

MILLS & BOON®

Betrothed for the Baby

Kathie DeNosky



Vintage Desire

Kathie DeNosky

Betrothed for the Baby

Аннотация

He claimed another man's child...Fearful that her ex's wealthy family would try to get custody of her unborn baby, there was only one man Cassie Marshall could turn to—her boss, Hunter O'Banyon. When he offered his protection and his name, Cassie accepted, sure that she was doing her best for her child. But when Hunter branded her with his kisses, Cassie forgot their arrangement was only a pretense.... Would it ever be more?

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

To: My personal assistant, Luther Freemont

Re: My grandson, Hunter O'Banyon

My grandson, Hunter, has arrived in Devil's Fork, Texas, to take over running the Life Med Evac Helicopter Service. I'm sure he'll be less than pleased when he learns that his flight nurse is a single mother-to-be, who has no intention of grounding herself until just before she gives birth. However if our sources are reliable—and I have no doubt they are—he should not only come to terms with his past, but he'll find his future, as well. That said, I expect you to assist him in whatever way he deems necessary to bring about a complete and satisfactory conclusion to his current dilemma.

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

Emerald Larson

Silhouette Desire is proud to present an exciting new miniseries from

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The Illegitimate Heirs

ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN ENEMIES

REUNION OF REVENGE

BETROTHED FOR THE BABY

Betrothed for the Baby

Kathie DeNosky



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KATHIE DENOSKY

lives in her native southern Illinois with her husband and one very spoiled Jack Russell terrier. She writes highly sensual stories with a generous amount of humor. Kathie's books have appeared on the Waldenbooks bestseller list and received the Write Touch Readers' Award from WisRWA and the National Readers' Choice Award. Kathie enjoys going to rodeos, traveling to research settings for her books and listening to country music. Readers may contact Kathie at: P.O. Box 2064, Herrin, Illinois 62948-5264 or e-mail her at kathie@kathiedenosky.com.

This book is dedicated to my editor, Tina Colombo. Thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement. You're the very best.

And a special thank-you to my son, Bryan, for his help with the Spanish in this book.

Te amo, mi hijo.

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One

When Hunter O'Banyon glanced over at the pretty little blonde he'd met only moments ago, adrenaline began to pump through his veins. Her porcelain cheeks were flushed with a mixture of heat and excitement, and he could tell from the sparkle of urgency in her violet eyes that he was in for one hell of a ride.

"I hope you don't mind, but this is going to have to be faster than I'd planned," she said, sounding a little breathless.

Grinning, he nodded. "Bring it on. I can take it as fast as you want to go."

"I like the way you think." Her smile caused his heart to race like a twelve-stroke engine hitting on all cylinders. "Hang on, big guy. This might get a little wild."

Hunter took a deep breath and braced himself. "Burn it, darlin'."

At the same time as she pushed the gas pedal all the way to the floor, she reached out to flip a switch on the dash. Lights and the keening wail of a siren competed with the sound of spinning tires kicking up a huge cloud of gravel and southwest Texas dust as the pickup truck careened away from the tarmac at Devil's Fork Community Airfield.

When Hunter had discovered there was no commercial air service to the little town, he'd wondered why the pilot of the Cessna Skyhawk he'd chartered to fly him to Devil's Fork from

El Paso had laughed like a hyena when Hunter had called it an airport. Now he knew why. The entire thing consisted of an asphalt landing strip that he'd bet barely met FAA standards, a storage shed that leaned precariously to one side and a wooden pole with a tattered wind sock attached to the top just above the United States and Texas flags. As far as he could tell, there weren't even any lights for landing at night. He could only hope the Life Medevac operation looked better.

"By the way, I'm Callie Marshall, the flight nurse on the Evac II team," the blonde said conversationally.

Nice name for a nice-looking woman, he thought as they approached the edge of town. "I'm Hunter O'Banyon."

"Thank God." She grinned. "When my pager went off, I didn't give you time to introduce yourself, and it suddenly occurred to me that you might not be the man I was supposed to meet."

His heart stalled and he had to clear his suddenly dry throat. When she smiled, Callie Marshall wasn't just pretty, she was drop-dead gorgeous.

"What were the chances of anyone else flying into Devil's Fork?" he asked when he finally got his vocal cords to work.

Her delightful laughter was one of the nicest sounds he'd heard in a long time. "Good point," she said, nodding. "I think you're the first person I've heard of flying into Devil's Fork since I arrived two months ago."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me." He tightened his safety harness when she turned a corner, seemingly on two wheels. "Did

you arrive by plane?”

“No way.” She shook her head, causing her ponytail to sway back and forth. “I drove over from Houston. I wasn’t about to take one of those puddle-jumper flights in here.”

As they sped down Main Street, Hunter decided that if he’d blinked, he might have missed the entire town. Besides the fact that Callie was going so fast it wasn’t much more than a blur, the business district was only a few blocks long and there wasn’t much more than two or three blocks to the residential section.

“Mary Lou, our dispatcher, said you’re from the Miami area. It might take a while for you to get used to Devil’s Fork. It’s about six hundred miles from the nearest beach and not exactly a hotbed of social activity.”

“No kidding.” He cringed when they sailed through a four-way stop on the opposite end of town without so much as slowing down. “I knew this place was small, but I expected something a little bigger than this.”

“I did, too,” she agreed. “After I drove through it the first time, I had a hard time believing there was enough of a call for a medevac operation to be based here. But I was wrong.”

Hunter thought back to what he’d read in the file he’d been handed on the business his grandmother had given him to run. “The way I understand it, we’re the only emergency service available for sections of five different counties.”

