

# REBECCA WINTERS

HIS VERY  
OWN BABY



*Cherish*

# Rebecca Winters

## His Very Own Baby

### **Аннотация**

Alik Jarman has only just met his six-week-old son - and he isn't going to let him go now! Even though the baby's mother broke his heart less than one year ago.... Blaire never told Alik the real reason she called off their wedding. And now, when Alik demands she and the baby move in with him for a month, Blaire should refuse. But seeing Alik's delight in their child, she can't say no - and she can't stop hoping that one day they will be a real family!

# Содержание

“I want to feed him. Show me what to do.”	5
HIS VERY OWN BABY	7
CONTENTS	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	31
CHAPTER THREE	50
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	54



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# **“I want to feed him. Show me what to do.”**

Alik stood too close. Blaire could feel his warmth. The familiar brand of soap Alik used in the shower emanated from his bronzed skin, assailing Blaire’s senses.

She placed a clean cloth over his broad shoulder, careful not to touch him for fear she wouldn’t want to stop. Then she handed him the bottle.

“Go ahead and put it in his mouth. He’ll do the rest.”

When Alik did her bidding, the baby started devouring his formula. He drank so fast and furiously, he made loud noises that sounded indecent. Alik’s laughter started in his throat and rumbled out to fill the hotel room.

She couldn’t help smiling. “As you’re discovering, he has your healthy appetite.” Before she gave her feelings away, she moved to the other bed. “Do you want me to leave the light on or off?”

“On,” Alik murmured. “I still have trouble believing he’s real.”

Meet

Dominic, Alik and Zane

Three firm friends...

Three successful business partners...

Three dedicated bachelors...

But life is full of surprises, and these gorgeous men are about

to discover the joys of fatherhood—and of marriage—sooner than they think!



Surprised by fatherhood and ready for love!

Next month in

The Baby Discovery by Rebecca Winters,

Zane finds an abandoned baby—

don't miss it!

# HIS VERY OWN BABY

Rebecca Winters



# CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

# CHAPTER ONE

BLAIRE REGAN got out of the rental car and locked the door. She could smell rain in the early-morning air. It wouldn't be long before it started falling.

After glancing around the excavation site outside Warwick, New York, she walked over to a couple of college students emerging from one of several dozen trailers.

"Excuse me? Could you tell me where I might find Dr. Alik Jarman? I was told he's the consulting geologist on this project."

It had taken several days and many costly, long-distance phone calls to various universities to determine his exact whereabouts in this pastoral section of the state.

Both heads turned at the same time. The look of blatant male admiration was always flattering, but right now she was too frightened and nervous to appreciate their attention. Her legs were shaking so hard it was a miracle she could still stand, let alone walk.

The blond one smiled. "He's living in the trailer at the far end." By some miracle she'd arrived at the right place.

His buddy asked, "Are you one of Dr. Fawson's students from New York University?" Hope shone brightly from a pair of warm blue eyes.

Her reason for being here was no one else's business, but she couldn't blame them for flirting. It was early October. College

classes had barely started. Naturally they'd assumed she'd come to join the other students she could see working in the distance.

"I'm afraid not. But thank you for your help."

"Anytime," she heard one of them say as she made her way back to the car and drove the long length of packed dirt. One drop, then another spattered her windshield. It wouldn't be long before the parking area turned into a mud bog.

The closer she drew to Alik's temporary home, the faster her pulse raced. She could hear the blood pounding in her ears.

In the field, Alik's day always started at dawn. It was possible he was already out on the site. She'd left the Bluebird Inn in Warwick at five-thirty in the morning, hoping to catch him before he began measuring soil properties or mapping water resources.

During the Introduction to Geology class she'd taken from the fascinating guest lecturer at UCLA in San Diego, California, a year ago, she'd learned he did a myriad of scientific disciplines in his study of the earth. But those all-too-short talks before and after class hadn't been enough for Blaire. She'd fallen deeply in love with the ruggedly attractive Easterner after he'd taken her home from school because she was sick.

Apparently the brief drive to her house hadn't satisfied his needs, either. Once she'd recovered, he'd suggested they have dinner overlooking the ocean. From that point on they couldn't bear to be separated from each other. After a short courtship filled with romantic late-night walks along the surf, they set the

date for their wedding and he flew her to New York City to meet his family.

That was when the horror story started. She'd had no choice but to break off their engagement. In truth, Blaire had never imagined she would see him again, especially if she allowed herself to think back to the awful blackness of that period.

But something unimaginable had come up, something she needed to talk to him about, otherwise she would never be able to live with herself.

Her mouth went dry as she got out of the car and found the strength to walk through the steady rain to the door of his trailer where she saw a poster mounted. No doubt he'd been forced to make a list of his business hours so the latest group of female students wouldn't lie in wait for him the way they'd done in San Diego.

Was he already involved with one of them?

Stop it, Blaire.

She didn't dare start thinking about what he'd been doing for the last ten and half months, let alone the women he'd been dating. Otherwise pain would consume her alive.

According to the poster, he was available for consultation between four and five in the afternoon, Monday through Friday, unless he was out of town.

Quickly, before she lost her courage and disappeared in the opposite direction, she lifted her hand and knocked on the door. She waited for a minute and knocked again. When there was no

answer, she debated what to do, then tried turning the handle. To her surprise, it gave. She leaned her head inside and called out to him.

He wasn't there.

After flying all the way from the West Coast to see him, she intended to talk to him no matter how long it took. Wondering how much her body could take in anticipation of this meeting, she considered waiting for him in her car. But the place where she'd had to park would prevent her from spotting him if he returned.

She vacillated for a moment, then decided to wait for him inside his trailer. He had to come back at some point. If the rain kept up, maybe it would be sooner.

During their courtship, Alik had intimated that when he worked at a site, any trailer would do since he only required the bare necessities. Viewing the drab brown and beige interior of the generic-looking mobile unit made her realize he'd spoken the truth.

At a glance she could see nothing of a personal nature to tell her about the man who inhabited these claustrophobic premises. After moving a pile of notebooks from a chair, she sat down to wait.

Much as she would have liked to explore his bedroom, she didn't have the right. In fact by entering his abode uninvited, he could accuse her of trespassing.

Blaire had no idea how he would react when he saw the liberty

she'd taken. But with the rain falling harder now, surely she could be forgiven for seeking shelter.

After a few minutes she got up to stretch her legs and discovered a huge map of the U.S. spread out on the built-in table next to the tiny kitchen. Curious, she made her way through the obstacle course to look at it.

