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The Secretary And The Millionaire

Leanne Banks



Vintage 90s

Leanne Banks

The Secretary And The Millionaire

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Fortune's Children: The Brides: Meet the Fortune brides - six special women who perpetuate a family legacy greater than mere riches! THE CINDERELLA ASSIGNMENT When Jack Fortune's motherless daughter moved in with him, this ever-so-competent CEO needed Amanda Corbain, his faithful assistant, to become Lilly's temporary live-in nanny. Suddenly this natural-born nurturer was living out her ultimate fantasy, but no amount of dreaming had prepared Amanda for the feelings he aroused. And now Amanda had one final wish before this Cinderella assignment ended... .

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Kate Fortune's Journal Entry

Of all the Fortunes, I think my nephew Jack might just be the most marriage-shy of them all. Oh, he dates plenty—with all the ladies he's had on his arm, he's a veritable moving target. But not one of those women is right for him.

Another job for Kate Fortune, matchmaker? Not this time! He's already got the perfect woman living right under his own roof. Ever-faithful Amanda Corbain has been his personal assistant for years; if Jack wasn't running so hard and so fast, he would see that she is his meant-to-be bride. But now that she is in his house, tending to his sweet little daughter, it's only a matter of time before nature takes its course. With maybe just a little bit of prodding from you know who....

Dear Reader,

April brings showers, and this month Silhouette Desire wants to shower you with six new, passionate love stones!

Cait London's popular Blaylock family returns in our April MAN OF THE MONTH title, Blaylock's Bride. Honorable Roman Blaylock grapples with a secret that puts him in a conflict between confiding in the woman he loves and fulfilling a last wish.

The provocative series FORTUNE'S CHILDREN: THE BRIDES continues with Leanne Banks's The Secretary and the Millionaire, when a wealthy CEO turns to his assistant for help in caring for his little girl.

Beverly Barton's next tale in her 3 BABIES FOR 3 BROTHERS miniseries, His Woman, His Child, shows a rugged heartbreaker transformed by the heroine's pregnancy. Powerful sheikhs abound in Sheikh's Ransom, the Desire debut title of Alexandra Sellers's dramatic new series, SONS OF THE DESERT. A marine gets a second chance at love in Colonel Daddy, continuing Maureen Child's popular series BACHELOR BATTALION. And in Christy Lockhart's Let's Have a Baby!, our BACHELORS AND BABIES selection, the hero must dissuade the heroine from going to a sperm bank and convince her to let him father her child—the old-fashioned way!

Allow Silhouette Desire to give you the ultimate indulgence—all six of these fabulous April romance books!

Enjoy!

Joan Marlow Golan

Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

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The Secretary and the Millionaire

Leanne Banks



www.millsandboon.co.uk

This book is dedicated to all the hardworking secretaries who had a secret crush on their bosses. Special thanks and acknowledgment are given to Leanne Banks for her contribution to the Fortune's Children miniseries.

LEANNE BANKS is a national number-one bestselling author of romance. She lives in her native Virginia with her husband and son and daughter. Recognized for both her sensual and humorous writing with two Career Achievement Awards from Romantic Times Magazine, Leanne likes creating a story with a few grins, a generous kick of sensuality and characters who hang around after the book is finished. Leanne believes romance readers are the best readers in the world because they understand that love is the greatest miracle of all. You can write to her at P.O. Box 1442, Midlothian, VA 23113. An SASE for a reply would be greatly appreciated.

FORTUNE'S Children

Meet the Fortunes—three generations of a family with a legacy of wealth, influence and power. As they gather for a host of weddings, shocking family secrets are revealed...and passionate new romances are ignited.

JACK FORTUNE: When it comes to mergers and acquisitions, this millionaire CEO doesn't miss anything. But will his new role as a single dad suddenly make him see who has been right under his nose?

AMANDA CORBAIN: For years this loyal secretary has had a hopeless crush on her charismatic boss. She's determined to fall out of love—until a special little girl enters Jack's life. And suddenly her Cinderella dreams temporarily become a living reality.

GRAY MCGUIRE: This businessman only wants revenge on the Fortune family. And he's about to meet the perfect partner in revenge—Stuart Fortune's illegitimate daughter!

Prologue

"When are you going to stop pining for Jack Fortune and get on with your life?" Carol Denton asked when Amanda rejected another blind date setup.

"I've tried dating other men. They all seem to be missing something."

Amanda Corbain knew Carol had a valid point, but she just couldn't get past her feelings for her boss, Jack. She glanced out the restaurant window at the busy Minneapolis downtown street and shrugged her shoulders. "Think about it," she said to her best friend. "Who can compare to Jack Fortune?"

"Okay," Carol conceded. "So he's blond, gorgeous, smart, wealthy and single. He's also your boss. He's a workaholic and commitmentphobic since his marriage busted up. Still changing women every three months?"

Amanda nodded glumly. "He's slowed down a little since his daughter came to live with him, but he still finds time to make the rounds." Unlike her, all of Jack's social partners were beautiful.

Carol gave a heavy sigh. "I hate to say this, but I think the man has ruined you."

Amanda felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. She didn't want that to be true. "He just can't seem to see me. As far as Jack is concerned, I may as well be the invisible woman." She took a sip of coffee and felt a surge of restlessness at the familiar lunchtime conversation topic. Whenever Carol asked about her progress with Jack, Amanda's answer was the same.

Carol made a face. "Have you ever thought about stripping off your clothes and sitting on his desk?"

"Yes," Amanda said without batting an eye. She'd envisioned such a scenario countless times. "But I'm not sure what I would do next. I think I might need remedial education in the feminine wiles department. Besides, I like my job, and my salary is helping put my sisters through college."

Carol finished her wine and shook her head. "It must be a burden to be such a responsible person. Were you ever impulsive? Even when you were a kid?"

Amanda thought of her father's death when she was very young. When Amanda had been just twenty years old, her mother's death had taken her family by surprise and she'd needed to hold everything together. "I didn't have much of a chance to be impulsive. The most impulsive thing I've done was accept the promotion with Fortune Corporation and move to Minneapolis from North Carolina." She smiled. "A nineties Mary Tyler Moore."