She nodded. “The population is so sparse in this part of Texas, it isn’t cost-effective for communities to have their own

ambulance.” Shrugging, she steered the truck onto a dirt-packed road leading up to a large aircraft hangar with Life Medevac Helicopter Service painted on the side. “Besides, if they had a ground unit, it would take too long to reach most of the people and even longer to get them to a hospital. We’re their best hope for emergency medical care.”

When she drove the truck around the side of the building, Hunter breathed a little easier. The Life Medevac base appeared to be in much better condition than the Devil’s Fork airfield. Besides the well-kept hangar, there were two brand-new, top-of-the-line Bell EMS helicopters sitting on brightly painted helipads, and the entire area was ringed with what looked to be state-of-the-art lighting for night takeoffs and landings.

“I’ll see you when we get back,” she said, jamming the gearshift into Park at the same time she killed the engine and threw open the driver’s door. “I have a flight to catch.”

“Thanks for the ride,” Hunter called, getting out of the truck.

Turning, she gave him another one of her killer smiles. “I almost forgot to tell you—beware of Mary Lou’s coffee. She’ll tell you it’s the best you’ve ever had, but don’t believe it.” She grimaced. “It’s awful.”

As he stood there staring at Callie slowly jogging toward the waiting helicopter, he couldn’t put his finger on what it was about her, but something bothered him. Aside from the fact that she’d driven the truck through town as though the hounds of hell were chasing them and she now moved as if she had all the time in

the world, there was something about the snug way her navy-blue flight suit fit her around the middle that didn't seem quite right.

But when she disappeared inside the cabin space of the chopper and the door slid shut behind her, he quickly dismissed his concerns as Evac II lifted off the helipad. Although Emerald Larson had assured him that she'd seen to it that all the equipment was up-to-date and exceeded state requirements, he intended to order new flight suits in a color that could be more easily differentiated from other first responders that might be on scene when the Life Medevac crews arrived. And he'd make sure everyone wore the right size.

"You must be Hunter O'Banyon, the new boss of this outfit."

At the sound of the female voice behind him, Hunter turned to face a woman he'd judge to be somewhere in her late sixties or early seventies. With curly snow-white hair, a perfectly round face and a pair of narrow reading glasses perched on her nose, she looked as if she could easily play Mrs. Claus in a Christmas pageant.

He smiled as he extended his hand. "That would be me. And you must be Mary Lou Carson."

"The one and only." Grinning, she firmly shook his hand. "Come on in the dispatch room and rest a spell. I'll pour you a cup of the best coffee you've ever had, then I'll show you your quarters."

Reaching into the bed of the pickup truck, Hunter grabbed his luggage and followed Mary Lou out of the late-August heat and

into the air-conditioned office of the hangar. When she led him into the dispatch room, he looked around at the framed military medals hanging on the wall beside the door.

“Did these belong to your husband?” he asked conversationally.

“Some of them.” Mary Lou walked over to a small kitchen area on the opposite side of the room to stir the delicious-smelling contents of a huge pot on the electric range. “The rest are mine.”

When she walked back over to where he stood, she handed him a cup of coffee, then motioned for him to sit in one of several chairs on the opposite side of a scarred wooden desk. “Take a load off, Hunter.”

“What branch of the military were you in?” he asked, sitting down.

“Lester and I were both career Navy.” She walked between the desk and a built-in counter filled with radio equipment, a computer and several telephones to settle herself into an old wooden desk chair that looked as if it might have been around since World War II. “He was an aircraft mechanic and I was a nurse. He died in an accident onboard an aircraft carrier not long before we were supposed to retire.”

“I’m sorry.” Hunter knew all too well what it was like to lose someone unexpectedly.

“Don’t be sorry,” she said, surprising him. “Lester died doing what he loved most—working on fighter jets. That’s the best way

any of us can hope to go out of this world.” Before he could respond, she shrugged. “That’s why I’m a dispatcher here. After my arthritis forced me to stop working the floor in a hospital, I took this job. When people call with an emergency, I sometimes stay on the line and talk them through whatever medical crisis they have until one of our crews arrives. It’s almost as satisfying as nursing.”

Hunter took a sip of coffee as he considered what Mary Lou said. But as the bitter taste spread over his tongue, he had to force himself to swallow. Quickly setting the cup on the desk, he barely controlled the urge to shudder. What Callie had told him about the coffee being awful had been an understatement. The stuff was as thick as syrup and tasted as though it had been made with quinine.

Coughing, he looked up to see Mary Lou watching him expectantly. He could tell she was waiting for him to tell her how good it was.

“You like your coffee strong, don’t you?” he asked, trying not to grimace.

She shrugged. “I like my coffee to be just the way I like a man—strong and the best I’ve ever had.”

If he’d thought her coffee was enough to send his system into shock, her outspokenness finished the job. He couldn’t have been more dumbfounded if he’d tried. Unable to think of a thing to say, he waited to see what she’d say next. Unless he’d misjudged her, that shouldn’t take very long.

Her knowing smile clued him in on the fact that she'd known her statement would render him speechless. "There's a few things about me you might as well know up front, Hunt. I don't mince words. I say exactly what I think because I'm old enough to get away with it and I've never been one to beat around the bush."

"I can respect that." Hunter had no idea where Mary Lou was going with this, but he could tell she had more on her mind.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, because what I'm going to tell you now might not set real well."

"I'm listening."

"I'm going to treat you like I treat everyone else around here because I'm not impressed by much of anything anymore. And that includes you being Emerald Larson's grandson."