He'd drawn a pencil line from New York City to San Francisco. Over the line he'd applied various colors of magic marker like a continuous patchwork between the cities he'd circled in black: Warwick, New York; Laramie, Wyoming; Tooele, Utah; San Francisco, California. There was no color beyond Tooele, just the line. Above each color he'd made scientific notations she didn't understand.

Intrigued, she wasn't aware of anything until the door was flung wide and she felt footsteps shake the floor. Suddenly Alik's six-foot-two-physique dwarfed the interior of the trailer. The door closed behind him.

Blaire didn't know who was more surprised, but where she let out a quiet gasp before straightening, his bronzed, whipcord-lean body stilled in place. The incandescent blaze in those forest-green eyes was the only part of him that let her know he wasn't an inanimate block of quarry marble.

Through lashes as black as his overly long hair dampened by the rain, his gaze scorched its way up her silken-clad legs. Swallowing hard, she felt it skim the flare of womanly hips beneath her skirt. After a breathless pause, it wandered over the

generous curves filling out her cotton sweater. When their eyes met again, she was quivering like a heavy dewdrop on a fragile petal.

“I couldn’t begin to guess why you’re here,” his voice rasped, “but you know the way out.” After opening the door, he stood there with his arms folded across his chest.

She’d imagined this meeting in her mind a thousand times at least, but nothing could have prepared her to deal with the extent of his deep-seated rancor.

He despised her.

“Alik—” His stance was so intimidating, she smoothed a lock of auburn hair behind her ear nervously. As she did so, his eye must have caught the glint of the diamond on her ring finger. The skin around his compelling male mouth seemed to whiten.

“I—I can understand how angry you must be finding me here like this,” she began in a shaky voice. “But it was raining, and I was afraid I might miss you if I stayed in the car, so I—”

“Get out of here, Blaire.” He didn’t shout the words. They were muttered beneath his breath like a curse.

She reeled from the raw brutality of his demand. The man she would always love had changed into someone she didn’t know.

No matter that she’d broken off their engagement for reasons he must never learn about, she couldn’t have imagined him treating her, or anyone else, with such exquisite cruelty. His capacity to inflict pain was a revelation.

“I’ll go,” she whispered, “just as soon as I tell you there were

consequences the night we slept together.”

A palpable tension filled the devastating silence of the trailer. He shut the door, then leaned against it.

Gathering her courage she said, “We have a son who was born on August 19th. He’s six weeks old, and was christened Nicholas Regan Jarman.”

Next to telling him she couldn’t marry him, this was the hardest thing she’d ever had to do in her life. But now that she’d started, she had to see it through.

“You have every right to know you’re a father, especially since I’m being married in two months and another man will be raising him.”

It was a lie. There was no other man. There never could be another man. But it was imperative Alik believe she was engaged to someone else. Blaire’s aunt had let her borrow the ring she was wearing. She was on a precarious mission and needed it to authenticate her untruth.

The white around his mouth spread to his face. The look of shock.

“I happen to believe this kind of news should be delivered in person,” she continued. “Certainly you deserve that. But until Nicky and I both had our checkups yesterday, I wasn’t able to travel.”

The sardonic slash of his black brows told her exactly what he thought of her fabrication. He moved away from the door and took a threatening step toward her.

The motion drew her attention to the white T-shirt covering his well-defined chest, the powerful thigh muscles visible beneath his jeans. His utter maleness overwhelmed her. It had been so long since she'd lain against him while they'd kissed each other senseless.

“If you had wanted me to believe this fantastic story, you would have brought the proof with you surely.”

His biting mockery cut her like a knife. She sucked in her breath. “I would have, but he’s your mirror image. Since I’m positive no one around here knows about me or our past relationship, I tried to respect your privacy by leaving him with the hotel sitter. That way I wouldn’t embarrass you. Not even the two male students who pointed out your trailer to me know who I am.”

His withering look sent her to the door.

So far she hadn’t broken down, but if she remained another few seconds, the tears would gush and there wouldn’t be any way to stop them.

“What you do with the information is up to you, Alik. I’m staying at the Bluebird Inn in Warwick until checkout time at eleven tomorrow morning. I—If you want to see your little boy,” she stammered, “I’ll wait for you that long.”

After shutting the door quietly, she dashed to her rental car, but couldn’t escape a good soaking by the rain. She didn’t expect Alik to come after her, but some habits died hard as she watched for him through the rearview mirror until the trailer disappeared

from her sight.

Fear had warred with excitement over seeing him again. The tension had made her body so twitchy, her foot wouldn't stay on the pedal. She took a deep breath and willed herself to calm down.

You did it, Blaire. You told him the truth. No matter if you were taking an enormous risk, it was the honorable thing to do. Now it's done.

By the time she reached the outskirts of Warwick, the rain had turned to drizzle. She lowered the speed of the windshield wipers. At least she could see better than before.

Yesterday she'd left San Diego under sunny skies. Only a mission as vital as this could have forced her to fly a second time to New York where she'd experienced the greatest pain of her life.

She hated it here, and couldn't wait to get back to California with her darling baby. As soon as she reached the hotel, she would confirm her reservation for the return trip home tomorrow afternoon.

Finally the Bluebird Inn came into view. Anxious to hold Nicky and make sure he was all right, she pulled around the back and entered through a door located close to her hotel room on the second floor.

It hadn't been easy to leave him with a complete stranger, but the manager of the Inn had assured her the baby-sitter was a retired registered nurse with impeccable credentials. There'd

never been one complaint about her in the three years she'd worked for them.

Though it had frightened her, Blaire had been forced to trust the older woman with her most priceless possession. The visit to the site had only required that Blaire be gone two hours at the most, but it had still been a hard thing to do when she'd never been separated from Nicky before.

For several reasons, she realized it wouldn't have been fair to spring the baby on Alik from out of the blue.

Certainly she hadn't wanted to arouse any suspicion in the students and staff at the site. But more importantly, Alik needed time to absorb the earth-shaking news that he had fathered a son. Only time would tell if his hatred of her overshadowed the desire to see the child of his own flesh.

Alik was a man of strong passions and convictions. He was also one of the most honorable men she'd ever known. No matter how bitter his feelings toward her, he wouldn't have received the news she'd just given him lightly.

But they hadn't been together in almost a year. Since she'd broken their engagement, there would have been many changes in the interim. For one thing, he wasn't on the university guest lecture circuit.

