of the building to cash in. Dempsey was a welterweight boxer, an Olympian in his youth and he takes his responsibility here as seriously as Sonny does." Backing into the hallway, he pressed his hands together and tilted his head toward his side of the condo. "If you're all right, I'll leave you to it."

"I'm good. Thanks again."

"Sweet dreams," he murmured.

Chapter Three

The next morning, grateful that Collin slipped out early, Sabrina called her boss at the warehouse and gave him the news that she was quitting effective immediately. She still felt badly for terminating so quickly, but had to admit Collin was right; if things were the other way around, she would get no such window of time or courtesy to ease into the transition. What's more, she had been wondering how long she could keep up those strenuous hours that had never been in her job description in the first place, while the district manager kept telling her there was no budget for additional employees.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Burger was displeased to learn that she wasn't at the store. What made her realize that Collin had done her yet another favor was when Burger finally asked, "How much is it going to cost me to keep you?"

Only now was he willing to negotiate?

Out of sheer curiosity, she told him a figure close to what Collin was paying her and the man laughed harshly. "Good luck, sweetie," he said, and hung up on her.

She sat there staring at her cell phone for several seconds before declaring with Collin's accent, "Then all's well that ends well, I suppose."

Sabrina made several more calls—all related to her compromised identity and credit situation—and then reached for the list of numbers that Collin had left for her on the kitchen counter. Pouring herself a second mug of coffee, she punched Cassidy's phone number into the wireless phone on the counter. She fully expected to be asked to leave a message and was unprepared to get Cassie herself.

"Oh! I didn't expect—this is—"

"Sabrina!" Collin's sister replied with delight. "I recognized your dismay instantly. How typical of people who spend any time at all around my brother."

Before this morning Sabrina might have giggled and agreed with her. But she was far more humbled and grateful to him now. "No, I'm fine, really."

"Well, I appreciate you getting in touch so soon. You've accepted the job?"

It was on the tip of Sabrina's tongue to admit that she didn't have much choice, but this was Cassidy Masters, who believed in choices and had made critical and smart ones for herself and her family. "Yes, I have. Only I'm not sure I'm qualified to fill your shoes, even part-time. Are you certain that you want me for this? It's such a serious responsibility."

"That's exactly why I told Collin to find you. I knew that's how you'd see this. Didn't he tell you?"

Sabrina pressed her hand to her heart. "You're too kind."

"And you're going to be wonderful. My fear is if my kids will want to come back home with me when I return."

"My fear is how to keep them from crying because they're missing you beyond bearing."

Sighing, Cassie replied, "They're going to cry, Sabrina. And misbehave. And test your wits. But I know if anyone can work through that, you will. While I sensed from the first that you have a tender heart, I quickly came to understand that you're not a quitter."

Hoping she was right, Sabrina thanked her again and began asking questions. "You're going to need to tell me about the girls' routines, likes and dislikes, and definitely any medical information I need to know about. And will they be able to talk to you sometimes? I know from other people who have had family deployed that they'll be able to e-mail almost anytime. But the girls are so little yet and that will hardly be enough."

"Sure, e-mails and phones are both an option. This is not our fathers' and grandfathers' war," she added drolly. "But listen, I want you and Collin to come down here as soon as you can. That way

we can cover all of the questions, and you can take some of their things they'll need back with you. Then you can take the rest when you come for them—or when I drop them off—the last day.”

“The last day.” Sabrina’s throat locked on the words.

“None of that,” Cassie ordered. “This will be a perfect opportunity for you to start getting to know them.”

“Does Collin know this is how you want to do it?”

“He will as soon as I call him.”

Cassidy’s laugh was subtly irreverent and Sabrina was reminded how brother and sister had that in common. “I don’t know how thrilled he’s going to be to have to sit in a car with me for two five-hour trips.”

“If he complains, he’s lying through his teeth.”

Had Collin admitted his attraction to his sister? Surely not—and she wasn’t about to, either, for fear that it would trigger doubts about having her stay on as the nanny after all.

“Uh-oh. You’ve grown very quiet,” Cass said. “Did he pretend to be insensitive and rude to you?”

“If anyone was rude, it was me. I was still angry with him for causing me to quit.”

“So was I, believe me.”

“Oh, dear,” Sabrina replied. “He told you why he transferred me.”

“He didn’t have to. I have good instincts and can put two and two together. Thank goodness the man put you up on a pedestal and refused to drag you off, otherwise he would have had a fling with you, then felt the need to buy you a nice piece of jewelry and find you a position with a deeper pocket than his.”

“Well, I wasn’t interested in having an affair with him then, and I definitely am not now.”

Cassidy sighed. “No, you’re the kind of girl a man marries, and Collin is practically allergic to that union, thanks to our parents, bless their souls.”

What did that mean? She had never broached the subject with him—there had been no reason to, even when she was his assistant, although she did notice that his only contact information in case of emergency was Cassidy. She had assumed that they’d passed away.

“That’s really none of my business, but I hope if he is involved with someone, that he doesn’t bring her here—I mean for the girls’ sake.”

Cass chuckled. “By all means, for the girls’ sake.”

Flustered, Sabrina slid off the bar stool. “I’d better get off this phone. The furniture is being delivered and the security guard is supposed to ring to warn me that they’re on their way upstairs.”

“You’re wonderfully efficient. I’ll get back to you as soon as I have my schedule lined out.”

“I’ll be here,” Sabrina murmured after the other woman disconnected.

It shouldn’t have surprised Collin at how eager he was to get home that evening, but it did. Not good, he thought, yet it didn’t stop him. He’d been invited to cocktails with associates across town; there was also some gala over by the new Dallas Cowboy football stadium in Arlington and another in the Dallas theater district. He felt no temptation whatsoever to choose any of them and, thirty minutes before the rest of the staff quit for the day, Collin told his assistant Geoff that he had an appointment and was leaving.

He arrived at the condo with a big sack of Chinese takeout. Sabrina was nowhere to be seen, so he set down the bag and pulled at his tie as he cautiously ventured through the hall. He would have called out to her, but if she was napping from all of her work and emotional upheaval, he wouldn’t want to wake her. Instead he found Sabrina on a stepladder draping yards of orange, lavender, pink and sage chiffon off the ceiling fan and fastening them to the four corners of the room.

“Good grief, woman, this is supposed to be an upgraded nursery, not a harem.”

With a yelp, Sabrina came off the ladder and would have tumbled back into one of the two dressers bookending either side of the doorway if Collin didn't catch her by her trim waist and help her back upright. She then slapped him with her ponytail as she whirled around to face him.

"Oh, no," she gasped. "Sorry. Sorry."

