

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired

The Nanny's New Family

Margaret Daley



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Second Chance Family Annie Knight has her work cut out for her as the McGregor family's newest nanny. Dr. Ian McGregor means well, but the distracted single dad's lost touch with his four kids. The new nanny brings much-needed calm to the chaos, including finding a service dog that could be a real lifesaver. And soon the good doctor's making Annie's heart respond in ways it hasn't for years. But Annie's cheery demeanor hides a heart-wrenching secret that's as much a part of her as her carefully hidden scars. Annie doesn't think she deserves happiness—but Ian and his kids will show the caretaker that with the love of family, everything's possible.

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"See you at home," Annie said.

Ian caught her arm before she reached the SUV. She glanced back at him. The look of appreciation in his eyes jammed her throat. She felt special in that moment, more special than she had in a long time.

"Annie, I don't even know how to begin thanking you for your help."

She covered his hand with hers, the physical connection making everything fade from her consciousness except the man near her. She smiled. "You just did." She continued her trek around to the car's driver's side, missing his touch.

That was too dangerous for her to get used to.

She'd let down her defenses in college and had risked her heart once before with David and ended up brokenhearted. She couldn't go through that again.

As she started the car, she realized that when she'd said, "See you at home," she'd felt as though his house was her home. More than she had at any place she'd been a nanny...

MARGARET DALEY, an award-winning author of ninety books, has been married for over forty years and is a firm believer in romance and love. When she isn't traveling, she's writing love stories, often with a suspense thread, and corralling her three cats that think they rule her household. To find out more about Margaret, visit her website at margaretdaley.com.

The Nanny's

New Family

Margaret Daley



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

—Matthew 6:14

To all people who work with service dogs

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[Chapter One](#)

Dr. Ian McGregor sank into a chair at his kitchen table, exhausted after wrestling with Joshua to take a much-needed nap. With his elbows on the oak surface still cluttered with the lunch dishes, Ian closed his eyes and buried his face in his hands, massaging his fingertips into his pounding temples. How did Aunt Louise handle Joshua when his youngest was dead tired yet fighting to stay awake?

With a lot of practice, no doubt. Something he lacked. Ian glanced at the clock on the wall and shot to his feet. The next candidate for nanny, one who had come highly recommended, would be here in ten minutes. He had high hopes she would work out because no one else had since Aunt Louise had passed away six months ago. Ian missed his aunt's bright, cheerful smile and all the love she'd had for his family.

Locking away his sorrow, Ian looked at the chaos around him and noted he now had nine minutes. He snatched up all the dirty dishes and crammed them into the dishwasher, leftover food and all. Then after wiping down the counters, he stuffed all of his four-year-old son's toys and the clothes he'd dragged out into the utility room off the kitchen and slammed the door closed.

Two minutes to spare. He wanted to be outside before Annie Knight rang the doorbell. He didn't want Joshua scaring her away if he woke up from his nap, especially without the rest he needed.

Lord, please let this one work out. On paper she looks great. We need her.

He'd turned to God so many times in the two years since his wife had passed away. There had to be an answer to his most recent problem somewhere.

As Ian made his way toward the foyer, the doorbell chimes pealed through the house. He sighed, realizing that he should have foreseen, after the day he'd had so far, that Annie Knight would arrive early. He rushed across the foyer and swung the door open before she rang it again.

The woman greeted Ian with a bright, wide smile, and he looked at it for a few seconds before he lifted his eyes to take in the rest of her... His mouth began to drop open. He quickly snapped it closed and stared at the *young* lady, probably no more than eighteen, standing on his porch. She couldn't be Annie Knight. That nanny had worked for six years, the past three years for a doctor he knew. She had graduated from college with a double major in psychology and child development.

Ian craned his neck, peering around the woman with thick shoulder-length blond hair and the biggest brown eyes he'd ever seen. Maybe she'd come with Annie Knight. But no one else was there. "Yes, may I help you?"

"Are you Dr. Ian McGregor?"

He nodded, surprised by her deep voice.

"I'm Annie Knight. Am I too early for the interview?"