At this point in time she knew nothing about the nature of his present project, let alone his state of mind.

Unbearable as she found the idea, he might be in a serious relationship with another woman. Even married, a tiny voice

whispered.

If he had a wife, Blaire couldn't begin to imagine how news of a baby from a former relationship would affect him or his marriage.

The more she went over the imponderables in her heart, the more she knew she'd done the right thing by preparing him first.

And if he didn't come to see his son?

Her hand went to her throat.

If he didn't come, then it meant that after weighing everything very carefully, he'd decided that never setting eyes on his tiny offspring was for the best. If that were the case, she'd already made up her mind never to question that decision.

The most important thing was, she'd given him the opportunity to know of Nicky's existence, and could leave with a clear conscience. Tomorrow she would board the plane with her baby, having said a final farewell to the past.

Nicky was the love of her life now, her future. He would be the constant reminder of Alik and the great love they'd once shared. She would devote every waking moment to being the best mother a child could ever have.

She tapped on the hotel room door before unlocking it so as not to alarm the sitter. To her relief, she found the woman sitting in a chair holding the baby against her shoulder.

"Mrs. Wood? How's Nicky? Has he cried for his bottle?"

The older woman smiled. "He barely woke up and has been a perfect little gentleman. Such a sweet nature for a big boy.

I was hoping you would be gone longer. There's nothing like a newborn, especially this one. With his dark curly hair and beautiful olive skin, his father must be as handsome as blazes."

Blaire cleared her throat. "He is."

"Makes me baby hungry for more grandchildren."

"I can't thank you enough."

"Say no more. I know exactly how you feel. When it's your first child, you're almost afraid to breathe, let alone be out of its sight."

"Am I that transparent?"

She chuckled as she handed the baby to Blaire. "A new mother with her baby is a wonderful thing to behold. I'm glad I could be of help."

"So am I."

Blaire took fifty dollars from her purse and pressed it in the woman's hand.

"Oh, no, my dear. That's twenty too much."

"If it hadn't been absolutely necessary, I would never have left my baby at all. To know you were watching after him settled my mind a great deal. Please keep it with my heartfelt thanks."

"Thank you." She patted Blaire's arm, then gave the baby a kiss on the top of his head before leaving the room.

After locking the door, Blaire rocked Nicky in her arms. "Oh, you feel good. Have you missed me as much as I missed you?" She covered his face with kisses.

"I bet by the time I order an early lunch and it's delivered to

the room, you'll be hungry for your bottle. Come with mommy.”

She walked over to the phone at the bedside table and called for a meal to be sent up. Since boarding the plane yesterday she'd had no appetite. But now that the miracle had happened and she'd found Alik, talked to him, she was hungry.

While she waited for the food to arrive, she gave Nicky a sponge bath and dressed him in his blue stretchy suit with feet. By now he was making sounds that he was hungry for his next feeding.

Thank heaven for prepared formula she could empty right from a can into his bottle. He was such a good baby, he didn't even mind it at room temperature.

She lay down on the bed and fed him in the crook of her arm. He'd been blessed with a healthy appetite. While he devoured the contents, she studied every detail of his precious face and body, which had measured twenty-two inches long when he was born.

He not only had Alik's skin and coloring, but one day he would grow to be tall like his father. Having just come from seeing Alik, Blaire could pick out the many characteristics that already made Nicky recognizable as one of the beautiful, fabulously wealthy Jarmans of Long Island, a well-established, well-connected banking family on both sides of the ocean.

The whole clan had exceptional good looks, especially Alik's mother, a physically beautiful woman with luxuriant black hair reminiscent of her Greek ancestry. Alik resembled her the most in appearance. But not in anything else, thank heaven. His height

he'd inherited from his dark-blond, green-eyed father who'd come from English parentage.

Nicky's Regan genes seemed to have contributed more to his even temperament. He'd inherited a sunny disposition for which Blaire's mother was famous. So far his eyes were a cloudy color. Perhaps Blaire had given him her gray eyes. Only time would tell.

There'd been several knocks on the door of the trailer since Blaire's hasty exit, but Alik had ignored them. The drone of the rain on the roof was driving him mad. He tossed down his second scotch, but the hoped-for state of oblivion hadn't occurred yet. Maybe if he finished off the whole bottle a miracle would happen and he would pass out.

Until Blaire had ripped his heart from his body almost a year ago, he'd rarely drunk anything more than an occasional beer or glass of wine. Since their excruciating breakup for which she offered some mumbo jumbo explanation about him being too old for her after all, he'd kept something stronger on hand for emergencies—like those times in the middle of the night when the emotional wound oozed more blood and the pain got so bad he needed relief.

This was one of those moments, only it wasn't even noon. Damn her to hell for showing up with such an improbable, ludicrous tale just when the new project had given him a reason to get up in the mornings.

Alik threw the empty tumbler across the expanse. It hit the wall, then ricocheted to the petrographic microscope, shattering

both the glass and the lens. The fact that he'd caused damage to an expensive tool of his trade didn't faze him.

He could still see her mouth forming the words. That luscious red mouth he helplessly devoured over and over in dreams he hadn't been able to control.

We have a son who was born August 19th. He's six weeks old and was christened Nicholas Regan Jarman.

He actually had a son she called Nicky? A child from his own loins? Alik shook his dark head. Dear God. Could she possibly be telling the truth?

You have every right to know you're a father, especially because I'm being married in two months and another man will be raising him.

Full of rage, Alik leaped to his feet, kicking a couple of geology journals out of the way with the tip of his boot. Did Blaire take him for a complete fool, one who would lie down and die for her? Is that what she really thought?

No doubt her latest fiancé was the man who'd made her pregnant, the one for whom she'd dumped Alik while he'd been out of town giving a geological seminar in Kentucky.

Now that the baby was born, the bastard didn't want anything to do with it. He'd probably threatened to withhold financial support, so she'd decided to fob it off as Alik's love child, hoping he would kick in with the funds.

Like hell!

He reached for the uncapped bottle and made his way through

the cluttered trailer to his bedroom. But he couldn't get away from her last salvo reverberating in his head.

I'm staying at the Bluebird Inn in Warwick until checkout time at eleven tomorrow morning. If you want to see your little boy, I'll wait for you that long.

His bitterness had reached its zenith. He lifted the bottle to his lips. "You can wait until hell freezes over, my beloved," he ground out before draining what was left.

Oblivion meant you never had to wake up. Unfortunately Alik's respite from pain lasted only as long as the phone didn't ring.