Ruefully rubbing his cheek, he quipped, "Was it something I said?"

"You're early." She checked her watch and frowned. "Very early. Didn't you tell me that you had some function this evening?"

"It's a good thing I changed my mind about attending or you'd have a concussion or worse."

"I wouldn't have fallen if you'd announced yourself."

"What, in my own house?" He wagged his right index finger at her pert nose. "I don't think I like the idea of you on a ladder with no one about, either. Where did you get it? I certainly don't own one."

"From the custodian, Mr. Salazar. Very nice man. He wanted to do this for me, but he had his hands full replacing bulbs in the lobby." Sabrina gestured to her handiwork. "Do you really hate it?"

Collin saw that the beds and other furnishings had arrived, and that sometime thereafter, she'd been out and had purchased a happy orange twin bedspread, one in purple and throw rugs in lavender, and embroidered throw pillows with bangles and mirrors and beads. Posters of Disney heroines adorned the walls.

"Who said anything about hate? It's just—different. It's definitely bright." He looked from poster to poster. "I'm not sure how much use they'll have for stories about mermaids and princesses at MIT. You do realize they know their numbers to twenty and can identify their names when they see them? They're learning to write them now. I believe calculus is scheduled to start next week."

"They can go back to being overachievers when their mommy returns. For now we're immersing them in storytelling and the art of using your imagination."

Amused, Collin watched her stretch to reach for the pink light bulbs on one of the dressers and felt his blood heat several degrees as her periwinkle sweater pulled across the gentle mounds of her breasts. "I certainly get that."

"Don't worry, I cleared it with Cassidy." Sabrina stretched her arms this time to encompass the room. "And look, I'm making this as easy for you as I can. No pink walls to paint over after they return home, no cutesy wallpaper or painted murals."

As she started up the ladder again, Collin stayed her. "Have you eaten today?"

Her eyes lowered, she said, "Sure. I found some crackers in the pantry, and I admit I helped myself to the cheese you had in the refrigerator."

"All that?" He took the bulbs from her and put them back on the dresser. "Enough for today. I don't need you falling off the ladder again, this time from hunger." He took her by her elbow and directed her down the hall. "I'll buy you dinner."

"Two nights in a row? That's not necessary."

"Frugal little thing. For your information, I brought back takeout. There's a nice bottle of Shiraz in the red section of the cooler that should accompany it well."

Visibly touched, Sabrina said, "That was thoughtful of you."

"You are literally saving my sanity. The least I can do is keep you alive."

Sabrina's brief laugh ended in a groan. "There's no danger in that. My brothers will tell you that they had to fight for their share of food at our table when we were growing up."

"Being a brother myself, I can assure you that we can be thoughtless lugs, when we aren't outright pigs." Collin stopped at the dining-room table and pulled out a chair for her. "Now this is an order. Sit and I will serve tonight."

Sabrina balked. "I'm not in any condition to sit at this table. Couldn't we sit at the kitchen counter on the bar stools?"

“Grand idea.” Inclining his head, he led the way, ditched his tie and suit jacket over one of the four bar stools, then drew out another for her. Once he had her seated, he collected two long-stemmed wineglasses from a cupboard and the wine. “Do you like Shiraz?”

“I had it once and honestly couldn’t tell the difference between it and the other red. I don’t remember what that was.”

“Bet it was a Syrah. Sometimes even I can’t tell the difference, but then Syrahs are sometimes marketed as Shiraz. It’s a dark-skinned grape with a history that goes back to the BCs. Do you like Asian food?”

“Almost all. Particularly Thai.”

“I will bring that next time. This time it’s Chinese.”

Collin enjoyed her politeness mixed with irrepressible honesty. She made him happy that he’d come home. She made him want to hug her with her youthful eagerness to please, seasoned with an instinct to stand her ground when the situation mattered. Refreshing, that was the word. She looked and was the genuine article. It didn’t hurt that her eyes matched the color of her sweater, although it was too long and hid her cute bottom, particularly in those slim-fitting jeans. He made the right choice to come home instead of slumming about tonight with people who were more acquaintances than friends, and who relentlessly altered their opinions to gain favor.

He knew she watched with studentlike attentiveness as he used the latest in cork-removal technology to open the bottle. “This is a client’s latest invention. I think our ads are three times better than the product.”

“I remember you always made a point to test the quality and value of the item you were being asked to market. Not all of your people did that.”

“Their success ratio exposes them sooner or later, and they move on. Jacobs left shortly after you did.”

Sabrina gasped. “You knew?”

Pouring, Collin nodded. “I knew.”

“I’m so glad. It had bothered me. I’d wake up at night wanting to write you an anonymous note to expose what a sloppy businessman he was.”

“Not handwritten, I presume? You didn’t believe me when I told you that you had the loveliest penmanship I’d seen in years.” Noting her cheeks blooming even as he touched his glass to hers, he changed the subject. “So the delivery went smoothly? You’re pleased with the furniture?”

“Yes and the men were happy to come to somewhere so elegant. Tony, the supervisor, said they’d never delivered bunk beds to anything higher than two floors.”

Collin barely swallowed his first sip of wine before something struck him. “How did you tip them?”

Sabrina shrugged. “I used what I had on hand.”

And would probably never ask to be reimbursed. “I’m so sorry.” He immediately reached for his coat and drew out his billfold.

“It’s not necessary.”

He drew out everything in his wallet and set it on the counter. “Household money. Nothing comes out of your salary. Put it wherever is most convenient for you to access. We’ll talk later about whether it’s more comfortable for you to buy groceries with the credit card or with cash.”

“Thank you. I’ll bring you receipts.”

“I don’t need them.”

“Well, I’ll keep a ledger and it will be here in the kitchen for you to review whenever you want to.”

With that Collin took another sip of wine and got up to bring out plates and silverware. He was aware of her watching him the whole time. “What?” he finally asked.

“I’m just not used to being waited on. Everything smells heavenly. It’s making me realize I’m hungrier than I thought I was.”

“How are you about sushi?”

She responded with a polite smile and no comment.

“I’m the same way. You’d be surprised how often clients request it, or else I’m attending a function where it’s prominent. Ah!” He pulled out two sets of wrapped items. “Chopsticks instead of the silverware?”

“Oh, great!”

Collin couldn’t explain it, but the food and wine tasted better with Sabrina to share it with. “It’s not any of my business, but are you okay with the other employer?”

“It worked out fine.”

“And you notified whomever you had to about your accounts and all?”

“Also talked to Cassidy.”

“And your family.”

“I’ll get to that.”