"You're going to have to do something," Carol told her. "You can't spend the rest of your life staying home by yourself on Saturday nights and pining for Jack Fortune."

"I know," Amanda said, putting the waiter's tip on the table as she prepared to return to work. "I've got to find a way to stop being invisible."

As soon as she got back to the office, Amanda poured a mug of hot black coffee and slid it onto Jack Fortune's desk ten seconds before he reached for it and automatically nodded his thanks. Listening to his smooth, baritone voice as he spoke with a potential client on the phone, she placed the faxes for his reference directly in front of him. He silently mouthed "Thank you" to her, another acknowledgment of her services.

Amanda wondered if he would choke on his coffee if she told him she would prefer a kiss, a nice long one. Turning her head, she rolled her eyes at herself. Better keep herself in check or her boss would learn she had a mile-high crush on him.

Jack always saw what she did and expressed appreciation in a dozen different ways. Yet he never ever seemed to see her. In a world filled with beautiful women, Amanda knew her appearance wouldn't stop traffic in Minneapolis or anywhere else. Her brown hair, brown eyes and average body made her the perfect unobtrusive assistant, or...invisible woman, she thought wryly.

"The demand for Fortune clothing has taken off," Jack Fortune said into the phone, glancing at the top fax. "Our profits are up thirty-eight percent, Bob. We have a new athletic wear line going head-to-head with the top designers. The retail market has had its shares of ups and down in the last few years. We'd like to give the customer a reason to come to your stores."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Amanda leaned against the doorjamb and stole a moment to listen to the sexy enthusiasm in his oh-so-persuasive tone. Jack's easy voice gave only a hint of the energy the man emanated.

His blond hair, startling green eyes and lean, muscular physique turned heads.

Amanda had never touched his hair. It wouldn't have been appropriate. That hadn't stopped her from wondering if his hair would feel crisp or soft against her fingers. She'd also wondered how his mouth would feel on hers. Hard, supple or both.

His personal sense of power, however, fit him better than his tailored suits. That dynamic power drew men's respect and caused women to make fools of themselves.

He was a conqueror, the corporate modern-day equivalent of Marco Polo. He was also a closer.

Yet he had a secret, tender side for his three-year-old daughter, Lilly. Amanda's heart softened at Jack's struggle to make Lilly feel at home. She wondered if he knew how seductive his tough and tender combination was.

He was a perceptive man, a demanding boss who inspired achievement and loyalty. Did he have any idea how many times his loyal assistant had fantasized about him making love to her on his big, cherry desk? Amanda knew Jack would never compromise his professional integrity with an office affair, but the familiar visual teased her all too often. Amanda pictured it happening after hours, during one of the many evening sessions she'd remained at work to help with a special project. The scene unfolded like a movie:

"Would you like coffee or a soda before you go home?" she asked Jack. They'd been so focused on preparing the presentation they'd worked through dinner. His charcoal jacket hung on the back of his chair, his shirtsleeves were rolled up to reveal strong forearms, highlighted with the same blond hair that crowned his head.

"A soda would work. Thanks," he said, then leaned back in his leather chair and stretched

Averting her gaze from his, she left the room and grabbed his soda. On the way back, she pressed the icy can against her forehead, then pulled it away just before she entered his office.

She felt his gaze on her and knew she must be mistaken. Jack never really looked at her. He looked through her.

“There you go,” she said and made herself smile. “I’ll see you in the morning for the Hartford presentation. Drive safely,” she added and turned to leave.

“Amanda,” Jack said, stopping her. “Do you have plans tonight?”

Her heart leaped, then she mentally smacked herself. He was just being polite. She turned back around and shook her head. “Nothing major.” I just need to go home, she thought. I’ve been around you too long today, and I’m starting to have delusions that you might actually be seeing me as a woman instead of just your assistant. “Have dinner with me,” he said and stood. “You and I, we should talk.”

“Thank you, but I don’t want to keep you out late with the presentation early in the morning. I know you’ve got that commute home.”

“I’ll be okay,” he said with a slight grin that contrasted with his intent gaze. “We should talk.”

As he walked toward her, she took a careful breath. “I—uh—”

He pressed his finger to her lips. “Just let me do the talking. You’ve been my secretary for four years now. I don’t know why I’ve been so slow about this.” He tilted his head thoughtfully. “Maybe my rotten marriage. But that’s over,” he said. “I want you doing more than my paperwork. I want to take you to dinner. I want to see you after quitting time. I want to kiss you,” he said, rubbing his thumb over her bottom lip. “But I can’t take advantage of our business relationship. I want you to consider a transfer so I can see you personally. I need you,” he said in a low, rough voice as he lowered his head. “I need you in my life.”

I need you. Amanda’s head was spinning. She’d dreamed of hearing those words from Jack.

“Amanda, I need...”

The sound of Jack’s voice jerked her out of her reverie, and she blinked at him.

“...the most recent sales projections for the Wyndham Retail Group.” He glanced up at her and raised his eyebrows. “Problem?”

Amanda quickly shook her head. “No problem. I’ll get them for you right away.”

I need you. His words echoed inside her as she left the room and took a mind-clearing breath. She could make a wish on every falling star that Jack would say those magic words to her about something other than office work. She could wish that he would need her the way a man needs a woman, but that would require him to see her. And as Amanda had learned, when it came to Jack Fortune, she might as well be the invisible woman.

One

“Amanda, I need you now.” Jack said two days later.

Jack’s words on Amanda’s intercom kicked her heart into overdrive. Wincing at her overreaction, she put a calming hand to her throat. She’d rarely heard that tone from him, and never coupled with those exact words. “I’ll be right there,” she managed, and swiveled out of her chair.

She opened his office door to find him pacing, his long stride covering the generous width of his office. He stopped when she closed the door behind her.

“It’s the housekeeper’s day off. The nanny is sick,” he told Amanda as he raked his hand through his hair. “I’m closing the Eastco deal today.”