Disoriented because it was so dark in the room, he ran a hand over the stubble on his jaw and tried to sit up. The room spun. He felt like the devil, but the damn phone continued to jar his nerves.

Through bleary eyes he checked his watch. It was quarter to eight? He fell back against the pillow from dizziness. That meant he'd been passed out for ten hours.

What did he expect after drinking a bottle of scotch on an empty stomach!

His cell phone was in the other room. Who in the hell would let it ring twenty times?

Blaire. That's who. She was desperate for money. Too bad she hadn't figured out which side her bread was buttered on before she'd betrayed him with another man.

They'd only slept together once—the night before he'd had to leave to give that emergency seminar. From the beginning, he'd

held off making love to her until after their marriage because he knew she was a virgin.

But something about his going away on that last unexpected trip had made her so insecure, she'd begged him to take her to bed, assuring him that her OB had put her on the pill at her premarital checkup. It had never occurred to him not to believe her.

At that point in time he'd been too seduced by her warmth and beauty, too deeply in love, too filled with desire for her to see what was coming.

The night they'd made love was the last time he would ever see her again.

Until this morning...

If she'd lied to him about the pill, then the baby could be anybody's. As far as Alik was concerned, if he had fathered her child, then he wanted DNA proof of his paternity!

Staggering off the bed, he groped his way to the shower and let the water pour over his head until it cleared enough that he could make it to the kitchen without falling down.

The thought of a meal sounded repulsive, but he toasted a slice of bread to put something substantial in his stomach. Two cups of coffee later, he realized that if he didn't bite the bait, he would always have a question in his mind about the real reason for her unprecedented visit.

Much as he dreaded the idea of seeing her again, of being in the same room with the only woman who'd ever held such fatal

appeal for him, he couldn't live with this thing left unresolved. Not if he wanted to survive the rest of his life.

Obviously he'd never known the real Blaire. It seemed she'd been a bewitching liar all along, deceitfully drawing him down to hell with silken cords fashioned expressly for him. But his instincts told him she wasn't lying about the existence of a baby.

All that remained was to call her bluff. Then he could write Finished to the end of the script and toss it in the trash along with every bittersweet memory.

After brushing his teeth, he dressed in clean trousers and a polo shirt, then left the trailer.

"Dr. Jarman? Wait up!"

His head swam as he turned it. He held on to the door handle to regain his equilibrium. "Hello, Ms. Call. What can I do for you?" The attractive blond graduate student was starting to make a nuisance of herself.

"I've been trying to reach you on the phone. It's Friday night. A whole bunch of us are getting together in Peter's trailer for a party. They elected me to invite you."

"That's very nice of everyone but I'm afraid I have other plans."

Not to be daunted she said, "The party will probably go all night. You'll be welcome whenever you get back."

"Don't think I'm not appreciative of the invitation, but I haven't partied in years and have no intention of starting now. Good night, Ms. Call."

She followed him to his truck. “Why won’t you call me Sandy?”

“I never address female students by their first names on the job.” He got inside and shut the door.

“What about off the job?” she asked in a surprisingly brazen manner through the open window.

“There is no ‘off the job’ when it comes to students.”

The only time he’d broken that rule had been with Blaire. It had turned out to be the greatest mistake of his life. He had an idea he would spend the rest of eternity paying for it. Tonight was a case in point.

He backed away, then floored the accelerator, almost hoping the dust flew in the aggressive Ms. Call’s face so she would get the point. With Blaire it had been the other way around. He’d done all the running. Until she’d let him catch her...

She’d missed his first test and had called his office with an excuse that she’d gotten the flu and didn’t feel well enough to take the exam. Used to the wiles of some of the female students who traded on their good looks for favors, he didn’t believe her and told her to come into his office. He’d give her the exam orally if she couldn’t write.

The breathtaking, auburn-haired student ten to twelve years his junior who’d shown up for the appointment did indeed have the flu. She appeared unsteady on her feet and the red stains on her cheeks were due to a fever.

Without conscious thought he put the back of his hand to the

skin of her cheek where her shoulder-length hair had been swept aside. It was hot to the touch. At the slight contact, surprised dove-gray eyes fringed by black lashes fused with his. In that moment he felt a quickening pass through both their bodies.

“Forgive me for not believing you,” he whispered, lowering his hand. “When did you notice the flu coming on?”

“This morning.”

He sucked in his breath. “You must feel wretched and should be home in bed. How did you drive here in this condition?”

“I took the bus.”

Scandalized by his insensitive treatment of her over the phone earlier, he said, “This is my fault. I’m through lecturing for today and will drive you home.”

“Oh, no.” She shook her head. “That’s very kind of you, but it won’t be necessary. As long as I’m here, please let me take the test, then I’ll go.”

Though he could sense her reservations about being alone with him, he knew a fire had been lit inside her. The same fire had been ignited inside him when he’d touched her skin. An invisible energy crackled between them.

Her breathing had grown shallow. A tiny pulse in the scented hollow of her throat throbbed out of control. He had an irresistible urge to press his mouth to it.

“Forget the test. I’ll drive you home.”

“My parents’ house is twelve miles away from campus. That’s too far. I couldn’t let you do it.”

The more she retreated, the more determined he was to have his way.

“If you won’t allow me to make amends, then I’ll call for a taxi.”

“Please no. I don’t have the cash on me.”

“Naturally I would pay.”

Her small gasp of frustration pleased him. “Dr. Jarman—”

“The name is Alik. If you’re going to refuse all help, then let me call one of your parents to come and get you.”

“My dad’s the only one with a car and he teaches at a junior high. I wouldn’t dream of getting him out of class.”

He put his hands on his hips. “Then the only thing to do is accompany you home on the bus.”

He watched her swallow nervously. “Why would you do that?”

“Because flu can cause a person to pass out. If you start to feel lightheaded, I want to be there with my cell phone to call 911. Admit you’re about ready to collapse.”

Tears moistened her eyes. “I—I admit it,” she stammered.

Through with this nonsense, he walked over to the door and turned out the light. “Come on. My car’s right outside the back steps of the building. I’m taking you home. Now.”

In those last seconds of hesitation, he knew she was fighting more than her desire not to be a burden.

His world changed the moment she moved past him in acquiescence. Like a lick of flame, the accidental brush of her hip against his sealed his fate.

As the sign for Warwick came into view, Alik's torturous thoughts returned to the present with a jerk.