“Sabrina—”

“They have my cell number. If there’s an emergency, they can get hold of me.”

Collin decided to back off, for now. But he would feel better if her family—brothers included—knew she’d switched jobs. “What about Cassidy?”

She looked startled. “You didn’t talk to her?”

“I ended up in meetings most of the day. We kept missing connections. What’s the latest?”

“I should let her tell you.”

Collin went to make the call shortly after Sabrina excused herself and turned in for the night. That it was only minutes before midnight was testament as to what a great time they’d shared this evening. Just as he retired to his room, his sister’s number showed up on his cell phone’s display.

“Practicing ESP or giving up sleep altogether?” he asked her as his gaze moved to the digital clock on the night table.

“We just came off the field. I’d feed the original Declaration of Independence into a paper shredder for an apple martini right now.”

Instantly sympathetic, Collin asked, “That’s disturbing considering how physically fit you are.”

“Oh, that’s not the problem. As sick as I am of being wet, cold and forbidden to use the legs I was born with, it’s the animal life I’m expected to sample that makes this a torment.”

“Then I’ll skip mentioning that Sabrina doesn’t like sushi any more than we do.”

“Funny man. If you’d stayed in England, I’d have grown up to be an only child. Almost a princess—albeit a Plains Princess.”

Chuckling, Collin replied, “Speaking of fairy tales...Sabrina has the kids’ room looking outstanding. I can’t wait for you to see it. Gena and Addie are about to be submerged into a fantasy world.”

Cassie sighed, the sound of her boots hitting the floor discernable. “You’ll have to send me a photo—first tell me what your calendar looks like. Can you and Sabrina come down this weekend?”

So that’s why Sabrina had been reluctant to share what she and Cass had talked about. “That’s rather short notice.”

“I want both of you to come so the girls get used to the idea of being around you two as a unit, and so you can haul some of their stuff up there. I’ll bring the rest when I drop them off.”

This was happening way too fast for him and the combination of fatigue and stress in her voice worried him, as well, but he tried not to expose any of that. “All right,” and added with as much cheer and irreverence as he could muster, “What can we bring you? Diapers for the long flight overseas?”

“Just your pretty face—and Sabrina.”

“Love you, Captain.”

“See you Saturday, English.”

Chapter Four

Sabrina had seen photos of Cassidy Masters, and she'd enjoyed talking to her many times, but she found her even more striking in person.

"It's so good to finally be face-to-face," she said as Cass hugged her. She felt like a shrimp to Cassidy's five-eight, and her figure was willowy, her big blue eyes wide set and intelligent.

"You, too." Pushing her to arm's length, Cassie studied her with the eye of an unabashed analyst. "Oh, dear, you look far too tenderhearted for these two mighty mites. Ladies," she addressed her daughters with a more formal tone, "This is Miss Sabrina, whom I was telling you about." To Sabrina she added, "They're better at their numbers than enunciation, as you'll soon find out. Can you tolerate being called, 'Miss Brina'?"

"That's much better than *Unca Colon*," Collin drawled standing behind Sabrina.

"Oh, let's just make it *Brina*." She crouched down to be at eye level with the two little girls. "Let me see..." She remembered who loved her long tresses and who wasn't a fan of her curls. "You must be Gena," she said to the child with the enviable mane. "And Addison, that's a very colorful sweatshirt." It was bright orange and adorned with handprints in every other Day Glo color.

"I made it myself for Halloween. Do you twick-ow-tweat, or are you too old, like Mommy?"

Trying not to giggle that most of the child's *Rs* came out as *Ws*, she nodded. "Yes, too old. But it's fun to be the one to hand out treats and see everyone's costume. What are you going to be, Gena?"

"Either a princess or a bride."

"It depends on how much time we have to do her hair," Cassie piped in.

"But if there's no time, I still get to wear a tara."

"Tiara. That's right." Cassie rolled her eyes at Sabrina. "Come in and please ignore our mess. Between my training and packing for all of us, things are upside down."

That was hardly the case, Sabrina thought, glancing around the house. Military-base living was modest, but nothing like what her previous apartment was like. And except for the girls' open suitcases on the coffee table, and a few boxes stacked by the door, the place was clean and the walls bright with fresh paint—white in the living room, yellow in the kitchen, peach in the master bedroom and lavender in the girls' room.

"I hear you've done a fantastic job at Collin's place," Cassie said as they entered the girls' room. "Thank you for working so hard to make them feel special. I know they're going to love it."

"I hope so. It was fun to do."

Addison tugged at her jeans and asked, "Bwina, do you have little girls we can play with?"

"I'm afraid not, sweetie. But I'm looking forward to you teaching me games you like to play. And we're going to go to fun places like the park and zoo and do lots of surprise things for Mommy."

"Is Unca Colon gonna have fun with us?"

Sabrina lifted her eyebrows at Collin. She wanted him to handle that question.

"Well, I do have a job so I can pay for that fun, but I hope to join you ladies on weekends at the very least."

Whether it was for his formal address or the tickle on her belly, Addison laughed. "Wenotladies, we little girls."

"Wash up time." Cass directed her daughters toward the bathroom. "We're going to have lunch in less than fifteen minutes."

"You needn't have gone to any trouble," Collin said as the two diminutive blondes sped out of the room. "I would have gladly taken you all out somewhere for a treat."

"Believe me, the treat is firing up the grill and not caring if you get mustard or ketchup on your face and hands," his sister replied. "Besides, I want to spend as much time picturing them as they are, and not having to be on their best behavior because they're in public."

“They’re extremely well behaved,” Sabrina assured her.

“Yeah, they’re pretty good, but when they’re overtired, they can find an earsplitting octave that you’ll want to restrict to once every full moon. Go flip those burgers and dogs, Unca Colon. I’m going to pass on more boring tidbits to Sabrina.”

As soon as the door closed behind him, Cassie turned back to Sabrina, her expression relaxing to weariness and worry. “How was the drive down?”

“Better than expected. It can’t help but get awkward every once in awhile considering our history.”

“He likes to watch you when he thinks you won’t notice.”

“I suppose I am becoming like a second kid sister to him.”

With a badly faked cough, Cassie replied, “Right. That’s exactly the conclusion that I came to.”

Feeling heat in her cheeks, Sabrina shook her head. “You don’t have to worry that I would— or *he* would, for that matter—behave improperly in front of the girls.”

“I’m so not worried. In fact, I wish you would drive the old fossil a little crazy.”

“Oh, please don’t start.”

“I hereby quit. I’ll just point out that a complete stranger would notice you’re good for him.”

“Thank you, but you know the chant better than I do. Your brother is ‘not the marrying kind.’ What about you?” Sabrina asked. “Do you ever have time for a life, let alone romance?”