He walked toward her, and her stomach dipped. For Amanda, stomach dips, butterflies, accelerated heartbeats had become part and parcel of working for Jack. The challenge lay in not letting her feelings show.

“This isn’t part of your job description, but I need someone I can count on to take care of Lilly now. Today. Will you do it?”

“Of course,” she said, then gave a light laugh. He truly had no idea of all that she would do for him. “I thought you were going to ask something difficult.”

He exhaled in relief and shook his head. “You’re one hell of an assistant, Amanda. You can be sure I’ll remember this at your next performance review,” he told her.

Amanda felt a twinge at his professional tone. “That’s not necessary. My experience taking care of my brother and sisters doesn’t have much to do with my office performance.”

“No. But in this case, it does with mine. I should warn you Lilly still hasn’t adjusted to living with me.”

“That’s understandable,” Amanda said, the slight nerves in his voice surprising her and grabbing at her heart. “Her mother hasn’t been gone very long. Not even two months. That will change.”

“God, I hope so,” he muttered, returning to his desk. “The poor kid hides behind the furniture every time I enter the room. She barely knows me, since Sandra made it difficult for me to see her. The nanny I hired has impeccable references, but Lilly hasn’t warmed to her.” He frowned, then seemed to switch gears. “Use one of the company limos. As soon as the meeting is over, I’ll come home.”

Amanda nodded, hesitating before she said, “You asked me to remind you about your dinner date with Ms. Sullivan.”

He frowned. “I’ll cancel.”

Amanda wrestled with her conscience. Trina Sullivan, a beautiful redhead, was Jack’s current social partner. She swallowed her reluctance and envy in one gulp. “You don’t have to cancel. I can stay with Lilly tonight.”

He shook his head. “No. I’ll cancel.”

Amanda bit her tongue to keep from screaming with joy.

Thirty-five minutes later the nanny, pale and clearly ill, invited Amanda into the marble foyer, introduced her to Lilly, then disappeared to her upstairs bedroom.

Amanda looked down at the perfectly dressed three-year-old, tightly gripping a worn, stuffed one-eyed cat. Lilly’s blond hair fell past her shoulders in tousled curls. The sorrow in her wide green eyes made Amanda’s heart turn over.

She knelt in front of Lilly. “I have a cat, too. Her name is Delilah. What’s your cat’s name?”

“Miss Annabelle,” Lilly whispered.

Amanda’s stomach twisted at the fear on her face. Lilly seemed such a tiny, forlorn figure especially in the grand surroundings of Jack’s home. “You wanna go outside for a while?”

Lilly nodded, and when Jack’s daughter put her tiny hand in hers, Amanda’s heart was lost.

Jack pulled his rain-splattered Mercedes into the tree-lined drive that led to his house. He was so preoccupied that he barely noticed how the warm, spring rain shower that had fallen on Minneapolis most of the afternoon, had made the green grounds of his estate even greener.

Jack was worried about Stuart. His father had been distracted lately. Profit figures looked great, but tension hung about Stuart like the thick humidity before a thunderstorm. Jack couldn’t tell if Stuart’s concerns were with the Fortune business or his own company, Knight Star Systems. Jack knew little about Knight Star Systems since he’d always felt a responsibility to make his mark at Fortune, especially since his brother, Garrett, had made it clear corporate life wasn’t his bailiwick and had chosen ranching instead.

If that wasn’t enough, although Jack was jazzed about the new account he’d just bagged, he was worried about Lilly. He had no idea what to do with her. Quiet and withdrawn, she hadn’t even begun to warm to Ms. Brown, the nanny. She hadn’t warmed to him, either, and that knowledge stung.

As he turned toward the garage, he glanced over the grounds and did a double take. He stopped the car and stared.

In an alcove of blooming trees beside his house, his secretary and his daughter were skipping through a mud puddle. He pressed the button to lower his window, and the sound of Lilly’s laughter drifted through the air. His heart stopped. He couldn’t remember when he’d last heard that sweet, wonderful sound.

Amanda's husky laughter joined with Lilly's. Getting out of the car, he gazed at his assistant. The rain had slowed to barely a sprinkle, but Amanda had clearly caught the worst of it. Her wet, fine hair hung limply to her shoulders. Her business suit clung to her slim curves, and her shoes and stockings were covered with mud.

Her face bright with pleasure, she didn't seem to give a damn that she was a complete mess. The movement of her body drew his gaze again. He noticed the subtle curves of her breasts and hips, her long shapely legs, and felt a tug of awareness. Clearly unaware of him, however, Amanda sang a chorus from "Singin' in the Rain." Lilly pulled at Amanda's stockings, and they both laughed again. Amanda kicked off her shoes, and Jack watched in amazement as his painfully practical and conservative secretary briefly bared her thighs and ditched her nylons.

He felt the disconcerting tug of awareness again and swore under his breath. He'd never really thought of Amanda as a woman. He'd never really wanted to. After all, she was the best damn assistant he'd ever had and he was too driven with his goals for Fortune Corporation to want any distractions.

Sure, she had a few nice features more or less—big brown eyes and an easy smile. Her primary value to Jack, however, had always been her organizational skills and uncanny ability to anticipate his professional needs. Her professional skills would continue to be her primary value, he told himself. Suddenly conscious of the fact that he was standing in the rain staring at his secretary, he scowled, got back in his car and pulled into the garage.

Grabbing a large black umbrella, he walked toward the two mud-splattered females. The bottom half of his daughter looked as if she'd been dipped in chocolate milk. Amanda caught sight of him and pointed out his presence to Lilly.

"I think I'm late with the umbrella," he said.

"We're a mess, aren't we," Amanda said, wincing, then she shrugged and chuckled. "You may not remember this, but when you're a kid, some days you just need to stomp in a mud puddle. Don't worry. I think I can get the mud out of her outfit."

"And yours?" he asked, his gaze inadvertently drawn to her damp blouse, which emphasized her small breasts and hardened nipples encased in lace. Feeling a slow, seductive curl of warmth in his stomach, he blinked and forced his gaze down to his daughter. Lilly was clinging to Amanda's leg. Hiding again. Jack sighed. Failure was an alien concept to him, but when he looked at his daughter, all his wins at work turned to dust.