Hunter frowned. He'd specifically asked Emerald not to divulge his relationship to her. For one thing, he didn't need the added pressure of living up to someone's expectations. And for another, he still hadn't fully come to terms with being her grandson.

"How did you learn about—"

"Emerald and I go way back. She hasn't always been on the top of the heap. When she was a teenager, she worked behind the soda counter in my father's drugstore." Mary Lou grinned. "She was like an older sister to me, and we've stayed in touch over the years."

Hunter wasn't particularly happy about having one of Emerald's lifelong friends working for him. He didn't like the

idea of not being able to make a move without his manipulative grandmother knowing about it.

“If you’re worried about me running to Emerald to report everything you do, don’t waste your time,” Mary Lou said as though she’d read his mind. “I don’t carry tales. If she wants to know what’s going on with you, she’ll have to ask you herself.”

“That’s good to hear.” Whether he should or not, Hunter believed the woman.

Draining the last of her coffee, Mary Lou placed her cup on the desk and stood up. “Now that we have that out of the way, I’ll show you to your living quarters and let you get settled in while I finish up the beef stew I put on for our supper.” She pointed to his cup. “Would you like that warmed up?”

He quickly shook his head. “I’m not much of a coffee drinker.” He didn’t want to hurt her feelings, but if he never drank another drop of the bitter brew, it would be all too soon.

She shook her head. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you young people. I’m the only one working here who likes coffee.”

As Hunter grabbed his suitcase and followed her through a doorway and down a hall toward the back of the hangar, he suspected the others’ reluctance to drink Mary Lou’s coffee had everything in the world to do with self-defense and nothing to do with not liking coffee.

“This is your office,” she said, passing a door on the way to the back of the building. Pointing to a door across the hall, she added, “And this is the on-duty crew’s sleeping quarters. We have

three crews working rotating twenty-four-hour shifts—two days on duty and four off. Of course, on the outside chance that we get a call while one crew is out, the first two days that a crew is off duty, they're on call."

"What about you? What are your hours?"

"I'm here round the clock. When I'm not dispatching a crew, I'm cooking and handing out advice that nobody seems to listen to." She laughed as she pointed to a door next to the crew quarters. "This is my room. I have a ringer in here that wakes me up when we have a night call or I decide to take a nap."

Hunter frowned. "Who's the dispatcher on your days off?"

She continued walking toward a door at the end of the hall. "On the rare occasions that I take a day off, one of the members of the off-duty crew fills in for me."

"You don't have regularly scheduled time off?" He didn't like the sound of that. Aside from Emerald taking advantage of Mary Lou, he wasn't sure that it was even legal for the woman to be working that much.

"Don't get your shorts in a bunch, Hunter," Mary Lou said as if she'd read his mind. "I don't have family, and working here at Life Medevac is what makes me happy and keeps me going. I love what I do, so don't go getting any ideas about making me take time off on a regular basis, because I won't do it." She opened the door to his room, then, stepping back, pointed to his luggage. "Are all your things in that one suitcase?"

He nodded. "I stored the rest of my things until I find a place

in Devil's Fork.”

“Good idea.” The woman nodded her approval. “Now go ahead and get your gear stowed away while I radio Evac II and find out the status of their patient and what time they estimate they'll get back to base.”

Hunter stared after Mary Lou as she breezed out the door and down the hall as if her working without regular days off was a nonissue. But he wasn't so sure. It wasn't just a question of the labor laws. Her age and well-being had to be taken into consideration, as well. She might seem like a dynamo with boundless energy, but working 24-7 would be hard on a much younger person, let alone a woman close to seventy.

As he lifted his suitcase and placed it on the edge of the bed to unpack, he decided there were several things he needed to do right away. Not only did he need to order the correct size flight suits for everyone, he'd have to check into Texas labor laws.

Putting away the last of his clothes, he looked around. It was a good thing he always traveled light. The room was barely big enough for the twin bed, small chest of drawers and bedside table. There was no way he'd have had room for anything but his clothes.

But then, he didn't need a lot of room. For the past five years he hadn't cared how spacious his accommodations had been or even where they'd been located. After working construction so hard each day that he'd been too tired to think or remember, all he'd needed was a place to sleep, shower and change clothes.

With any luck, there would be enough work to keep him just as busy at Life Medevac.

At the sound of a helicopter landing outside, he walked down the hall to the dispatch room. “They weren’t gone long.”

Mary Lou nodded. “Juanita Rodriguez thought she was going to have her baby, but it turned out to be false labor.” Smiling, she added, “She’s only nineteen and it’s her first pregnancy. She and her husband, Miguel, are worried they won’t make it to the hospital in time.”

“I hear that’s a big concern for most first-time parents.” A twinge of regret ran through Hunter. Anticipating the arrival of a child was something he would never experience.

But he didn’t have time to dwell on the disturbing thought as the flight crew from Evac II entered the dispatch room. Besides Callie, the crew consisted of a sandy-haired man who looked to be in his forties and a fresh-faced kid of about twenty.

“The name’s George Smith,” the man said, smiling as he walked over to shake Hunter’s hand. Almost as tall as Hunter’s own six-foot-three-inch frame, George was built like a heavyweight prizefighter, and if his grip was any indication, as strong as one. “I’m the pilot for the Evac II team.” He nodded toward the younger man. “And that kid over there is Corey Timmons, the EMT on our crew.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. O’Banyon,” Corey said, stepping forward to pump Hunter’s hand enthusiastically. “We’ve been looking forward to you taking over.”