Cassidy glanced over her shoulder to make sure the girls were still down the hall. “Believe me, I could have a different man every night if that was what appealed, and I have to admit one or two have been tempting, but as you can tell, right now it’s the girls and the job that need to take priority.”

“It must feel like a huge responsibility to fly something where everyone counts on you to get them home.”

“It does, but I count on them just as much to do their jobs, so it’s a team thing.”

The girls returned and Cassie effortlessly changed the subject to who wanted to drink milk and who wanted to drink spring water.

“I try to keep soft drinks out of their diet as much as possible,” she told Sabrina. “They can thank me for their healthier teeth and digestive systems later. Oh, and for afternoon snacks, I always keep carrot and celery sticks. Add a little peanut butter and they’re good until dinner. They like apples with peanut butter, too. And bananas.”

“I know Collin doesn’t have any peanut butter in the house, but I’ll get it. What about D-E-S-S-E-R-T-S? What is and isn’t permitted?”

The spelling had Cassie smiling. “That won’t work much longer. Not only can they now spell their names, not just recognize them in print, they can spell cat and dog. But back to your point—it’s your call. I know the calendar is charging into the most sugar-intense time of the year on top of the kids craving comfort food for one reason or another.”

“You’re making it so easy for me. I thought since you’re so slender, you might be concerned about them gaining too much weight.”

“Those two take after me. I burn triple-digit calories just breathing. That’s one thing you don’t have to worry about. If they tell that you they’re hungry, feed them.” Cassie added, “I would love not to look like a boy going and coming. Please tell me yours aren’t a boob job?”

Sabrina gasped. “Why, no!” She couldn’t imagine what her family’s reaction would be if she did such a thing. “With a B-cup, I’m considered the flat-chested one in my family.”

“You’re from Wisconsin? Your family is Scandinavian?”

“On my mother’s side. My father’s people are English.”

“Ever curious to see the old family haunts?”

“If it wasn’t so cold. I hate being cold.”

“I’m with you there. So where am I going? The mountains of Afghanistan—during the winter, no less.”

“Make a snowman, Mommy, and send us the picture,” Addison said returning to the kitchen.

“I will, my glass-half-full girl.”

Sliding Sabrina a wry look, Cassie started pouring the children’s drinks. “What will you have, Sabrina? I do have beer or wine if you’d prefer.”

“Oh, no, thanks. That and the long drive back to Dallas will put me to sleep.”

“I’ll have a glass of that wine,” Collin told his sister returning with the tray of grilled food.

“You’re driving,” Cassie sang, gently reminding him.

“Actually, we’re staying the night at a hotel just down the road,” he sang back.

Cassie glanced at Sabrina’s startled face. “Would have been nice if you had told her that.” Then she concentrated on getting the rest of the food onto the kitchen table.

As Collin poured himself the wine, Addison studied him with furrowed brow and pursed lips. “I don’t get it,” she began.

“Well, if *you* don’t, love, I’m sure the experts at NASA haven’t got a clue. Tell me what the problem is.”

“What do we call you when we live by you, Unca Colon? You can’t be Daddy Colon?”

Collin had taken a sip of the chardonnay and launched himself for the paper towels. Cassie and Sabrina covered their mouths and had to turn away.

Seeing no adult corrected her sister, serious Gena took over. “He can’t be our Daddy, Gena. He’s our *Uncle Daddy*.”

It was dark by the time Sabrina and Collin left the base. After a picnic-style lunch, and a tour of the base, they went through photo albums and then snacked. Afterward, she helped Cassie give the girls their baths, learned how they liked their hair dried, listened to prayers and tucked them in. She was exhausted and told Collin that she didn’t know how Cassie did all she did and fulfilled her military responsibility.

“I’m more impressed than ever with her,” Sabrina said as Collin navigated the crowded Saturday-night streets of San Antonio as expertly as he drove in Dallas. “She wasn’t kidding when she said she burns calories like a grand prix racing car did fuel.”

“What pleased me is that you two got along famously,” Collin said.

“Thanks, but who wouldn’t? She’s smart and funny, and radiates charisma.” She almost added, “Like someone else I know,” but she wasn’t about to swell his head more than it already was. His nieces clearly adored him and had taken full advantage of his presence to ask for repeated piggyback rides and sleight-of-hand tricks with his pocket change that always became theirs. “How’s your back?” she asked him instead.

“As soon as we check in, I plan to nurse it with a single malt. I did the math and I almost toted around the equivalent of a side of beef today.”

Sabrina glanced at the next hotel they drove by. That made three quite nice, executive-type inns. “Where exactly are we going to stay?” she had to ask.

“The Hilton on the River Walk. I made reservations the evening after I spoke with Cassie about coming down. Please don’t scold. Blame it on my need for creature comforts.”

“Wouldn’t think of it, but that’s way over my budget,” she told him. “Why don’t you drop me at the place we just passed and pick me up in the morning?”

“Not on your life. I have your room reserved, as well. Business expense. Besides, I want you to join me for dinner. I need real food, not toddler munchies.”

“Please don’t ask me to do the bag-lady-at-the-steak-house act again.”

Collin scoffed at her protest. “You look terrific. If you insist, we’ll stop in the hotel lobby store and pick you up a glitzy pair of earrings.”

“You’re kind to think that’s all it would take. Surely you know people in the city? You know half of Texas. Wouldn’t you rather touch base with them?”

“You’re just fishing to see if I have an old flame lurking in this area code.”

“I am giving you an out if you were only being polite.”

“Look, we are about to spend the next four months inundated with baby talk, kiddie videos and mushy cereal. I would consider it a gift and pleasure if you’d properly dine with me.”

With her resistance to him melting faster than ice cream in a microwave, Sabrina replied, “Well, I know I couldn’t sleep yet if I tried...and I am somewhat hungry.”

Collin nodded and murmured, “Thank you. Pick you up at 7:00.”

In less than an hour, Collin escorted Sabrina to the blissfully dark hotel restaurant. He still wore the black T-shirt he’d had on earlier, but added a matching sports jacket that he’d brought along in his usual “expect the unexpected” way. With delight and even amusement, he discovered that Sabrina not only didn’t need help from his plastic, but she’d been delightfully creative. Responding to his soft knock, she emerged from her room wearing the same tunic sweater, but now it was worn over sexy black leggings that she’d picked up in a shop in the lobby. She’d cinched her trim waist with a black leather belt and had slipped into sparkly slides, things also picked up there. There were no glittery earrings, just the delicate hoops that seemed to be a staple with her; however, the added mascara and lip gloss had her looking absolutely glamorous and sexier than ever.