"Dry cleaning works wonders," Amanda said, and turned to Lilly. "While you and I were playing in the mud, I bet your daddy bagged another big deal this afternoon."

Lilly looked at him with wide, solemn, unblinking green eyes.

"Hey, princess," he said, and gently touched her soft, damp cheek with his knuckles. "Did you have fun today?"

She nodded, but said nothing.

He glanced down at the bedraggled, stuffed cat she held in her hand. "We'll need to wash your kitty, too," Jack said, feeling, as he often did with his daughter, at a loss.

"Miss Annabelle," Lilly whispered.

His heart squeezed. Lilly rarely spoke, even in a whisper.

"Miss Annabelle needs a bath and you do, too," he said.

"Manda says I get a cookie," Lilly whispered.

He glanced up at Amanda and raised his eyebrows. He wondered how she had won over his daughter so quickly.

"A cookie is a magical thing," Amanda told him, as if she could almost read his mind.

An hour later, after Jack pulled strings and got a doctor to examine the nanny, and Amanda gave Lilly a bath, he joined his assistant and daughter for a dinner of grilled cheese sandwiches and soup.

"I would have heated the casserole if I'd known about it," Amanda said. "Ms. Brown mentioned it when I took her soup to her room."

Noting the way his daughter gobbled down her sandwich instead of picking at her food the way she usually did, Jack shook his head. “No, this is fine. It was kind of you to feed us.”

“Not exactly a celebration dinner,” Amanda said with a wry smile.

“Celebration?” Jack repeated.

“For the Eastco account.”

“How did you know I got it?”

She rolled her eyes. “As if they stood a chance.”

He felt a curious rush of pleasure at her praise. “You’re assuming I always win.”

“Safe assumption. I’ve seen you in action,” Amanda said, then turned to Lilly. “I think your dad deserves a cookie. What do you think?”

Lilly stared at him, then nodded at Amanda. “Can I please have another cookie?” she whispered.

Amanda gave a mock gasp. “Another cookie? But you’ve already had two today.” She bent closer to Lilly. “Are you sure you’re not a cookie monster in disguise?”

Lilly giggled, and the sound surprised Jack again. He gazed at Amanda and made a quick, instinctive decision. “It’s getting late. Why don’t you stay here tonight?”

Amanda did a double take and looked at Jack as if he’d sprouted horns. “I—I don’t have any clothes for work tomorrow and—”

“I can take you by your apartment on the way to the office,” Jack said, thinking he’d never seen her flustered.

She blinked. “And my cat,” she managed. “I need—”

“Do you have a neighbor you can call?”

“Well, yes—”

“Good,” Jack said, knowing he was railroading her. He hadn’t seen his daughter this happy in weeks, and if Amanda was the magic potion, then he sure as hell didn’t want her leaving yet. “Then it’s settled. You probably want to get out of those wet clothes. I’ll see if I can find something for you to put on after your bath.”

He returned shortly with one of his terry robes and a pair of silk pajamas he’d never worn. When his wife Sandra had left two years ago, he’d gotten rid of every remaining article of clothing she’d left behind. He’d wanted no sign of her left in the house. She’d taken his name, his money and his daughter, and left him with bitter emptiness. Sandra might be dead, but the damage she’d caused continued.

The complete and utter sense of failure he’d felt at the time of the divorce echoed through him again as he watched Amanda with his Lilly through Lilly’s open bedroom door.

Brooding, Jack absently noticed Amanda had climbed into Lilly’s small bed with his daughter as she read and sang with her instead of sitting in the chair beside Lilly’s bed as Ms. Brown did. After she finished *The Little Engine That Could* and a chorus of “Eensy Weensy Spider,” Jack entered the room and kissed Lilly good-night.

Amanda left the door cracked and joined him in the hallway. “I think she’s a goner.”

“Are you sure you didn’t miss your calling?” Jack asked her.

She met his gaze. “What do you mean?”

“You’re so good with children. Did you ever think about working with them in some professional way?”

She gave a half smile and shook her head. “I got my experience the natural way. I had a younger brother and younger sisters. My father died when I was young, so my mother counted on me a lot. Then when my mother died, they needed me even more.”

“I forgot about your family,” he mused, wondering why he hadn’t paid more attention. “I’ve noticed the pictures on your desk, but you don’t mention them often.”

“Oh, I love them all,” Amanda said, her voice full of affection. “Both my sisters received academic scholarships to college, and my brother operates his own successful home-remodeling

business. I'm very proud of them, so don't get me started," she warned him. "I won't stop and I'll end up boring the boss to death."

"I'm not bored," he told her. "Would you like a nightcap before you turn in?"

Amanda hesitated, a flash of uncertainty sweeping across her face. For a second he thought she might refuse and felt a strange sting of disappointment.

"Thank you. That would be nice," she finally said, and pulled the lapels of his robe closer together as they walked toward the den.

"The robe swallows you."

"Uh—well—"

"You're not going to lie to be polite, are you?"

Amanda's cheeks bloomed with color. "Okay, yes, it does. But it's not a problem. It's just for one night."

He headed for the bar on the other side of the room. "What would you like to drink?"

"White wine," she said, sitting stiffly in an overstuffed chair. "I don't have a sophisticated palate. One glass usually makes me sleepy." She gave an earnest but strained smile. "You have a lovely home."

"Thank you. The decorator was highly recommended," he said, placing the wineglass in her hand. He'd had the entire house redone after his marriage broke up, but he didn't impart that information to Amanda. He noticed her toes were curled into the Oriental carpet and he wondered about her uneasiness.

She nodded. "Whoever it was did a nice job."

Silence followed. Despite her tension, her presence reminded him of background music. He studied her again. Her hair, still slightly damp from her shower, was pushed behind her ear on one side and curved over her cheek on the other. Her skin was fresh-scrubbed and glowing. The robe gaped slightly at the neck, revealing the gentle curve of her breast; and lower, where she crossed her legs, he saw one silky calf.