A long time ago he'd consigned Blaire Regan to the devil. Such a beautiful, treacherous coward, she'd ended their love affair long distance proffering no explanation he could live with. To compound the pain, she'd run away where he couldn't find her. By refusing to face him, her cruel actions had denied him any possibility of permanent closure.

His jaw hardened.

She'd made a fatal mistake by daring to show up at his trailer this morning. Before the night was out she would learn the definition of cruelty. Then it would be she who rued the day their paths had ever crossed.

The knuckles of his hand gleamed white as he turned the steering wheel to enter the parking area in front of the Bluebird Inn.

## CHAPTER TWO

WITH the bulk of the ten o'clock television news coverage over, Blaire realized she'd been waiting for something that was never going to happen.

She looked down at her adorable baby who was still wide-awake on one of the double beds, almost as if he knew this day and night had been different from all the others. His fingers clung to her pinky.

"How sad Alik's never going to know you, my little love." One salty tear dropped, then another. "You have no idea what a wonderful man he is, Nicky. There's no one his equal, except for you. I pray you'll grow up to be exactly like him."

She used the edge of the baby quilt she'd made for him to wipe her eyes. "I'm not talking about the angry man I confronted this morning. I'm afraid that man is the result of what I did to him. He'll never forgive me, I can see that now. Why should he? If he'd done the same thing to me, I'm not sure I'd even be alive.

"When he walked in his trailer this morning and saw me, he had every right to throw me out bodily. But he didn't. He could have called me a liar. In fact he could have called me every cruel name he could think of. He could have shouted loud enough for everyone at the site to hear him. Yet he restrained himself, because he's a real man."

The lump lodged in her throat refused to move. "I did an awful

thing to him, Nicky. I hurt him the worst way you can hurt a man. It destroyed me, too. But I had no choice. None...”

She leaned over to kiss the top of his nose. Every time she looked at his precious face, it was Alik all over again. Just in miniature.

“I believe it was destiny the day I came down with that bout of flu in college. I was already halfway in love with your father, the brilliant, famous, drop-dead gorgeous Dr. Jarman. Every woman in class had fantasies about him. Yet I was the lucky one who had to go to his office to take my test.

“He was unbelievably tender with me.” A delicious shiver ran through her as she relived the feel of his hand on her face to check her temperature. “After driving me home, he brought me dinner and flowers. I didn’t have to take the test until I was better. By then I so madly in love with him, I forgot I had any other classes.

“We spent every waking moment together. Most evenings we walked along the beach talking about our lives, then ended up in each other’s arms. He shared his dreams with me. Imagine. Me. I told him mine. You were part of those dreams, Nicky. You and the rest of the family we were going to rear one day.

“Your father has led such a fascinating life. His privileged background has given him the best education in the best schools. He’s gone on adventures that have taken him all over the world. What’s so amazing about all this is that he became my world, and I became his.

“Though I was forced to break up with him—” her voice shook

in remembered pain of that ghastly time when he was away giving a seminar “—I’ll always be thankful he made me pregnant with you. You’re all I have left of him. When we get home, I’m never looking back again. What I am going to do is raise you to be the same, magnificent man he is. I plan to devote my life to you, my sweet love.

“Come on. Let’s get you undressed and ready for bed. We have a long flight home to San Diego tomorrow. You need your sleep. So do I.”

As she got up from the bed to find his nightgown in the diaper bag, the phone rang. The baby’s arms flailed in the air.

That would be Blaire’s mother calling to find out how things had gone today.

Not so well, Mom.

Blaire walked around to the bedside table to pick up the receiver and said hello.

“Ms. Regan? This is the front desk. There’s a Dr. Jarman here who said you were expecting him.”

The receiver slipped from her fingers. It clanked against the wood. With trembling hands she grasped for it.

“Y-yes. I am. Please send him up.”

Dear God.

“Very good.”

After hearing the click, she replaced the receiver and dashed to the bathroom to retouch her lipstick. Her hair needed a good brushing after playing with the baby who had started to reach for

the strands. She probably ought to cut it, but it was too thick to wear short.

The blue cotton sweater and designer jeans she'd chosen to wear no longer seemed right, but it was too late now. She could hear his familiar tap on the door. He didn't do it like anyone else. Her heart skipped a beat. Some things never changed.

She hurried out of the bathroom toward the door to the hotel room. But she was so frightened and excited all at the same time, she had to stop and try to pull herself together before she opened it.

This morning Alik had been breathtaking enough in a T-shirt and jeans. Tonight he was shaven and dressed in a navy polo shirt and cargo pants, the kind of clothes that revealed his devastating masculinity. He put every other man to shame.

Embarrassed because she'd been feasting her eyes, she quickly lifted her gaze to his face, fearful of seeing the same chilling look in his green eyes he'd directed at her earlier in the day. But for once something else had caught his attention. He stared past her shoulder to the baby still dressed in his adorable yellow suit who happened to be in Alik's direct line of vision.

She noticed the sharp rise and fall of his chest before he swept past her in a few long strides to reach the bed. In his haste, he'd forgotten to shut the door. Blaire closed it, then walked slowly toward him waiting for his reaction.

With that effortless male grace, which was unconscious on his part, he sank down on the bed next to the baby. Her breath caught

as she watched him lean over Nicky and run a hand through his curly black hair.

Their son didn't seem particularly disturbed that a total stranger had started to undress him. Nicky's sweet temperament allowed Alik to examine every part of his anatomy, from his broad shoulders to his square-tipped fingers and long legs without making a fuss.

While he lay there looking up at his father with cloudy eyes already fringed by long black lashes like Alik's, his dark male beauty and olive skin, the square jaw, the way his shell ears lay close to his perfectly shaped head, all screamed Jarman.

"Dear Lord—I have a son."

The reverence, the wonder in Alik's husky tone told Blaire how much this moment meant to him. Her heart swelled until she thought it might burst. No matter if she'd done everything else wrong in life, she'd done this one thing right.

Clearing her throat she murmured, "Perhaps now you'll understand why I didn't dare bring him to the site. People would have taken one look at him an—"

"Why didn't you tell me you were pregnant?" he demanded before she could finish. The tender side had disappeared as if it had never been.

By now Alik had gathered their near-naked baby against his shoulder with the quilt. He rose to his full, intimidating height.

She backed away from the fury in his glittering gaze. "I—I didn't know I was pregnant when I broke our engagement. After

I found out, I thought it better not to tell you.”

“Why? Damn you.” He hadn’t raised his voice. Maybe that’s why his excoriating rebuke sounded more deadly.