“My, you’ll spawn several thoughts among diners this evening, but none of them will have anything to do with bag ladies.”

“Thank you...I think.” She self-consciously ducked her head, and tucked her hair behind her right ear. “Isn’t the decor nice? That hunter green on the walls is cool and soothing.”

“I honestly hadn’t noticed.”

Sabrina continued noting the decor until they reached the restaurant where they were greeted warmly by the maître d’.

“We have your table ready, Mr. Masters.”

As they approached it, a handsomely dark waiter eagerly pulled out a chair for Sabrina, who demurely thanked him. Collin was seated by the maître d’. He couldn’t fault the younger man for his admiring study of Sabrina, but if it continued through dinner, it was going to get on his nerves.

“A cocktail before dinner, sir?” the maître d’ asked. “Or may I show you the wine list?”

“Both, please,” Colin replied. “A cosmopolitan for the lady, a double Chivas on the rocks for me. Perhaps you can recommend your most mellow Cabernet with dinner?”

“Excellent. I will see that our wine steward finds exactly what you desire. Thank you, sir.”

As he and the waiter left them for the moment, Collin glanced up to see Sabrina’s wide-eyed stare. “Yes?”

“You remembered.”

Soon after he’d hired her, she’d mentioned having watched *Sex and the City* on reruns and listening to them go on about drinking cosmopolitans. She’d yet to taste one. “I hope it proves worth the wait,” he said, pleased to surprise her.

Leaning closer she whispered, “But you’re ordering wine, too?”

“I promise to get you to your room with dignity intact.”

“What’s the special occasion? Your birthday isn’t until July and mine is in August.”

“How about a salute to your own loss of freedom? Well, at least until nearly spring?”

“I’m getting paid. Your sister is taking all of the risks.”

Collin could see he was not making himself clear. “After watching you with Cass and the girls today, I realized all that we’re asking of you. You won’t have much opportunity for a night life—or any form of personal life.”

“In all honesty, I didn’t have much of one anyway.” Sabrina looked everywhere but at him. “I worked. That was it.”

It was disconcerting to feel something akin to relief. What a rat to not want her to have someone special in her life when he knew perfectly well he could never have her. “What about your parents? Won’t they and your brothers be disappointed if you don’t come home for at least one holiday?”

“I wouldn’t have been able to if I’d stayed at the warehouse job, either. From Thanksgiving to Christmas is the busiest time. No one gets time off. Oh!”

“What?”

She gave him a sickly smile. “I need to tell my parents that I moved and give them your number.”

Collin could almost imagine their reaction. Seismic waves would probably be recorded as far south as Galveston. “Thanks for the warning. I should check in with my health-care provider and beef up my policy.” Where were their drinks?

“I just turned twenty-eight, not eighteen.”

“That still makes me thirty-eight and the single man you’re living with.”

Thankfully, the waiter arrived with their drinks, then took their order. Collin didn’t wait for him to get more than a step away before taking a needful sip of Scotch. The burning down his throat was nothing compared to how his stomach would feel as he worried about the entire Sinclair clan appearing in the lobby.

“I am not living *with* you.”

“They might buy that if I was seventy.” As she opened her mouth to speak, he raised his hand entreating her to wait. “Please don’t point out yet again how completely resistible I am.”

Instead Sabrina took a second sip of her cosmo.

“Do you at least approve of it?” he grumbled.

A smile pulled at Sabrina’s lips. “It’s not on the level of a margarita, but it’s interesting.” When their waiter returned with their salads, she made eye contact with him and her smile was as flirty as his.

“He’s not an hour over twenty-one,” Collin said when they were again alone.

“Maybe I like them that way.”

Collin narrowed his eyes. “You did that to get at me.”

“Did it work?”

“No.”

She threw back her head and laughed. “This is kind of fun.”

“What other unpleasant characteristics don’t I know about you besides your sadistic streak?”

“If you want to be rid of me, all you have to do is suggest to Cassie that I move into her place. This way the girls stay put in familiar surroundings and with their friends. Come to think of it, I might even get a social life with all of those soldiers around.”

“Yes, but you wouldn’t be making the salary that you are.” He was not enjoying this conversation one bit. He should never have confessed his interest in her. He should have thought up some other story; he was in the business of lies, for pity’s sake.

“You’ve got me there.” Sighing, Sabrina picked up her salad fork. “Okay, I’ll quit teasing. I don’t know how you do it, though. Being a flirt is work. Were you like that as a boy?”

He didn’t want to talk about his childhood any more than he wanted her to torment him, but at least the past was the past. “Hardly. My parents didn’t divorce pleasantly, didn’t my sister tell you? Mother kept Cass here and my father took me back to England.”

“That much I picked up from office gossip the first time I was your employee.” Intercepting his dark look, she grinned, but said, “Sorry. Go on.”

“There’s not much to tell. It wasn’t a month before he shipped me off to an academy—a fancy rendition of a boarding school. You see, he didn’t have any use for me, he was merely getting back at my mother.”

“That was small of him. I’m sorry.”

“I’m hungry.” Stabbing an olive in his Mediterranean salad, Collin thought the subject was done. He was wrong.

“So you eventually developed the ‘I’m a catch’ persona due to a need to prove your father wrong for pushing you away? Or your mother not fighting harder to keep you?”

“Neither. I was starving for attention and discovered people gave it to me if I flattered them enough. But it also helped to keep people from asking too many questions.” He pointed his fork at her. “Until you.”

“Hint taken. New subject.” Sabrina nodded out the window at the tree-lit canal where a barge was passing full with tourists listening to a guitarist playing for them. “Can we walk off dinner down there?”

“I suppose. I’m certainly not going to leave you on your own.”

“It’s not like I can lose this hotel.”

“I’ve only been there once before and enough time has lapsed to not bore me to tears.”

“Thank you,” she said demurely. “I promise not to keep you out too late.”

Collin could only shake his head.

“I love doing the typical tourist things,” Sabrina said.

It was now almost nine o’clock and the crowd had thinned out some. At least there were fewer children and older folks than when she’d first watched from the hotel restaurant. The temperatures weren’t exactly chilly, but she was glad she had her jacket to tie around her shoulders. Collin had his hands shoved into his jeans’ pockets and remained on the quiet side.

She worried that she had made a mistake and gone too far with him. She couldn’t blame it on the liquor, either, since she’d said those things before she drank—and never did finish the cosmo and maybe had two sips of the wine. But she hadn’t needed the alcohol; she was high on being with him and knowing he’d wanted her company.