“Call me Hunter.” He wasn’t surprised to hear the employees had been looking forward to a change in administration. From the file he’d been given, when Emerald bought Life Medevac, the employees hadn’t been paid their wages in several weeks.

Grinning, the young man’s brown eyes danced mischievously. “We’re glad to see you survived the drive across town with Callie behind the wheel.”

Hunter chuckled. “Was there doubt?”

“After flying into Devil’s Fork with Crash Jenson at the controls of that little four-seater prop job, we kinda wondered if her driving wouldn’t finish you off,” George added, laughing.

“If you two keep joking about my driving, I’ll stop making those chocolate-chip-oatmeal cookies you love so much,” Callie warned good-naturedly as she crossed the room to the kitchen area, where Mary Lou was putting the finishing touches on the crew’s dinner.

“We take it all back,” Corey said earnestly as he walked over to grab a plate for Mary Lou to fill with a generous helping of stew.

“You bet,” George said, nodding vigorously. “We were just joking around, Callie. Whatever you do, don’t stop making those cookies.” Turning to Hunter, he confided, “You’ve never tasted anything as good in your entire life as her chocolate-chip-oatmeal cookies.”

“I’ll look forward to trying them,” Hunter said, enjoying the easy banter.

As George moved to get a plate of stew, Hunter watched Callie open the refrigerator to remove a carton of orange juice and once again noticed the way her flight suit fit. The navy-blue fabric was fairly loose everywhere but in her midsection and she looked as if...

A sudden cold feeling of intense dread began to fill Hunter's chest and he had to swallow hard against the bile rising in his throat. Callie Marshall wasn't just carrying a few extra pounds around the middle. She was several months pregnant.

Two

As she walked past Hunter to sit down in one of the chairs in front of Mary Lou's desk, Callie wondered what on earth she'd done to come under such close scrutiny. His intense stare had followed her from the moment she'd walked into the room and caused her skin to tingle as if he'd reached out and touched her.

Shaking her head to clear it, she decided her uncharacteristic reaction to him had to be because her hormones were all out of whack due to her pregnancy. It was the only reasonable explanation she could think of to explain it.

His concentrated stare had probably been nothing more than the result of noticing her thickening midsection. He was no doubt trying to figure out whether she was just a bit plump or expecting a baby.

Careful to keep her voice low to avoid calling the others' attention to the fact that she'd caught him staring, she smiled as she turned to meet his intense green gaze. "In case you're wondering about my odd shape, I'm four and a half months pregnant."

Running an agitated hand through his dark brown hair, he looked a little uncomfortable. "I...didn't mean to—"

"Don't worry about it." She smiled, hoping to put him at ease. "It's not like it's a big secret. And, as you can see, I'm certainly not trying to hide my pregnancy."

“Your husband is okay with you flying while you’re pregnant?” He shook his head. “I’m sorry. It’s none of my business.”

It was an odd question, but the concern on his handsome face and in his deep voice was genuine. “Don’t worry about it. I don’t have a husband, so it’s a nonissue.” She shrugged. “I’m unmarried, uncommitted and quite content to stay that way.”

“I didn’t mean to pry.” He looked more uncomfortable than before.

“It’s not a problem. I’m actually looking forward to single motherhood.”

He looked as if he intended to say something, but Corey chose that moment to walk over and plop down in the chair beside her. “Have we sucked up enough to get more cookies or do we need to grovel a little more?”

Callie laughed at the likable young EMT. “No, I think you’ve redeemed yourself enough for another batch of chocolate-chip-oatmeal cookies.”

“If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go check out my office,” Hunter said suddenly, turning to walk down the hall.

Staring after her new boss, she wondered what had caused his abrupt change. When she’d met him at the airfield, he’d been congenial and outgoing. But within the span of a few minutes his mood had become pensive and troubled. Was he concerned that she would be unable to do her job?

She rose to her feet to follow him into the office and reassure him that she was perfectly capable of carrying out her duties, but

the dispatch radio chose that moment to crackle to life.

“Looks like we have another run,” Mary Lou said, crossing the room to answer the call.

As Callie listened to the highway patrol officer relay the location of the one-car accident on Interstate 10 and the patrolman’s assessment of the driver’s injuries, she, George and Corey started for the door. “Tell him we’re on the way.”

“ETA is fifteen minutes,” George said.

“Keep the stew warm,” Corey added.

Out of the corner of her eye Callie saw Hunter reenter the room. His concerned expression reinforced her determination to set his mind at ease. But their talk would have to wait until later. Whether or not he believed she was capable of doing her job, she had an accident victim depending on her for emergency medical attention. And she wasn’t about to let her patient down.

Drenched in a cold sweat, Hunter awoke with a jerk and, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, sat up. Propping his elbows on his knees, he cradled his head in his hands as he tried to chase away the remnants of his nightmare.

He hadn’t dreamed about the accident in almost six months. But it was just as real now as it had been when he’d lived through it five years ago. He and his fiancée, Ellen Reichert, a second-year resident at the Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami, had flown into Central America to deliver medical supplies and administer first aid to some of the remote villages hit the hardest by a category-four hurricane. Everything about the trip had been

routine and uneventful until he'd circled the landing site for their last stop. That's when all hell had broken loose and the course of his life had changed forever.

The twin-turbine helicopter he'd been piloting had suddenly lost oil pressure, then, before he could get it safely set down, it stalled out. He didn't remember a lot of the details of what happened after that, only that he'd fought the controls with little success. The chopper had ended up tilting precariously in midair, then come down hard on its starboard side.