Clasping her hands together she said, “I told you I had been put on birth control pills, but the doctor said I should have been on them a full month b-before—”

“That still doesn’t explain why I wasn’t informed you were carrying my son.” His voice grated.

Aghast at his unexpected anger, she struggled for words that would appease him. Anything but the truth.

“I knew how much you hated me for ending our relationship the way I did. There was no excuse for my unconscionable behavior. I realize I was a coward. It’s because I was too immature for a man like you. Under the circumstances, I didn’t want to bring any more grief to your life.”

His features hardened, making him appear older than his thirty-six years.

“If that’s the case, then why in the hell have you come here now?”

She fought to hold back the sobs for the bitterness and hurt in his voice.

I’m so sorry for what I’ve done to you, my darling. You’ll never know the nightmare I’ve lived through. I can never tell you.

“Because having a baby forced me to consider someone else besides myself. Before Nicky’s delivery, it was all still like a dream. But when the doctor laid him across my stomach, I was

struck with the realization that he was half yours. In that moment I determined that as soon as my OB would allow me to travel, I would bring him to you.

“I couldn’t have lived with myself if I’d kept this knowledge from you. As the father of our baby, it’s your God-given right to know he exists. R-Rick agrees.”

“Rick?” The skin around Alik’s mouth had gone a bluish-white. If she didn’t know better, she would think he were ill.

“Rick Hammond, my fiancé.” Dear God, the lies... “He knows I’m here, and he knows why. After we’re married, he intends to be a wonderful father to Nicky. Rick’s a good person. You can trust him to help me raise our son.”

A stillness had come over Alik. It should have warned her to stop talking, but she’d been working on this speech for weeks and needed to get it all said while she still had the courage.

“I—If you want to see Nicky from time to time, I’m willing to work out visitation with you. I’ll give you my phone number.” She moved over to the counter by the television and wrote it down on a piece of hotel stationery. “After Rick and I are married, I’ll let you know my new one.”

As she lifted her head, she noticed he’d put the baby back down on the bed. To her shock, he’d stretched out beside Nicky and was testing the strength of their little boy’s hands and arms.

The deep chuckle that came out of Alik testified to his delight in his offspring. Many times she’d dreamed about a domestic scene like this between father and son, but the reality was so

poignant, she found herself fighting tears again.

“Alik?” His actions made her wonder if he’d even heard her.

“What is it?” he asked without looking in her direction.

“I know all of this has come as a tremendous shock. You don’t need to make up your mind about visitation tonight. If you need time to decide what you want to do, I’ll certainly understand.”

“I don’t need time,” came the blunt reply. “I want custody of Nicky.”

It was her turn to freeze in place. Surely she hadn’t heard him correctly.

Calm down, Blaire. He’s only baiting you because he has to go somewhere with all the anger that’s been bottled up inside him for the past year. Don’t take anything he says seriously. He looks exhausted. In a few minutes he’ll leave and that will be the end of it.

Pretending she hadn’t heard him, she found the baby’s nightgown in the diaper bag, then walked over to pick up Nicky and put him in the crib. But by this time Alik had nestled the baby against his shoulder with one strong, suntanned hand spanning his little back.

“I need to get him ready for bed, Alik.”

He stared up at her, his slumberous gaze narrowed on her features. “I need time to get acquainted with my son. There are two double beds in here. You look tired. Why don’t you go to sleep in the other one. I’ll take care of him.”

“Don’t be absurd!” she cried before remembering that she

wasn't going to let him get to her.

"I see you brought cans of formula with you." He spoke in a conversational tone, ignoring her outburst. "Did you do that so I could feed him, or aren't you nursing?"

The intimate question caught her off guard because she hadn't expected him to think about things like that. She found herself blushing. Her reaction was ridiculous considering the fact that they'd spent a whole night making love. That night the term "one flesh" took on a whole new meaning, with Nicky as the final result.

"I nursed him in the hospital, but he developed a serious rash. The pediatrician told me he's allergic to my milk, so I switched to formula. I use something different when I'm home, but the canned milk works fine for travel."

Not being able to nurse had come as a huge disappointment to her. But compared to the more serious problems some mothers faced with their newborns, she had no room to complain.

"In that case I'll be able to give him his next feeding. If you can't go to sleep with the light on, by all means turn it off. Nicky and I will get along just fine in the dark, won't we, son."

This game had gone far enough. She sat down on the bed opposite him, unaware she was torturing the nightgown in her hands. Preoccupied with an animated Nicky and his baby noises, Alik refused to look at her.

"It's getting late." She had to think fast. "I promised Rick I would phone him before I went to bed."

“Go ahead. So far our son’s behavior has been perfect. This is probably the best time to talk. Rick needs to know that I’m not relinquishing my right to raise Nicky. On the contrary, I plan to father him on a full-time basis from here on out.”

The finality in his tone terrified Blaire. She bowed her head.

“You can’t do that. He’s my son, too, Alik.”

“I’m afraid you should have thought of that before you entered my trailer without being invited. If you think I’m going to allow him to be raised by another man who answers to Daddy, and calls him son, then you never knew me, and I sure as hell never knew you. Except of course for one night in the biblical sense,” he scathed, wounding her in new ways that went marrow deep.

She slid off the edge of the bed and got to her feet, too upset to remain in one position. “Why don’t you go home and get a good night’s sleep. I’ll do the same. In the morning we’ll be fresh and can talk over breakfast before I have to leave for the airport with Nicky.”

His answer was to place the baby on his stomach and rub the back of his head in a soothing motion. While Nicky lay there perfectly content, Blaire felt like screaming.

“I know you’re angry, Alik. You have every right to be. But please let’s not fight over Nicky. He’s an innocent baby who deserves the best from both of us. As long as you want to be a part of his life, I’m willing to work out something reasonable with you.”

His piercing glance trapped hers. “I plan to be very reasonable.

How much do you want in order to give me exclusive parental rights? Two million dollars? Three? What's your price? Why not talk it over with Rick. I'm willing to negotiate as long as he names a figure that's somewhere in the ball park."

She shook her head in exasperation. "My baby is not for sale at any price."

His mocking smile shattered her. "A little while ago you hastened to inform me he was our baby."

"Stop it, Alik!"

"You started it by coming to New York and presenting me with our little fait accompli.

"Did you think I was going to forgive your crimes because you decided at the midnight hour to do the decent thing in letting me know I was a father?" Rage had made the cords stand out in his neck.