When he didn’t remark on her comment, she stopped and gazed up at a lit storefront on the second floor. She liked this open-air-mall type of shopping.

“Oh, look. Tattoos.”

“No.” Collin took hold of her arm just above the elbow and urged her forward.

“It’s my skin.”

“Then respect it more. I’m going to follow an old military custom. You work for me, therefore your skin is my property until we end this contract. You do not mar my property. Not even if you invite me to watch.”

She knew better than to respond to that line. Instead she gazed up at the twinkling white lights in the trees and outlining the arching bridges over the canals. “This is like Christmas 365 days a year.”

When she spotted a store with postcards, she asked Collin to wait and dashed inside to buy a handful to send to her niece, Trudy.

“Going to rebuild your scrapbook collection?” Collin asked when she emerged with her bag of choices.

“I don’t do that, but my niece, Sayer’s daughter, does. Like most people from out of state, she thinks Texas is still the Wild West.”

“There’s another gift shop. Want to get some T-shirts for the other nieces or nephews? There’s an Alamo piggy bank.”

“Okay, I can take a hint. I’m done.” She glanced down at her feet. “Besides, these heels aren’t the best idea on this sidewalk.”

“What you women do for fashion.”

“Be nice. I could have gone upstairs and changed into my sneakers, and then I’d be ready to walk the whole length of this place.”

“I promise you that I would have slung you over my shoulder and carried you back to the hotel if you’d tried.”

Seeing his crooked smile, she felt better. He was over being annoyed with her.

In the elevator, though, they were joined by a couple who were unabashedly enraptured with each other and had no interest in waiting until they were in their room to begin getting intimate. Cuddling in the opposite corner, the young woman was leaning back against her partner and the hip

action while slow was flagrant. He had his arms around her and his fingers were diving inside her sweater to stroke the sides of her breasts. It was a relief to get out at their floor. The couple was heading several levels up.

Sabrina stopped once the elevator doors closed again and pressed her hand to her chest. “Do you think they’ll make it there?”

“What I do know is that there’ll be no need for them to rent an adult film.”

Continuing down the long hallway, it was strange how they avoided looking at each other. Conversation dried up, too. She was relieved to reach her door.

“Well, thank you again. I did enjoy it.” She concentrated very hard on getting her room key out of her purse. “Um...what time do you want to leave in the morning?”

“Is 7:00 too early for you?”

“Not at all. Good night then.” She knew he was going to be a perfect gentleman, waiting until she was inside with the door safely shut and secured behind her, and that made her self-conscious and clumsy. She missed the slot completely the first time she tried. The second time she withdrew it too soon and the green light didn’t come on. “This is humiliating,” she told him. “Could you at least wait by your own door?”

Instead he took the card key from her and calmly unlocked her door for her. Holding it open with his left hand, he handed the card back with his right, then caressed her lower lip with his thumb. “You are an utter delight. Good night.”

Shutting the door and turning the second bolt, she stood there and waited. Then she heard a brushing sound against the wood and footsteps as he walked to his room. She waited for his door to open and close...and waited. Her heart began to pound anew.

Finally he did retreat into his room.

Sabrina touched her fingers where he’d stroked her and wondered if he would ever kiss her—and would that be enough?

Chapter Five

Shortly after the calendar flipped to November, Cassidy delivered Gena and Addison up to Dallas. Sabrina couldn't imagine what they were feeling and did her best to put on a bright smile, as did Collin, who had taken the afternoon off to be there, too.

Cass described how excited the girls had acted all the way up from San Antonio. Getting a new room would be like going on vacation. It hadn't really registered in their three-year-old minds that the cost of that meant not getting to see their mommy for months. As soon as everyone hugged, Genie and Addie ran down the hall to see their room. Squeals of delight quickly emanated from there.

"Sounds like a hit to me," Cassie drawled. Then she groaned as she lowered their suitcases to the floor and let her shoulder bag slide down her arm. "That stuff weighs more than the backpacks we hauled during training."

Shoving her purse out of her way, she came to Collin for a hug. "You look almost ashen. Everything okay? Too late to run scared now?"

"It was too late as soon as you told me that you were being deployed," he said looking none too happy with that memory. He held out his hand. "You and Sabrina talk. Give me your keys and I'll go get the rest of their things from the car."

"I'll go, too. That's too much to carry in one trip."

Collin plucked the keys out of her grasp. "There must be a hundred last-minute instructions or girly things you'll want to pass on to Sabrina, and I'd only embarrass her and annoy you by asking what all that means."

He was out the door before his sister could say anything else. Cassidy looked from the closed door to Sabrina.

"What's wrong?"

"He's anxious for you, you must know that?"

Running her hands through her short, wind-swept curls, Cassie's lips curved with sardonic amusement. "That I get. It's the tension that wafted out of here the instant the door opened. And you were hanging back watching him, then refused to make eye contact when he looked over his shoulder at you. My brother doesn't doubt himself or get worried about women because he simply doesn't let himself care beyond mutual gratification. I'm getting the feeling that you're messing with his damaged mindset."

"He's been working a great deal of overtime so he can take some days to spend with the girls."

"And when he's not at the office?"

"He's sleeping."

"Alone?"

"Cass! There's nothing to tell. At least not what you're thinking." And that wasn't a lie in that what she was waiting for from Collin hadn't happened. Sabrina gestured down the hallway where the happy sounds continued. "Don't you want to come and see their room? I want to take your picture in there and then have it blown up into poster size so that the girls will feel you're not so far away."

Cass wrinkled her nose. "Darn it all—I wanted him to have at least kissed you by now. You must really have him conflicted."

Conditions were no easier for her. But what was saving Sabrina some wear on her nerves was the certainty that if she behaved like every other woman he'd known—like the proverbial moth to the flame—she was the one who would be reduced to ashes.

She picked up a pink suitcase with purple piping. "Come see what the fuss is all about. We added a few things since we got to visit with you."

An hour later Collin watched Cass say a difficult goodbye to the girls, rise from her knees to hug Sabrina as one would a sister and stride toward him where he waited by the elevator. He wrapped

an arm around her shoulders and urged her to lean on him, even though that made his eyes burn worse and made the lump lodging in his throat all but strangle him.

Only when the elevator doors closed them in the car was he able to mutter, “Well, this sucks even more than I expected it to. You should have flown up. It’s too many miles back to the base with no chatterboxes in the backseat to keep you alert.”

“I’ve got an audiobook to play. It will be novel to indulge in adult fiction for a change instead of reading manuals and course studies, or kiddie books.” But her expression looked anything but enthused about that. “I wish you’d have just given me a hug up there and let me be gone.”