He glanced at her face again and something about the restlessness in her dark eyes was sexy to him. He took a quick drink of whiskey at the thought.

If women were music, then he always chose loud, showy numbers, the better to make him forget his marriage failure. Amanda was background music. Too soft, too gentle. With her, he would have time to think.

Strolling closer to her, he propped a hand on a cherry end-table and looked down at her. "You've worked for me for four years now. Why are you uneasy with me?" he asked.

She sucked in a quick breath of surprise and glanced away. "I'm not. Well, maybe I am," she said, running her sentences together. "It's a different situation. A little odd. I'm wearing your robe, caring for your daughter, drinking a glass of wine with you." She finally looked up at him. "It's not the office."

"As you were singing 'Eensy Weensy Spider' with my daughter, it occurred to me that aside from the fact that you are the best assistant I've ever had, I don't know much about you."

She nervously brushed her hand against her neck. "There's not much to know," she said, and when he didn't fill the silence, added, "I'm kinda quiet."

Determined to dissolve her discomfort, he took another drink and nodded. "For the next five minutes, forget I'm your boss."

She gave him a doubtful look and shook her head.

"It's an order."

Still doubtful, she sighed. "I'll try."

"You have a cat."

Amanda smiled. "Yes, Delilah. She's been spayed, but the neighbors in my apartment call her a—" she paused, then shrugged "—slut for human attention."

His lips twitched in amusement. "So, you live with a slut?"

“Yes, I’ve tried to reform her, but it’s futile.”

“What do you do when you’re not working?”

“Well, I have a very demanding and challenging job, so I don’t have a lot of time to spare.”

“Nice try. Now give the real answer.”

“I belong to a fitness club where I swim a few times each week. I volunteer with a professional advocacy organization for teenage girls and I have friends I jom for lunch, dinner and shopping. Are you asleep yet?”

“No,” he said and swallowed a chuckle. “Men?”

She paused and seemed almost to hold her breath. “Not at the moment.”

He nodded, not quite sure why he’d asked that question. “What do you think of your boss?”

She gave him a long-suffering glance, and Jack wondered how he’d missed the stories her eyes could tell. She looked away again. “He is very challenging and demanding, but also rewarding. Intelligent, makes things happen,” she said. “He leaps tall buildings in a single bound, but he is occasionally human.” Her gaze slid to the brass clock on the mantel and she handed him her still-full wineglass. “Five minutes is up.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“You weren’t the one under the microscope,” she said with gentle reproof, and stood. “Thank you for the wine. Your daughter is beautiful and sweet. You’re lucky. If you ever need me to pinch-hit again, let me know.”

He frowned thoughtfully as she turned away. “Amanda,” he said, stopping her with his voice.

She turned, her arms wrapped around herself as if she were braced for another trip under the microscope. “Yes?”

He detested asking the question, hated that he didn’t have the answer himself. “Why is my daughter afraid of me?”

Her face softened. “You said yourself that she hasn’t spent much time with you. You’re larger than life to her. So tall, so strong. Even your voice is strong.”

“That’s why she whispers,” he muttered, and took another sip of whiskey.

“She doesn’t know your secret yet.”

He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head. “And what is my secret?”

“That you would do just about anything to make her happy. When she learns that, you’re cooked.” She met his gaze with gentle reassurance. “She’ll be okay. You’ll both be okay.”

Jack watched Amanda walk out of the room and wondered how his assistant knew so much more about him than he knew about her.

Two

He had looked at her.

Amanda stared wide-eyed at the ceiling in the guest bedroom of Jack’s home. She was wearing his pajamas, sleeping in his house.

All because she was good with kids, her rational mind reminded her. And she was not sleeping.

But he had looked at her. She had seen and felt the curiosity in his gaze. Her mind was whirling. When he’d asked her to forget he was her boss, she’d nearly dropped her wineglass. Did this represent some kind of breakthrough? Did this mean she was no longer invisible?

Taking a deep breath, her defense mechanisms kicked in and she closed her eyes. Probably not a breakthrough, she reasoned. Probably an aberration. She felt a clinch of disappointment at the same time she felt relief. Maybe she really wasn’t the right woman for Jack Fortune. The man might be a master communicator with clients, but he made her nervous.

Carol had once told her she thought Amanda was comfortable with Jack being her unreachable dream. Amanda had pooh-poohed the idea, but now she wondered if there was a grain of truth to it. It was much easier to be silently and secretly enthralled with Jack than it was to try to carry on a conversation with him that didn’t involve work.

She rolled onto her side and sighed into her pillow. He was still the most exciting man she had ever met. Tonight was an aberration. Tomorrow she and Jack would return to the office, and she would become invisible again. Everything would be normal.

The following morning Amanda put on her wrinkled suit, brushed the tangles from her hair and avoided looking into the mirror. She just didn't want to know what she looked like.

She stepped into the kitchen and found Jack talking with a stern-looking, older woman. "Lilly, Mrs. Downey will take care of you today since Ms. Brown is still sick."

Amanda glanced at Lilly and immediately saw the little girl's feelings on the subject. The telltale protrusion of her bottom lip, followed by too-shiny eyes grabbed at Amanda's heart.

Lilly shook her head, and in the middle of one shake, she spotted Amanda and ran to her. In her timid, whispered voice, she asked, "Can you stay with me?"

Amanda ruffled Lilly's hair. "Oh, sweetie, I wish I could, but I work for your daddy at his office and—"

Attaching her small frame to Amanda's leg, Lilly started to sob. Amanda looked helplessly at Jack.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Downey," he said quietly and moved to Amanda's side. "Let's take her to the office."

Amanda stared at him. "Pardon me?"

"The Eastco deal is done. It will be a light day," he said.

"Easy for whom?" Amanda asked, knowing how quickly her work piled up in her absence. "I was gone yesterday. Remember?"

"I remember. It will be a light day," he told her. "I promise. The poor kid's been through too many changes lately. This one isn't necessary."

Amanda felt the intensity of his gaze down to her bones. She hadn't become invisible again. Yet. With Lilly clinging to her and Jack looking at her that way, she had no choice. "Okay," she said.