"We have a son. He isn't a piece of property to be passed back and forth when the mood suits either one of us. Nicky's beautiful. Perfect. I've been cheated out of his first six weeks.

"It's obvious you never loved me. Because you couldn't bring yourself to marry me, I was denied the thrill of watching him grow inside you over the nine months you were pregnant. That's not something I'm going to forget. But it's in the past.

"All that matters now is that I love him. I plan to fight for him, Blaire. I know I can win. I have friends in high places, and I have the kind of money it takes to get what I want.

"I hope I've made it clear I want my son. When you call Rick,

you tell him that for me. No matter how accommodating he's been, let's be honest. If he's any kind of a man, he'll prefer making his own babies with you.

"Here!" He reached in his trouser pocket and tossed his cell phone on the other bed. "Be my guest. Since I'm planning to stay the night, you'll need to go in the bathroom and shut the door if you don't want me to overhear your conversation.

"Before you go, toss me that nightgown and I'll get this little tyke ready for bed. He just gave me a huge yawn, which reminds me how sleepy I am. This has been quite a day for both of us, hasn't it, son."

She struggled for breath. "You can't stay here, Alik!"

"What are you worried about? I'm certainly not about to leap on an unwilling woman who left me and ran away because she couldn't stand the sight of me. Remind Rick of that fact when he tells you he doesn't approve of your spending the night in the same room with me.

"Of course if it's a case of your sensibilities being offended now that you're wearing his ring, you're welcome to book another room for yourself. I'll pay for it."

Suffused by the white-hot heat of anger she cried, "I thought by doing the honorable thing that you—"

"No—" He broke in brutally. "You never thought about anyone but Blaire Regan. I suspect Rick is a good deal younger than I am, and doesn't have a dime to his name. He's probably panting to get you into bed if he hasn't already, and is praying I'll

come through with enough child support to set you up.”

“How dare you!”

But those very words crucified her even as she said them because Alik had every right to be in a rage. The damage she'd done to him by breaking their engagement was so much worse than she'd supposed. And now she was forced to perpetuate a lie about a fiancé who didn't exist. All because she'd wanted Alik to know he had a son. What have I done?

If he fought for custody, his family would get involved. After all his mother had threatened, if she were to find out it was Blaire's child...

Blaire shuddered, not even wanting to think about that because Alik's mother would never accept Nicky as a Jarman. The knowledge of his existence would create such enmity between Alik and his family, it would turn into a living horror story.

In the end Alik and Nicky would be the ones who were destroyed. She couldn't do that to them. She couldn't let it happen. Right now she needed the wisdom of Solomon to know where to turn, how to stop the precarious situation from escalating.

Feeling physically and emotionally ill, she turned out the light and sank down on top of the other bed to think. But the hopelessness of this nightmare overwhelmed her. Turning her back to Alik, she buried her face in the pillow to stifle her sobs.

After a few minutes, “Once upon a time those tears might have

moved me,” came the gravelly male voice out of the darkness. “To have the thing you prized most in life snatched away without warning is a life-changing experience, isn’t it, Blaire? I have to say it’s one you’ve been long overdue.

“Do you know I used to lie awake nights planning different ways I would exact my revenge to make you suffer even one-hundredth of my pain? Little did I know that one day down the road, you would appear in my trailer to supply me with the perfect instrument to inflict that torture back on you.”

Unable to bear the stinging pain any longer, she drew herself upright, smoothing the hair out of her tear-ravaged face.

“Consider your revenge complete, Alik. I’m prepared to grovel because I can’t lose Nicky. He’s my life!”

“You mean Rick isn’t?”

This was one time she had to be totally honest. “Not in the same way.”

“The poor, stupid devil. You’re the kind of woman who needs to wear a warning sign, Love Me At Your Own Peril.”

Every thrust of his rapier tongue ripped apart what little of her heart his family had left intact. Now there was nothing more to shred.

“Name your price,” she said in wooden voice. “Just promise me you won’t bring the courts into it and sue me for full custody of Nicky.” Please don’t do that or your family will find out. “I—I’d rather be dead.”

A long, tension-filled silence ensued. The baby must have

fallen asleep in his Alik's arms. She hadn't heard a peep out of him.

"That's an interesting proposition," he muttered silkily. "Let me think about it. I'll give you my answer in the morning." The sound of satisfaction in his tone made her tremble.

While both the baby and Alik slept, she spent the next three hours in a frantic state of torment trying to figure out what his answer would involve. The only possibility that made sense would be if he demanded she live in the same city so they could share custody.

But if he forced her to do that, then her bogus story about a fiancé would be exposed. There was no way on earth she could come up with a fake husband-to-be. It meant she would have to concoct another story about Rick not wanting to leave San Diego, so they'd decided to call off their engagement.

She could hear Alik's mocking words when she informed him of that particular piece of news.

That makes two down, Blaire. How many more to go before the male of the species learns to look, then run for dear life in the opposite direction.

By the time Nicky started making hungry sounds, she'd come to terms with the fact that she might have to move to Warwick and rent an apartment until Alik's work took him elsewhere. But whatever she had to do, it was worth it to keep her baby.

As for Alik's parents, they still wouldn't have to know anything about his secret child. Thank heaven Long Island was too far

away to pose any kind of threat of her being seen in this area of the state.

Out of habit, she got up from the bed and flicked on the light switch to pour Nicky's formula into a clean bottle. When she turned around Alik was right behind her, their fussy baby propped against his shoulder.

"I want to feed him. Show me what to do."

He stood too close. She could feel his warmth. The familiar brand of the soap he used in the shower emanated from his bronzed skin, assailing her senses. His shuttered eyes reminded her of the way he used to look at her when his passion had been aroused.

Out of self-preservation she ran for the baby bag. "He needs to have his diaper changed first," she called over her shoulder. "Lay him down on the quilt and you can do it."

The next few minutes were instructive as he followed her directions with methodical attention to detail. Dr. Jarman was known as a perfectionist. He would be that way when it came to caring for his son.

Out of the periphery she saw the glow in his eyes, revealing the bursting pride in his little boy who was perfect in every way, shape and form.

When he'd finally managed to slip the baby into a clean shirt and nightgown, she suggested he sit at the head of the bed with Nicky nestled in his left arm.

His daddy had taken a little too long for his liking with all the

baby wipes, ointment and powder. Now their son was all worked up and clamored for his food.

Averting her eyes, she placed a clean cloth over Alik's broad shoulder, careful not to touch him for fear she wouldn't want to stop. Then she handed him the bottle.