“I want to see you to your SUV.”

“You’re not going to make me cry.”

Not only did Collin do that, but he also pressed his lips to her temple. “If you do something stupid and brave and get hurt, I will never forgive you.”

“I’m shaking in my boots.”

“You damn well should be.”

Cassidy stepped back and studied his face. “I know you’ll take care of my babies, but I hope you’ll take care of this, too.” She pressed her hand flat against his heart.

“I’m trying.”

“Now see—it’s comments like that which worry me. I love you, English.”

“Me, you, Captain.”

When he returned to the condo and locked the door, he experienced such a wave of weakness and loss that he had to lean back against it to stay standing. His heart had just dropped into one of the dark places in his soul.

“Collin?”

He didn’t realize Sabrina had been in the kitchen and had heard him return. Seeing him frozen there against the door, she came to him, her eyes radiating her concern. And then she did exactly what Cass had done, placed her hand flat against his heart and he stiffened and sucked in a sharp breath. It literally hurt, as though she’d reached into his body and physically touched that organ.

He couldn’t bear the raw, naked emotion of need. Despite weeks of iron will and brutal lectures to keep his hands to himself, he crushed her against him and hid his face in the fragrance and silkiness of her hair.

Sabrina gently eased her trapped arms free from between them and wrapped them around his waist. Slowly, she stroked his lean, too tense back. “She’ll be all right,” she whispered to him.

“You can’t know that.”

“But I feel it.”

“How, when this is so wrong on every level?”

The more gravelly and bitter his voice grew, the softer and more tender hers became.

“There’s just an inner peace.”

“Peace.” He exhaled shakily and stroked his cheek against her hair. “I don’t know the meaning of the word anymore. I don’t know that I ever did.” He swallowed painfully. “Thank you for being here...for doing this. I couldn’t—”

“Shh.” She stroked his cheek and then brushed a kiss there. “You don’t have to.”

He gravitated to the source of that sweet caress until his lips were aligned with hers. “Oh, yes, I do,” he rasped and feathered a kiss to her lower lip. “Yes, I do,” he murmured again as he repeated the caress to the right corner of her mouth, then the left. Shifting his hold to frame her face between his hands, he looked deeply into her eyes, then focused on her lips again. “Yes.”

He kissed her as he had in a dream, with tenderness and care, and sighed with relief when she opened to him. She was his link to sanity and his soul and he cherished the gift of her. When his tongue touched hers, she murmured softly and let herself lean against him.

“Bwina...I gotta go potty.”

It was Sabrina who eased back and called down the hall, “I’ll be right there.” Then she looked at Collin and asked softly, “Are you okay?”

He could only offer a barely perceptible nod, and then she was off to help Gena. What had just happened? he wondered. He felt as though he’d been in one of those out-of-body experiences.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be okay again,” he finally replied to the empty room.

By the time he felt in control of himself again, the giggle and chatter level was going strong in the girls’ bedroom. Collin noted that Sabrina’s voice came across as excited as his nieces’ did. She was attempting—and succeeding—in getting their focus off of their mother’s departure, at least temporarily.

At the doorway of their room, he saw that the grand unpacking had commenced. Dolls and stuffed animals were already strewn about. Clothing was being put away; however, some modeling appeared to be necessary.

“These are my favorite shoes,” declared Gena hugging ultrashiny patent leathers to her pink-and-glitter sweatshirt.

Collin compressed his lips to hide the smile as “are” came out “aw” and “favorite” sounded suspiciously as “faborite.”

“They’re beautiful,” Sabrina cooed. “They’re so shiny. Who keeps them that clean for you?”

“Mommy. But she teaching me.”

“Then you can teach me so we can make Mommy proud when she gets back and sees that they’re still in good shape, okay?”

“I will. I teach Addie all the time.”

“Which are your favorites, Addie?”

“My sneakers.” But Addison was more interested in the giant polar bear that she had dragged from the far corner of the room and was attempting to sit in its lap. “Is this yours?”

“No, it’s yours. Everything here is for you girls from your Uncle Collin. He’s very happy to have you visiting with him for awhile.”

“Addie,” Gena explained, all solemnity, “member? Mommy told us. He don’t have little girls and borrowed us so he won’ be lonesome while Mommy is gone.”

Collin saw Sabrina touch her fingertips to her mouth and turn away. He was certain something had stabbed his heart, as well, especially as Gena said “bowwowed.” He cleared his throat. “Is that okay with you, Addie?”

Both tots turned to him.

“I guess,” Addie said, but didn’t sound quite convincing. “If you promise to give us back.”

“Oh, I most definitely do.”

“When?”

“In time for Valentine’s Day.”

Gena and Addie exchanged looks.

“Is that before Santa?” Addie asked her sister.

“Only if the groundhog comes outside and sees his shadow. If the sun doesn’t come up, then it’s after.”

Addison frowned and rested her cheek against Bear. “I hope the sun comes out.”

Blinking back tears, Sabrina said brightly, “Know what? We forgot New Year’s! That’s when we wear happy, bright hats with feathers and sparkles, and throw streamers and play with balloons to welcome a new year and get ready for you girls turning four!”

“Can I sleep with Bear until Mommy comes gets us?” Addie asked.

“He takes up a bunch of the bed, but if that’s what you want,” Sabrina said sending Collin an anxious look.

“Which bed?” he asked the child.

“Orange. It’s like the sun.” She hoisted up Bear and crawled onto the bed to gaze up at the shimmering orange chiffon.

“What about you, Gena?” Collin asked.

“I’m older. I don’t need to sleep with toys. And I get purple.” But she didn’t get onto her bed. Instead she stood beside the stuffed giraffe that was twice her height and slowly stroked its neck and back.

Collin pushed away from the doorjamb and crouched beside Sabrina where he gave the back of her neck a secret squeeze. “It’s okay to have an animal friend to nap with even if you are a few minutes older, Gena. Just don’t forget to brush your giraffe and put a blanket on him so he doesn’t get cold at night.”

“Okay. What do I feed him?”

Crap, Collin thought. “You want to handle this one?” he said under his breath to Sabrina.

“I do, because your mom told me that she’d arranged for the sandman to come by after you go to bed. He’ll take care of that for you.”

“Who feeds Bear?” Addie demanded. “He don’t like sand or grass, he likes fishes. I seen that on TV.”

Sabrina nodded several times, which indicated to Collin that she was thinking as desperately as he was. Unfortunately, for him, being close to her like this and picking up the luscious scent of her made him think about her taste and the temptation of her body against his.

“Now I remember what your mom told me!” she burst out. “Do you know how the postman carries different kinds of stamps with him for people who need to mail something but forgot to go to the post office? That’s what sandman does. He brings the things that are needed.”