Jack glanced at Mrs. Downey. "We've had a change of plans, but I'd like to compensate you for coming out on such short notice."

After quickly downing cereal, toast and milk, the three of them piled into Jack's Mercedes and headed for Amanda's town house apartment on the other side of town. Showing no favoritism, Delilah greeted them at the door, swirling between each pair of legs.

Lilly squealed with delight.

Jack quirked his lips into a wry grin. "The slut?" he asked in a voice for Amanda's ears only.

"I didn't exaggerate. Let me get dressed. It will only take a few minutes. Make yourselves at—" She broke off, the comparison between her comfortable but modest apartment and Jack's luxurious home hitting her. "Have a seat," she said instead.

Lilly wandered upstairs and watched Amanda lose a battle with a curling iron. When Amanda applied lipstick, the little girl puckered her lips; a silent invitation for Amanda to paint her tiny mouth, too. Amanda smiled and complied, then put on her pearl earrings. Digging through the jewelry box, Lilly selected the gaudy rhinestone drop earrings Amanda had received as a gag gift and never worn.

Chuckling, she clipped the large earrings on Lilly's little ears. "Oh, your daddy is going to love these. Let's go."

They walked downstairs, and Amanda watched Jack do a double take at his daughter. "She has excellent taste, wouldn't you say?" Amanda asked.

Audibly swallowing his amusement, he nodded. "You look beautiful, Lilly."

"This is when you say thank you," Amanda whispered to Lilly.

"Thank you," Lilly echoed in a whisper.

Lilly was a hit at the office until just after lunch, when the little girl's energy began to wane, boredom began to set in and naptime loomed. After much coaxing, coddling and a promise of cookie

and juice after the nap, Amanda was able to persuade Lilly to lie down on a sofa in an office down the hall.

Amanda plopped down in her chair, cradled her chin in her hands and closed her eyes. A nap sounded pretty good to her right now, too.

“Sleeping on the job?” Jack asked in an amused voice.

Chagrined, she immediately straightened.

He leaned against her desk. “How did you get her to take a nap?”

“Complex negotiations. It would require too much of your time to explain.”

“You pulled the cookie trick again, didn’t you?”

“Think about it. If a nap followed by juice and cookies were part of the required schedule for the United Nations, I bet our conflicts would significantly decrease.”

He nodded. “Point taken. I need you in my office. I’ve got a new project in mind for you.”

Amanda’s silly heart leaped at his words. I need you.

“Okay,” she managed, and pulled herself back in line. “Now?”

“Yes,” he said and led the way.

Following him, she waited expectantly after he closed the door. Gazing at her thoughtfully, he remained quiet for far too long.

Amanda’s stomach began to dance with uneasiness.

He slowly walked toward her and stopped. “I need you...” he began, sending her heart into another tripping mode. She wished he would stop that.

“...to move in with me and take care of Lilly for a while.”

Move in with me. Amanda locked her knees. Her head began to swim. Move in with me. His words echoed in her mind. She didn’t even think she’d fantasized hearing those before.

“I know it’s an unusual request, but Lilly needs you. I need you to help her during this time of transition for her. She never really liked Ms. Brown that much, but she adores you.”

Amanda slammed the brakes on her thoughts. This was all about Lilly. This was not about Jack or his feelings for Amanda. The knowledge rubbed at a raw spot inside her. She took a mind-clearing breath. “But didn’t you tell me the doctor said Ms. Brown should get over her flu in a few days? And she’ll be able to take care of Lilly again?”

“Yes and no. She’ll recover, but I called her today and asked her honestly how she felt her position was working out with Lilly. Ms. Brown said Lilly still didn’t seem happy, and she wondered if another personality might suit better.”

Amanda felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. “You didn’t let her go.”

“I did.”

Amanda shook her head. “Oh, Jack. I’m not a nanny. I’m an administrative assistant.”

“But you’re great with Lilly.”

“What about my job?”

“I’ve arranged for a replacement,” he told her.

Amanda felt as if she’d been kicked. “That easily?”

“No!” he said, raising his voice. “Dammit, not that easily.” He raked a hand through his hair. “My little girl has been miserable since she came to live at my house. I can’t help her. The nanny can’t help her. But you did. What choice do I have?”

“You were sure I would agree, weren’t you?”

“I hoped. It’s not forever. It’s just until she adjusts to living with me. Afterward, you’ll have your job back,” he said. “And my undying gratitude.”

Amanda sighed and walked away from him. She felt torn. If she stayed at Jack’s house, she would be in intimate contact with him on a daily basis. It wouldn’t be all business between them. She could end up falling more deeply for him. She could, in fact, fall irrevocably for him. It was a terrible risk to take.

She glanced at him, and the combination of ruthless determination and vulnerability stamped on his face quashed her inner protests.

Carol would either tell her she was crazy or that this was an opportunity she couldn't pass up. This could be Amanda's only chance with Jack. This could be her chance to stop being the invisible woman. Maybe Jack would really see her, and maybe if he saw her, he would also see that she was meant for him.

"I still need to keep up my activities and classes. I will want to keep up with my friends."

"Consider it done."

"My cat will have to move in."

He paused a millisecond. "Okay."

"I will want to oversee the person temporarily assigned to this position, so I don't come back to a mess."

"Makes sense."

She rolled her eyes. "I've never seen you this agreeable. Should I ask for a million in unmarked bills?"

He chuckled. "You might be surprised. You'll do it?"

"I need to know that you'll be spending time with Lilly in the evening and on the weekends."

"I will. I would have before, but you know that Sandra made it difficult," he said, meeting her gaze. "Anything else?"

"Just one thing," Amanda said.

"Here comes the million in unmarked bills," he said cynically.

"Not quite," Amanda said, surprised at the slight edge of bitterness in his tone. She'd never heard it directed toward her before. "Once a week I'll bring Lilly to your office and you will have lunch with her."

Jack looked at her as if she were an alien he could never hope to understand. "I was certain you'd ask for more compensation," he muttered. "Is that all?"