"Go ahead and put it in his mouth. He'll do the rest. When he's drunk a third of it, prop him on your shoulder and gently pat his back to get rid of the air bubbles. By the time he has drained the bottle, he'll be fast asleep again. Give him one more burp and then put him in his crib.

"Be sure to lay him on his back before you cover him with his quilt. The doctor says a lot of infant deaths have been prevented by putting them in that position."

She stood for a minute to watch. Nicky searched in frustration for the nipple, but couldn't quite get hold of it.

"Insert it right into his mouth. He's not a fragile piece of crystal."

When Alik did her bidding, the baby started devouring his formula. He drank so fast and furiously, he made loud noises that sounded indecent. Alik's laughter started in his throat and rumbled out to fill the hotel room.

She couldn't help smiling. "As you're discovering, he has your healthy appetite." Before she gave her feelings away, she removed herself to the other bed.

"Do you want me to leave the light on or off?"

"On," he murmured. "I still have trouble believing he's real,

let alone that he came from one night's pleasure with you.”

The thickness in his tone sent delicious pains through her body.

“I could look at him all night. He has your eyes and eyebrows. It's your mouth in miniature. Even I who am biased because I'm his father, can see he's a living miracle because you're his mother. For a woman who hates my guts, you've given me a priceless treasure.”

She winced at the sudden twist of the knife.

“Because of this noble gesture you've made,” he said with glaring sarcasm, “I'm prepared to offer you a deal. There'll be no bargaining. You will either accept it, or I'll take Nicky away from you forever.”

Here it comes, Blaire. Her fingernails dug into the quilted bedspread covering the mattress.

“For the next month you'll live in my trailer with me. Separate beds of course. I need that amount of time to get used to my son's routine, and for him to get used to me.

“At the end of the thirty days—if you've kept your side of the bargain by staying put to help me establish an unbreakable bond with our innocent child—then and only then will I be willing to talk about joint custody. Otherwise we go to court. I promise you it will be a fight you'll wish you hadn't started,” he vowed with a fierceness she'd never heard come out of him before.

“That's it. That's the bargain. If your fiancé doesn't like the idea of being separated from you for a month, that's tough!

Compared to nine months deprivation from my unborn child, he damn well has nothing to complain about.”

## CHAPTER THREE

BLAIRE didn't close her eyes for the rest of the night. To live with Alik for a month in such close quarters was the last thing she'd expected him to demand.

He'd asked the impossible of her!

Unable to quell the frantic beat of her heart since he'd surprised her in his trailer yesterday, she feared being under one roof with him that long would wear out her vital organ before the thirty days were halfway up.

She needed to be made of stone to endure the torture of being around him day and night, sharing everything except a bed. If she'd thought she'd loved him prior to their breakup, those emotions were nothing compared to the feelings she had for him as she watched the care he was giving Nicky for his six in the morning feeding.

Perhaps there was no more beautiful sight than a strong, powerful man nurturing his little baby with so much love. With Alik this wasn't a show of pretense. His delight in their son was a hundred percent genuine. If Blaire hadn't known that deep in her soul, she might not have set out on this precarious mission.

Now that Alik had told her what he was prepared to do, she had a decision to make. But she needed to inform her parents before giving him his answer.

While father and son were otherwise occupied, she got off

the bed, gathered a fresh change of clothes and headed for the bathroom with his cell phone.

After locking the door, she turned on the water full force, then phoned home. Her mom and dad adored Alik, and were horribly upset when they'd found out why she'd broken her engagement. Though they hadn't approved of her lying to him about her reason for ending it with him, they'd understood her motives and had left it alone.

When she'd informed them she was expecting his baby, they'd insisted she live with them until after it was born. Without their love and support, she had no idea how she would have managed. Since they'd always maintained Alik had the right to know about his child, they'd backed her decision to fly to New York.

But like her, they were shocked by Alik's ultimatum. When she reminded them that his family was worth millions and he could take Nicky away from her, the silence on the phone told its own story. Her parents worshiped their grandson. To lose him would be unthinkable.

No one knew better than Blaire that her parents lived on a fixed income and could never afford a court battle. Neither could she, especially not on the small amount of money she made doing word processing at home for college students who needed their term papers typed.

The best her parents could do was ask her to call them as often as she could, and remind her that she and Nicky still had a home when the month was up. With muffled tears, she thanked them,

then hung up and stepped into the shower.

By the time she'd emerged from the bathroom in a clean blouse and jeans, Alik had put Nicky back in the crib and was lounging on the bed like a dangerous panther lying in wait for its prey.

She braced herself to face the inevitable withering comment from him. It wasn't long in coming.

"That must have been some conversation you had with Rick. I hope you warned him that if he sets foot in my trailer at any time in the next thirty days, all bets are off."

In order to carry out this charade to its necessary conclusion, she had to convince Alik she had a fiancé.

Pretending to be enflamed, she wheeled around. "Why do you assume I have decided to accept your bargain?"

He flashed her a sardonic glance. "Because you didn't try to sneak out with Nicky while I was asleep between feedings."

"I wouldn't have gotten very far," she admitted, reaching for the brush to do her hair.

"I'm glad you recognize that fact."

If she'd really been engaged to another man, his smug remark would have made her furious.

"Enough, Alik. You've won. I'll live with you for a month. But it will be easier for me if you leave my fiancé out of the conversation. He may not like this arrangement, but he urged me to accept your conditions because he knows I'll never be happy if I lose Nicky. That's the kind of man he is, so don't say anything

more about him.” Her voice trembled.

Judging by the way his expression closed up, she’d done a better job of acting than she’d supposed.

“I called for breakfast to be sent up. It should be here any minute. While we’re waiting, let’s make a list of the things we’ll need for our happy home.”

She bit her lip. “There isn’t much space to work with in your trailer.”

“We’ll make room. I prefer cozy to palatial.”

Alik had never been able to tolerate his parents’ ostentatious lifestyle. He found it obscene to flaunt money, and much preferred to do humanitarian kinds of gestures behind the scenes. In that way alone, he was a remarkable man. If she got started on all his wonderful traits, she wouldn’t be able to stop.

“Well, obviously we’ll need a crib. I can send for the rest of Nicky’s clothes.”

He made a sound of exasperation. “I doubt a six-week-old baby has an elaborate wardrobe. We’ll shop for the items he needs. After your sudden exit from my world, the experience of buying things for my own daughter or son was something I never expected to happen in my lifetime.

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