“Does he know the Easter bunny?” Addie asked.

“I hear they are excellent friends,” Sabrina assured her.

“Girls, play for a minute while I check on something with Brina, okay?” With that he crooked his finger and motioned her to follow him, whereupon he led her farther down the hall. Hands on his hips, he asked in a hushed voice, “And how are you going to explain a lack of food crumbs or grass when they wake in the mornings? Do not think that you’re going out to the park across the street at night with scissors to clip grass, and I’d better not hear about some sacrificed goldfish found dead on that carpet.”

“Of course not. Giraffe and Bear will be here looking well fed and cared for because that’s the magic of stories. What’s happened to your imagination, Ad Man?”

Although the question was posed with a tender smile, Collin took a step toward her, which had her smile waning and she took a step back, which immediately put her against the wall. “You know perfectly well what’s happened to it,” he said close enough to drown in the alluring depths of her eyes.

He’d touched her. Now all he thought about was doing it until he knew every inch of her better than he knew himself, knew what gave her the most pleasure and heard her cry out for him.

“Collin, I need to get back to the girls,” she whispered.

Muttering that he had to call the office, he bid a hasty retreat before he made a bigger fool of himself than he already had. As much as he wanted to keep his word to his sister that he would use this opportunity to bond more with the little ones, he couldn’t do it and not fall for Sabrina.

Who are you kidding? You’re halfway there already.

That left him with only one solution.

Chapter Six

“Good morning, Sonny!” Sabrina said to the beaming security guard, who met them as the elevator doors opened to the building’s lobby. She had called to let him know they were on their way. “Girls, this is Mr. Birdsong. He watches over everyone who lives in the building. This is Gena and this is Addison.”

“Mr. Masters’s nieces. It’s a pleasure, ladies.”

“Why do they call you a bird’s song?” Addie asked, her head tilted as she gazed up at the friendly giant.

Grinning, Sonny began whistling and it did, indeed, sound like they’d just stepped into the park.

“Do you know what that is? A robin. This is a cardinal...and a bluebird.”

The girls were enthralled as he duplicated each feathered creature’s song.

“Can you do my friend Tassie’s parakeet?” Addie asked.

“He never seen it, Addie,” Gena replied before Sonny could reply.

“Besides, we can’t take all of Mr. Birdsong’s time,” Sabrina added.

“Birdsong is too much of a name for such little ones to deal with,” he told Sabrina as they crossed the lobby. “If you don’t mind, let them call me Sonny like everyone does.” At the front door, he bent over and rested his hands on his knees to address the girls again. His teeth were as white as his starched shirt and his security badge had a shine no less than his twinkling eyes. “You all look pretty and set for a day on the town. Where are you headed?”

It was Gena and Addie’s third day at the condo and since the weather was obliging, they needed fresh air—definitely more than they were getting stepping out onto the balcony waving at pigeons. After a healthy start of oatmeal and bananas, Sabrina decided to test her mettle with the two energetic prodigies. They were dressed for a sunny day, but with temperatures not rising over sixty degrees Fahrenheit, hats and scarves were currently a necessary addition to their light jackets.

“We’re going to the Dallas Farmers Market and then to that wonder-world grocery store, Central Market at Greenville and Lovers,” she told Sonny. “Mr. Masters doesn’t want us taking a bus so could you get us a cab?”

“I can do you one better. There’s a van bringing back one of our elderly residents from a doctor’s appointment at any moment. The driver’s name is Gus Genovese. He’s older himself, but far healthier. He’ll drive you through the stalls and you can keep your purchases in the car while you shop. Gus has been taking care of people in this building for almost six years now.”

“That’s wonderful. He doesn’t have other appointments today?”

“Nothing on the log. It’s early in the season. Once the cold sets in and flu season, and church holiday and party events, you have to book further in advance. But I think for you three, he’ll always make the time. Gus is a widower, a self-made man.”

“He sounds like an answer to a prayer for me,” Sabrina replied. “What a relief that I won’t have to try to call for a ride back. Let me quickly get their car seats.”

Gus turned out to be a young sixty-eight. A New Jersey transplant, he’d sold his truck refrigeration conversion business after the death of his wife Emily. With no children and too much free time on his hands, he found his independent shuttling service perfect for this stage in his life.

“You can only sit at home and watch so much TV,” he explained after they got the girls settled in the second row of van seats. “My wife had the green thumb. Me, I can’t grow weeds. I don’t like clubs and social organizations. Seemed like whenever I walked through the front door of a place, I was being sized up by the hungry widows, or asked to attend a funeral. Don’t get me wrong, I like the ladies, but it would be hard to match my Emmy, and I’m not interested in spending the rest of my life in a funeral home or cemetery. You get to a certain age, you start giving yourself permission to be particular with whom you spend your time.”

“That makes sense to me.” Sabrina glanced back at Gena and Addie. “I do appreciate your help with their forward-facing car seats—and your patience.”

“They’re adorable kids, and very well mannered. I can see you’re doing a good job with them, Mrs. Masters.” “It’s Sabrina. Sabrina Sinclair. I’m the nanny.” “So, Mr. and Mrs. Masters both work in demanding fields?”

“Captain Masters, the girls’ mother, just left for Afghanistan. She’s a helicopter pilot.”

“What is this world coming to? Bless her.”

“Her brother offered to take in the girls and hired me.”

“Well, you’re still doing a great job. I have an eye for these things,” he said touching his right index finger to his temple. “Now tell me...what are we looking for at the Farmers Market?”

Sabrina showed him her list, which included gourds and small pumpkins, and Indian corn to make a centerpiece, then vegetables for soup, some spinach and plants for a mini kitchen herb garden.

Gus was taken aback. “You’re more than a nanny.”

“I grew up on a Wisconsin farm. I’m handy.”

“You have that fresh, wholesome look. It’s very good to see. These days I run in to professional people—people who you can have an intelligent conversation with—who have no idea how to boil an egg, and can’t tell you what their grandparents’ names are, what they did and where they came from.”

“I left the farm hoping to become a professional,” Sabrina quipped.

“Nothing wrong with that,” Gus said with a shake of his head. “Just don’t make it all you are.”

As they parked in the first barn, the girls thought the pigeons walking between the cars had followed them from the condo. Gus patiently told them that they were “cousins.” Thereafter, every bird was greeted with, “Hi, cousin! Bye, cousin!” The girls also thought that the mounted police should offer them a free ride on their “ponies,” but they weren’t able to charm their way into making that happen. Overall they were well behaved and enjoyed the outing.

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