"Yep. I'm warning you, though. If your goal is Lilly in starched pinafores and speaking when spoken to, you've just gotten yourself into a doozy of a mess."

His expression turned thoughtful, and she saw a rare glimmer of vulnerability in his strong features. "My goal is to make Lilly happy."

Her heart caught. "I'll do my best."

The following week Jack took an overseas trip for the purpose of cultivating an international account. Although his days were filled with meetings and business lunches and dinners, his mind frequently wandered to thoughts of Amanda and Lilly. He placed a couple of transcontinental calls home and was relieved to hear all was well.

His meetings went so well he arrived home one day early. Jack entered his foyer to the sounds of laughter and the "Limbo" song. Delilah greeted him by weaving between his legs and purring. Following the sound of the music, he walked into the kitchen and saw his daughter and Amanda doing the limbo underneath a jump rope stretched across two kitchen chairs.

Amanda, barefoot and dressed in jeans and a cropped shirt, shimmied under the rope, her movements baring her belly to his gaze. "I don't know about this, Lilly," she said. "I'm not sure I can—"

Distracted by the curve of her waist, he watched her stumble. Hearing her little squeak, he automatically grabbed her to keep her from falling. Amanda stared at him.

Her hand clung to his, and he secured her with his other hand on her back. No bra, he idly noticed. His staid, conservative secretary wasn't wearing a bra. A strange sizzling sensation spread through him. Her mouth formed an O of surprise. She had a pretty, lush mouth, he thought. He hadn't noticed it before.

"You're home early," she finally managed, still holding his hand.

“I wrapped things up quickly.” He pulled her to her feet.

Her eyelashes fluttered, and her cheeks turned pink. She looked down at their joined hands. “Oh,” she said, and removed her palm from his as if it had been burned.

Jack would have sworn he’d seen her fingers tremble slightly when she’d lifted her hand to her forehead, but that couldn’t be true. And he sure as hell wasn’t feeling a kick of arousal.

Amanda made a sound resembling a faint chuckle, then, seeming to gather her composure, she turned to Lilly. “It must be your day, sweetie. You beat me at limbo, and your daddy’s here!” She cut off Lilly’s tape player and put her arm around his daughter. “He has been cooped up in an airplane for a long time, and I bet he rushed back just so he could see you. I bet he also needs a hug.”

Hesitating, Lilly eyed him with a mixture of wariness and childlike sympathy. With slow steps she moved toward him, and when he bent down, she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Jack’s heart dipped. He picked her up and squeezed her small frame to him. “Hi, princess. Have you had a good time with Amanda?”

Lilly nodded.

“Have you been a good girl?”

Lilly nodded.

“Very good,” Amanda added. “Plus she was smearing me during the limbo dance. Since it was going to be just us girls tonight, Lilly asked if we could have spaghetti instead of the chicken cordon bleu the housekeeper left. I can heat up the chicken for you if you like?”

Jack shook his head. “Spaghetti’s fine.” He set Lilly down when she began to squirm. “I’ll clean up and be back down.”

After dinner and kissing Lilly good-night, Jack poured a drink in the den. Hearing the soft click of a door closing, he glanced out the window and saw Amanda on the back porch. He picked up a newspaper and skimmed it for a few minutes, then checked the window again. She still sat on the porch. He strolled outside.

“Nice night,” he said.

“Almost every night,” she said, rolling her shoulders. “I found out there’s less glare from the city lights here, so the evening sky looks beautiful.”

“I hadn’t really noticed,” he murmured.

“You’ve been busy making conquests,” she said, looking at him.

“Conquests?”

“Corporate conquests. How many international companies did Fortune’s Marco Polo conquer this time?”

He quirked his mouth at her reference to his reputation. “Lots of interest. One commitment.”

“Good for you,” she said with a smile, then rubbed her left shoulder.

“Got a problem, there?” he asked.

“Just a little tight. I think I did one too many rounds of the limbo,” she admitted.

“Where is it?”

“Right here,” she pointed. “but—”

Jack put his hands on her shoulder and felt the small knot. He rubbed and massaged her shoulders while Amanda fell silent. She let out a quiet moan that pulled at his gut. Her cropped shirt was thin, and he remembered she wasn’t wearing a bra.

Brushing aside the thought, he continued the massage. “You’re very quiet.”

“You haven’t ever rubbed my shoulders before,” she said.

“Is it helping?”

“You—” she took a careful breath “—you’re very good.”

Her words were both an unwitting sensual compliment and invitation, and he wondered what Amanda was like in bed. Was she conservative and repressed, the way she was in the office? Or

uninhibited, like she was with his daughter? How responsive would she be? What would make her sigh and gasp? How would her nipples respond to his fingers and mouth?

He felt the dull ache of arousal between his legs. Over Amanda? Jack shook his head.

“You’re different here from the way you are at the office.”

“Different jobs,” she said slowly as if she were forcing herself to concentrate. “With Lilly, she needs me to act a little crazy to get her to come out of herself. She needs lots of hugs.” She made a soft moan.

“And at the office?” he prompted, his curiosity about his assistant growing. There was more about Amanda than met the eye.

“At the office you need me to be efficient and to anticipate your needs so your time won’t be wasted.” She sighed and leaned away from him. “Thank you,” she said, turning slightly to face him. “You need me to be invisible.” A lock of hair slid over one of her eyes like a filmy shield of her secrets. Meeting his gaze, she gave a soft, wry smile. “I’m very good at being invisible.”

Amanda said good-night, and Jack stayed awake. Although he was tired, he couldn’t sleep because of the time zone change. In the middle of the night while he surfed through late-night television, he thought about Amanda. He decided that perhaps she had a few surprises behind those big brown eyes. Maybe she wasn’t just background music after all.

Two days later Amanda brought a picnic lunch for Lilly and Jack to share at the office while she answered questions from her replacement, took care of transition confusion and grabbed a lightning-quick lunch with Carol in a snack bar. “I want an update,” Carol demanded.

“Lilly’s such a sweetie. She—”

“Jack. I want an update on your progress with Jack, since you have now penetrated the Fortune outer wall.”