His first thought had been to make sure that Ellen was all right, then get them out of what was left of the helicopter. But the blood in his veins had turned to ice when he'd called her name and she'd failed to respond. He'd placed his fingers to the side of her neck and, detecting a faint pulse, scrambled to release their seat belts. Pushing the door on the port side of the chopper open, he'd carefully lifted her up through the opening, then carried her a safe distance from the wreckage.

When she'd regained consciousness, they'd both known she didn't have long, and that's when his devastating heartbreak had turned to total despair. She'd told him that she'd been waiting for the perfect time to tell him she'd recently learned she was pregnant. With her dying breath she'd told him how much she loved him and how sorry she was that she had to go, then, closing her eyes, she'd quietly slipped away.

The ensuing investigation into the crash had proven the accident had been caused by mechanical failure and there was

nothing he could have done to prevent it. But he'd quit flying that day and struggled for the past five years, feeling guilty because he'd walked away with nothing more than cuts and bruises, blaming himself for living when the woman he'd loved and their future child had died. He'd spent countless hours going over every detail of the accident, wondering if there was something he could have done differently, something that could have lessened her injuries or saved her life. But try as he might, he couldn't think of anything that would have changed the outcome.

He took a deep shuddering breath and tried to relegate the disturbing memories to the back of his mind. There was no doubt why the horrific dream had returned, and he couldn't say he was overly surprised that it had. After discovering that Callie was pregnant, all he'd been able to think about was once again being responsible for the lives of a woman and her unborn child. Even though she wasn't on his flight crew, as her employer it was ultimately his job to see to her safety.

Fortunately her shift had ended right after the Evac II team had returned from transporting the car accident victim to a hospital in El Paso. That meant that he had four days to come up with a convincing argument to get her to ground herself. And unless her crew was called out as backup for Evac III, she and her baby would be safe.

Now all Hunter had to do was figure out a way to keep them that way.

"Give me a second," Callie called when it sounded as if

whoever was at her front door would knock it off its hinges with their insistent pounding. Wiping the flour from her hands with her apron, she turned her CD player down and hurried from the kitchen to open the door. “What’s so important that—”

She stopped short at the sight of Hunter O’Banyon standing on her tiny front porch. Lord have mercy, but he was one of the best looking men she’d ever seen. He was dressed in a black T-shirt and worn blue jeans. The soft fabrics fit him like a second skin and emphasized the width of his broad shoulders and his narrow hips. When she glanced at his arms, the sight of his bulging biceps stretching the knit sleeves of his shirt sent a shiver of awareness straight up her spine.

Callie gave herself a mental shake. What on earth was wrong with her? And why in the name of heaven was she ogling the man as if he were a fudge-nut brownie with rich chocolate frosting?

“Are you all right?” His expression was one of deep concern. “Of—” she swallowed hard “—course. Why wouldn’t I be?” Other than being embarrassed that her hair was piled on her head in total disarray, her shorts and T-shirt were the oldest things she had in her closet and she was coated with a fine dusting of flour, she was just peachy.

“I knocked for five minutes before you answered the door. I thought something might be wrong.” He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. “Never mind. Do you have a few minutes? We need to talk.”

What could he possibly think they needed to discuss? And

why did he have to show up after she'd received a phone call from her mother?

At least once a week since telling her mother she was pregnant they'd gone through the same old routine of her mother wanting to know who the father of Callie's baby was and why she was so insistent on keeping the man's identity a secret. Frustrated beyond words with her mother's persistence, by the time Callie had ended the phone call, she'd already measured the ingredients for several dozen sugar cookies and had pulled the box of oats from the cupboard for a double batch of chocolate-chip-oat-meal cookies.

Some women cleaned house when they were upset. Callie baked.

"Do you mind if I come in?" Hunter asked, returning her to the present.

"I'm sorry. Please come in." She stepped back for him to enter her small cottage. "I was just baking some—oh no! My cookies!" Remembering the peanut butter cookies she'd put into the oven just before hearing him pound on the door, she made a beeline for the kitchen with him hot on her heels.

"Damn! When you make cookies, you don't fool around, do you?" he said, looking around.

Taking the baking sheet from the oven, she placed it on the top of the stove, then glanced at the table and countertops. Plates of cookies covered every available surface.

Shaking her head at the sight, she nibbled on her lower lip.

She must have been more upset over her mother's phone call than she'd realized.

"Would you like some milk and cookies?" She grinned. "I have plenty."

"No kidding." His deep chuckle caused a wave of goose bumps to sweep over her skin. "What are you going to do with all of them?"

"They won't last long around George and Corey."

She opened a cabinet to get something to store the cookies in, but the feel of Hunter's broad chest pressed to her side as he stepped forward to reach for several of the plastic containers on the top shelf sent a charge of excitement skipping over every nerve in her body. When he handed them to her, then stepped back, she had trouble drawing her next breath.

Unnerved, her hand trembled as she took the containers from him. "Th-thank you."

He gave her a short nod, then moved farther away. "I think I will take you up on that offer of some milk and cookies."

Pouring them each a glass of milk, she set one at the far end of the table and started to sit down at the opposite end. Hunter was immediately behind her, holding the chair, and his close proximity unsettled her so much that she almost turned over her glass.

What in blazes was wrong with her? She not only felt as jumpy as a frightened rabbit, she'd suddenly turned into a major klutz.

When he sat down across from her, he studied the plates of

cookies between them. “What do you suggest I start with first?”

“I like the oatmeal cookies, but that’s probably because I use chocolate chips instead of raisins,” she said, reaching for one of the tasty treats.

He nodded as he took a cookie from one of the plates. “I’m kind of partial to peanut butter myself.” Taking a bite, his eyes widened. “Corey and George weren’t exaggerating—these are some of the best cookies I’ve ever tasted.”

As they munched on the cookies, Callie wondered what it was he thought they needed to discuss. For the life of her she couldn’t think of anything so important that he’d pay her a visit on her day off.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” she asked, hoping the sooner he stated the purpose for his visit, the sooner he’d leave. She desperately needed to regain her composure.

Taking a deep breath, he set his empty glass on the table, then caught her gaze with his. “I’m concerned that your job might be a little too much for a woman in your condition.”

She laughed. “Contrary to what you might think, pregnancy is not a disability.”

“I understand that,” he said, nodding. “But at times I’m sure it’s extremely tiring.”

“I’m not going to pretend that it isn’t.” She rose to place their glasses in the dishwasher, then started stacking cookies in the containers for freezing. “But there are also times when we’ll go for a day or two without an emergency call and I’m exhausted

from sheer boredom. Besides, my obstetrician doesn't have a problem with me working as a flight nurse, so if you're worried that it's too strenuous for me, don't. Corey and George are both very conscientious and won't let me do any heavy lifting. And when we're not out on calls, I make sure to take regular naps."

"Yes, but there's other things to be considered, such as turbulence or pilot error," he said as he handed her plates full of cookies to be stored in the plasticware.

"I trust George. He's a good pilot."

"I'm not saying he isn't."

She snapped the lid shut on the box, then started filling another one. "What are you saying?"

He rubbed the back of his neck as if to relieve tension. "Aren't you worried about having to make a rough landing or a possible crash?"

"Not really." She couldn't for the life of her figure out why he was so overly concerned. Every pilot she'd ever known considered flying the safest mode of transportation. "In the event that something like that happens, I'm in no greater danger because I'm pregnant than I would be if I wasn't."

"But—"

"I see no reason why you're so worried about it, but if you think it's that important, why don't you review the employment records and put me on the crew with the best pilot?"

To her surprise, he placed his large hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. But instead of arguing his point further,

he stared at her for several long seconds before he muttered a curse and lowered his head to capture her lips with his.

As his mouth moved over hers in a gentle caress, Callie's pulse raced and her insides began to hum. The last thing she'd expected for him to do was kiss her. But instead of pushing him away as she should have, she reached out and placed her hands on his biceps to steady herself. The feel of his rock-hard muscles flexing beneath her palms sent a shiver of excitement up her spine and caused her knees to tremble.

If she had any sense, she'd put a stop to the kiss right now and demand that he leave. But his firm, warm lips were making her feel things that she'd only read about in women's magazines and romance novels, and she didn't want the delicious sensations to end.

When he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him to deepen the kiss, the feel of his superior strength surrounding her sent tiny little sparks skipping over every nerve in her body. Opening for him, she felt her heart skip several beats when he slipped his tongue inside to tease and explore her with a tenderness that made forming a coherent thought all but impossible.

Placing his hand at the small of her back, he urged her forward, but the feel of her round little tummy pressed to his stomach must have brought him back to reality. He suddenly went completely still, then, releasing her, he carefully set her away from him and took a couple of steps back.

“That shouldn’t...have happened.” He ran an agitated hand through his thick dark brown hair. “I think I should probably leave.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Embarrassed and more than a little confused by her uncharacteristic behavior, Callie began packing more cookies into the plastic containers. Why hadn’t she stopped him instead of clinging to him as if she were desperate for a man’s attention?

Hunter O’Banyon might be tall, dark and movie-star handsome, but she was no more interested in him than she was in any other man. But, dear heaven above, could he ever kiss.

Her cheeks feeling as if they were on fire from her sudden wayward thought, she shoved a container of cookies into his hands. “Take these back to the hangar for Mary Lou and the on-duty crew.”

“Callie...I—”

If he didn’t leave soon, she’d be up all night baking. “It’s getting late and I’m sure you need to get back.” She walked into the living room and opened the front door. “Thank you for stopping by. I appreciate your concerns and I will give them some thought.”

“By the way, I know this is short notice, but I’m holding a staff meeting the day after tomorrow at 10:00 a.m.,” he said, looking anything but happy. “Will you be able to be there?”

She shook her head. “I have a doctor’s appointment. But I’ll stop by after my checkup and someone can fill me in on what

was covered in the meeting.”

He stared at her for what seemed an eternity before he gave her a short nod. “Good night, Callie,” he said, walking out onto the porch.

“Have a nice rest of the evening, Hunter,” she said, closing the door behind him.

Walking straight to the kitchen, she stacked the containers of cookies on a shelf in her freezer, then pulled out the ingredients for a batch of brownies. Her phone conversation with her mother had been frustrating and caused her to make several batches of cookies. But Hunter’s disturbing kiss was sending her into a baking frenzy, and for some odd reason everything she wanted to make was chocolate.

As she measured cocoa and flour, something she’d heard on a cooking show came to mind and caused her to knock over a cup of sugar. Eating chocolate released the same endorphins in the brain that were released while having sex.

“Not good, Callie. Not good at all.”

Hurriedly opening a bag of milk-chocolate chips, she popped a handful into her mouth, and as the rich taste spread over her tongue, she decided that even if chocolate did make her gain too much weight, it was far less dangerous to her peace of mind than Hunter O’Banyon.