Amanda laughed and shook her head. “I’m not that much of a schemer. I’ve been much busier with Lilly than Jack.”

Carol frowned. “But part of your purpose in taking on this job was making Jack Fortune see you as a woman.”

“Well, I think maybe he does,” she said, thinking of the questions he’d asked her and the way he’d looked at her. “There’ve been a few nights that we talked.”

“Talk?” Carol asked. “Talk is all?”

“Mostly,” Amanda said. “He rubbed my shoulder one night, but—”

“A massage. That’s better.” Carol studied her. “Your eyes are sparkling.”

Amanda felt her cheeks heat, remembering the way his hands had felt on her. She’d barely been able to breathe, let alone think or talk. It had been torture to pull away, but if she’d allowed him to continue, she’d feared she would do something crazy like turn around in his arms and kiss him. Although Amanda was finding it more and more difficult to keep her feelings invisible to Jack, she was determined to keep her hopes under control.

“No. My eyes are not sparkling.” She shook her head at both Carol and her crazy hopes. “Nothing has happened. He hasn’t professed undying love, nor does he seem to have gotten a big eureka that I’m the woman of his dreams. Nothing has happened,” she said again to keep herself on the ground.

“Uh-huh,” Carol said in disbelief. “Your eyes are sparkling, and it’s not due to new contact lens.”

Amanda changed the subject, then scooted back to work a few minutes later. On her way to her office she saw Mollie Shaw hanging outside Stuart Fortune’s office.

Amanda knew Mollie was Chloe Fortune’s young wedding consultant, but she’d only spoken to her a couple of times. “Can I help you find something?”

Mollie blushed. “Oh, no. I—uh—” She bit her lip. “I—uh—I was looking for Emmet, Chloe’s father. I needed to discuss some of the wedding arrangements with him.”

“With Emmet,” Amanda repeated doubtfully. “Emmet’s office is on the next floor.”

“Oh,” Mollie said, her cheeks deepening with color. “My sense of direction needs a little work. Thanks,” she said, then quickly breezed away.

Puzzled, Amanda looked after her for a long moment. She returned to Jack’s office, gave a quick hug to Lilly and an update to Jack.

“Thanks,” he said. “Your replacement is having a difficult time.”

“Why?”

“Because I start every sentence with ‘Amanda does it this way.’”

She smiled. “Are you saying you miss your invisible assistant?”

A curious, seductive light flickered in his green eyes. “You might have been invisible, but what you did wasn’t,” he told her. “I have a conference in fifteen minutes. Is there anything else?”

“Not really,” Amanda said, thinking of Mollie Shaw. “Except I just saw Mollie Shaw hanging around Stuart’s office. She said she was here to see Emmet, but she seemed very nervous.” She shrugged. “It’s probably nothing. Will you be home for dinner tonight?”

“No. I’m joining Trina. Time for that rain check.”

Amanda felt her stomach sink and instantly chided herself. Just because she was caring for Jack’s daughter and the nature of the conversations had become more personal didn’t mean he was anywhere near having romantic feelings for her. Just because he’d seemed to look at her, really look at her, a few times, didn’t mean he wanted anything from her except to help Lilly be happy.

She made herself smile. “Have a good time,” she said, feeling the sparkle inside her fizzle.

Three

Mason Chandler stopped Jack outside the conference room after his afternoon meeting. “Got a minute?”

“Sure. My office?”

Mason nodded, and they walked down the hall. A successful businessman in his own right, Mason had long moved in the same social circle as the Fortune family. Soon he would be joining their ranks as Jack’s cousin Chloe’s husband. Even though he owned his own company, he was well trusted by the Fortune family.

“Hold my calls, Elaine,” Jack said to his replacement assistant, then joined Mason in his office. “What’s up?”

“Chloe told me your father’s been acting edgy lately,” Mason said.

Jack frowned.

“Will you keep me posted if you see or hear anything out of the ordinary? Anything at all.”

Jack shrugged. “I can’t think of anything offhand,” he said. “Unless—It’s nothing.”

“You’d be surprised what can come from nothing,” Mason said in a dark tone.

“Amanda told me Mollie Shaw was hanging around Stuart’s office. When Amanda asked her about it, she got nervous. It’s probably nothing,” he said. “Mollie’s barely over drinking age.”

“Maybe a background check,” Mason murmured.

“For a wedding planner?” Jack asked in disbelief. “Are we stepping into paranoia? Besides, she’s good friends with your future brother-in-law’s wife, Kelly.”

“You may be right,” Mason said in a noncommittal voice. “But there is such a thing as healthy paranoia. Keep your eyes open. Okay?”

“Always,” Jack said. “How do you get all your information, anyway?”

“I have my sources.” Mason headed for the door and turned around. “How’s Lilly?”

“Better since Amanda took over.”

“That’s good. You headed home now?”

“No, I’m meeting Trina Sullivan for dinner.”

“Redhead.” Mason cracked a wicked grin. “Jack’s new WOW.”

“Wow’?” Jack repeated.

“Woman of the week. You don’t keep them around much longer than that.”

“I come from a long line of matchmakers,” Jack told Mason. “You know about Kate,” he said referring to his aunt who was determined to make sure all Fortunes were happily married and producing more heirs. “The only way to throw her off course is to be a moving target.”

“No serious contenders?”

“The only female I’m serious about is Lilly.”

Mason nodded slowly. “Safe choice. ‘Night.”

After Mason left, Jack checked the mirror in his office rest room and straightened his tie. His evenings had been too quiet lately. He’d had too much time to reflect. He needed a distraction. Trina.

Every time Amanda closed her eyes that night in bed, she pictured Jack. And Trina. He would flirt with Trina and let his hand linger at her waist. He would kiss her. He would hold her.

Pain cut through her. Jealousy welled inside her. Amanda squished her eyes closed. She hated jealousy. It was such a small, useless emotion. Amanda didn’t spend much time lamenting her plain appearance. Her value had never been in the color of her eyes, the shape of her face or the shape of her slim body. She’d been valued for her mind, her common sense and for her heart.

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