As he descended the steps and walked over to the white truck with Life Medevac painted on the side, Hunter shook his head. He didn’t blame Callie one damned bit for giving him the bum’s

rush. Hell, he'd deserved more than that. He'd acted like an oversexed teenager on his first date. But what he was having the devil of a time trying to figure out was why.

Getting into the truck, he started the engine and, backing from the driveway, drove across town. But instead of turning onto the road leading to the Life Medevac hangar, he kept going until the lights of Devil's Fork faded in the distance behind him. He needed to think, and even though he could go into his room for solitude, he'd found that staring at the vastness of a starlit night always helped him put things in perspective.

When he parked the truck and stared out the windshield at the stars above the Apache Mountains in the distance, he couldn't help but wonder what the hell had gotten into him. He'd only stopped by Callie's place to try to talk some sense into her and get her to see the wisdom in grounding herself until after she had her baby. But when he'd placed his hands on her shoulders and looked into her pretty violet eyes, he could no more have stopped himself from tasting her sweetness than he could stop his next breath.

He took a deep breath. Although he wasn't overly proud of it, he hadn't exactly led the life of a monk since Ellen's death. But he'd always been careful to be with women who wanted nothing more from him than mutual satisfaction and had no expectations of their liaison leading to anything more. And Callie Marshall was most definitely not that type of woman. Instead of smoke-filled nightclubs, champagne cocktails and a meaningless one-

night stand, she was a cozy little cottage, homemade cookies and a long-term commitment.

But come to think of it, he'd been so busy in the past several months that he'd completely abandoned any kind of a social life. And although he was far from being as randy as a seventeen-year-old boy, a man of thirty-two did have certain needs that couldn't be ignored.

He frowned. But he'd never in his entire life found a pregnant woman irresistible.

He stared at a shooting star streaking across the inky sky. He guessed it was only natural that he'd be attracted to Callie even though she was expecting a baby, considering his current state of celibacy. She was a very pretty woman with a killer smile, a delightful laugh and a pair of legs that could drive a saint to sin. Combine all those traits with his neglected libido and it was no wonder he'd felt compelled to kiss her.

Satisfied that he'd discovered the reason for his uncharacteristic caveman behavior, he started the truck and headed back toward the Life Medevac base. Now that he had things in perspective, there was no reason that he and Callie couldn't put what happened this evening behind them and move forward as employer and employee. Hell, maybe they could even be friends.

But much later, as he lay in bed trying to will himself to sleep, Hunter couldn't seem to forget the sweet taste of Callie's soft lips or that the blood in his veins had heated considerably when she'd

kissed him back. And whether he liked it or not, the very last thing on his mind was friendship.

Three

On the drive back from her appointment with the obstetrician, Callie thought about Hunter's visit and how foolish she'd been. The kiss they'd shared had been very nice, but it didn't mean anything. She knew he'd been frustrated with her refusal to ground herself and he'd been just as surprised by his actions as she had. There had really been no reason for her to get so flustered and read more into it than that.

But she'd spent the rest of the night baking everything from chocolate-fudge-nut brownies to chocolate cake. And by the time she'd gone to bed, the gray light of dawn had begun to chase away the shadows of night. She shook her head. She hadn't baked that much since she'd discovered she was pregnant.

Thinking back on that day, she could still remember walking out of her gynecologist's office in a total state of shock. She'd always wanted children, but she'd envisioned herself happily married and anticipating the blessed event with the man she loved and who loved her in return. She wasn't supposed to have become pregnant by a man who put social status above a meaningful relationship.

When she'd first met Craig Culbertson, he'd swept her off her feet with his charm and thoughtfulness. But it hadn't taken long for her to discover that he wasn't the man she'd thought he was. He'd hidden his true nature behind a winning smile and

charming ways, and by the time they'd parted company, shallow, self-centered and selfish were the nicest words she could think of to describe the conceited snake.

Then, when she'd discovered she was pregnant a month after their breakup, her disillusionment with Craig had turned to abject fear. One of the deciding factors in her ending their relationship had been the sickening disgust she'd felt when he'd confided in her that at the age of nineteen he'd gotten his girlfriend pregnant and that his twelve-year-old brother was actually his son. He'd told her that once his parents had learned of the pregnancy and discovered the girl wasn't the family's social equal, they'd used their money, as well as their position in Houston society, to gain custody of the baby, adopt him and raise the boy as their own.

A cold chill raced through Callie. She could only imagine the devastation and powerlessness the young mother must have felt at losing all contact with her child. And that was the very reason Callie had made the decision to leave her job as an emergency room nurse at one of the Houston hospitals and take the job as flight nurse with Life Medevac.

If Craig found out about her pregnancy, she wasn't sure he and his parents wouldn't try to do the same thing to her that they'd done to the mother of his first child. Callie hadn't been born into a life of wealth and privilege and therefore would no doubt be considered an undesirable candidate to raise a Culbertson heir. They'd take her to court and she'd come out the loser. She didn't have the kind of money it would take to fight a custody battle

against their high-powered lawyers.

She'd come from a middle-class single-parent home where there hadn't been an endless supply of money, and social outings had consisted of making trips to the mall or attending a matinee at the movie theater. And even if her father hadn't been lost at sea during a storm while working on an oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico, her social status wouldn't have been a whole lot different.

As she steered her car onto the lane leading up to the Life Medevac hangar, she placed her hand on her rounded tummy. She might not have been born with a silver spoon in her mouth, but she loved her little boy with all her heart, and no one was going to take him away from her.

Parking the car, she took a deep breath and forced herself to forget about Houston and the ruthless Culbertsons. She was about to face Hunter O'Banyon and tell him that she'd given a lot of thought to his request that she ground herself. She'd even gone so far as to discuss her physical limitations with her obstetrician, and together they'd concluded there was no reason for her to go on maternity leave for a few more months. Now all she had to do was explain that to Hunter.

"Hi, Mary Lou," Callie said as she entered the dispatch room. "Is Hunter in his office?"

The older woman nodded. "I suspect he's back there compiling a list of everyone's size and the number of new flight suits he's going to order." She laughed. "How do you look in red?"

“We’re going to wear red flight suits?”

“That’s what he says.” Mary Lou looked thoughtful. “Come to think of it, though, our crews will be more easily identified among other emergency personnel at an accident scene.”

“It does get confusing sometimes when some of the other services wear the same shade of dark blue that we do,” Callie agreed.

“Did everything go okay at the doctor’s office?” Mary Lou asked. Since learning of Callie’s pregnancy, the woman had taken it upon herself to monitor Callie’s progress and well-being.

Smiling, Callie nodded. “The obstetrician did a sonogram and said the baby’s size is right on target for a four-and-a-half-month fetus.” She laughed. “But I doubt that I can get away with blaming my five-pound weight gain on my son.”

“No, that would be due to all those cookies you bake,” Mary Lou said, grinning.

As Callie walked down the hall to Hunter’s office, she decided that Mary Lou was right. If she didn’t stop baking, there wouldn’t be a flight suit big enough to accommodate her expanding form, whether she was pregnant or not.

Knocking on Hunter’s office door, she waited a moment before entering the office. “Do you have the time to fill me in on what took place at the staff meeting or should I come back later?”

He shook his head and pointed to the brown leather chair in front of his desk. “Have a seat. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“Not really.” His intense green eyes held hers as she lowered herself into the oversize armchair and tried not to notice how good-looking he was or that the sound of his deep voice had caused her insides to start humming. “Before I can order the new flight suits for everyone, I need to know if you’ve given any more thought to my suggestion that you ground yourself until after your baby is born.”

“Yes, I have.” She met his questioning gaze head-on. “I even discussed your concerns with my obstetrician this morning.”

“And?”

Hunter held out little hope that she’d changed her mind, but since it had been the uppermost thing on his mind for the past two days, he had to know.

“The doctor and I both agreed that as long as I avoid heavy lifting, eat a healthy diet and get plenty of rest, there’s no reason that I can’t continue as a flight nurse on the Evac II team.”

“But—”

“But nothing.” Her determined expression warned him that she wasn’t going to budge on the issue. “I’m not only capable of doing my job, I need the money I’ll make between now and when I give birth to pay for the doctor and hospital.”

He had to concentrate hard to keep his mind off the fact that she had the prettiest violet eyes he’d ever seen. “And there’s nothing I can say to change your mind?”

“No. But as I told you the other night, if my continuing to fly bothers you that much, pair me with your best pilot. That should

eliminate some of your concerns about pilot error.”

Hunter took a deep breath, then slowly released it as resignation set in. “I anticipated your decision and I’ve already made arrangements for you and Corey to be switched to Evac I.”

“That’s your team.” If the dismay on her pretty face was any indication, he’d shocked her.

Not at all happy about the situation, he nodded. “George and Mike—the Evac III pilot—are good, but I’m better.”

“Don’t you think your assumption that you’re a better pilot is a bit arrogant?” She didn’t look any happier with his decision than he was.

He shook his head. “Not in the least. It’s a matter of experience. I have more flight hours in a Bell helicopter than George and Mike combined. Until he retired from the Air Force a couple of years ago, George flew Sikorskys. And Mike flew Apaches for the Army. I’ve flown a Bell almost exclusively for the past twelve years.” He stopped short at adding that if he’d been behind the controls of a Bell the day of the accident, instead of a reconditioned military chopper given to the hurricane relief organization for aid missions, his fiancée would probably still be alive.

“When does this reassignment take place?”

“Effective immediately.” Glancing down at the list of everyone’s flight suit sizes, he asked, “What size flight suit do you think you’ll need until after you have the baby?”

As he watched her thoughtfully nibble on her lower lip, sweat

popped out on his forehead. The memory of Callie's softness and sweet taste when he'd kissed her was doing a real number on his neglected libido.

Giving him the size she thought she'd need to accommodate her advancing pregnancy, she asked, "Was there anything else discussed during the staff meeting that I should know about?"

He sat back in his desk chair. "Mary Lou served your cookies, and everyone agreed that if you ever decide to give up nursing, you should open a bakery shop."

She gave him a half smile as she stood up. "I don't think that would be a good idea. I only bake when I'm..." She stopped suddenly and shook her head. "It doesn't matter. What's my new schedule?"

Hunter rose to his feet. "Instead of coming in this evening, you'll need to be here day after tomorrow."

"At the usual time? Or did you change that, too?"

"Six in the evening," he said, nodding. When she turned toward the door, he said, "By the way, the other night I noticed you have a loose board on one of the porch steps. You'd better have your landlord fix it. You don't want to run the risk of falling."

"If I had a landlord, I'd have him take care of the repair." She shrugged one slender shoulder. "But since I bought the place when I moved to Devil's Fork, I guess I'll have to buy a hammer and a few nails and see what I can do about it myself."

For reasons he didn't care to contemplate, he didn't like the

idea of her trying to make the repair herself. “I’ll be over this evening to fix the step.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She edged toward the door. “Upkeep is part of a homeowner’s job. I don’t think hammering a couple of nails into a board will be all that difficult.”

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