"No, right on time," Ian finally answered as he frantically thought back to reading her résumé. She'd graduated from high school ten years ago, which should make her around twenty-eight, twenty-nine. "Come in." He stepped to the side to allow her to enter his house.

As Annie passed him in the entrance, he caught a whiff of...vanilla, and he thought immediately of the sugar cookies Aunt Louise used to bake. The young woman paused in the foyer and slowly rotated toward him, waiting.

Ian waved his arm toward the right. "Let's go in there."

He followed her into the formal living room that he rarely used. As she took a seat in a navy blue wingback, Ian sat on the beige couch across from her. The large chair seemed to swallow her petite frame. She couldn't be any taller than five-one. His eldest son would surpass her in height in another year or so.

Ian cleared his throat. "I'm glad you could meet me here. My youngest son, Joshua, didn't go to school today. He's been sick the past two days but is fever-free as of this morning."

"How old is he?"

"Four. He's in the preschool program at Will Rogers Elementary."

"Dr. Hansen told me you had four children. How old are they?"

"Jade and Jasmine are eight-year-old twins and Jeremy is nine, soon to be ten, as he has informed the whole world. I'm sure Tom told you that I need a nanny as soon as possible. My aunt who helped me with the children passed away six months ago and since then, I haven't found anyone who fits my family."

Annie Knight tilted her head to the side. "What has been the problem?"

All the good nannies have jobs. My family can be difficult. My children—and I—are shell-shocked after losing two important people we've loved in the past two years. Ian could have said all of that, but instead he replied, "The first nanny stole from me, and the second woman was too old to keep up with my children—her words, not mine, but she was right. Then the third one decided to up and quit without notice and left my kids here alone while I was in surgery. That was last week." And the seven days since then had not been ones he would like to repeat. Ian had had to rearrange several operations he'd scheduled and change appointments.

Annie frowned. "That's so unprofessional."

"Tom is moving at the end of this week. I know he wanted you to go with the family to New York. May I ask why you didn't?"

"My family is here in Cimarron City, and a big city like New York doesn't appeal to me. Besides, his two eldest are teenagers and don't need a nanny. His youngest will be twelve soon. Dr. Hansen will be able to hire a good housekeeper."

Ian watched her as she talked and gestured. Warmth radiated from the woman across from him. Her face was full of expression, and when she smiled, dimples appeared on her cheeks. She had nice, high cheekbones. Her hair curled under and covered part of her face, which wasn't unpleasant but not what most people would consider beautiful. As a plastic surgeon he was always drawn to how a person looked, but from experience he knew the importance of what lay beneath.

"Tom told me he hated losing you." Why didn't she use her college degree? Why did she choose to be a nanny? Ian decided to tell her everything so she would know what she would be up against. He heaved a composing breath. "Four children can be a handful."

"I loved working with Dr. Hansen's three children. We fell into a good routine. One more child shouldn't be a problem. I grew up in a large family—four brothers and two sisters. I'm used to a full house."

"I want to be blunt with you because I don't want you to decide to leave after a few days. My children need stability. There have been too many changes in their lives lately. Their mother died two

years ago, then my aunt. Joshua is—” he searched for the right word to describe his youngest “—adventurous. He’ll try anything once. He’s fearless.”

“Which could get him in trouble. My younger brother was like that. Actually, still is. He certainly tested my mother’s patience.”

“Jade and Jasmine desperately need a woman’s touch. They can be adorable, but if they don’t like you they will pull pranks on you. I suspect the reason the last nanny left was because of them, but I couldn’t get the truth out of any of my kids.”

“Are the twins tomboys?”

“Jade is, but Jasmine is totally the opposite. That’s the way you can tell them apart, because they do look exactly alike.” Ian stared at a place over her left shoulder while trying to decide how to explain his eldest son. “And Jeremy is angry. That his mother died. That Aunt Louise did, too. That I have to work to make a living. That the sky is blue. It’s sunny. It’s rainy.”

There—he’d laid it all out for Annie. If she stayed he would be surprised, but he didn’t want another nanny starting then leaving right away.

“I’ve worked with kids like that. They haven’t moved through the anger stage of grief. When my mother died, I got stuck in that stage.”

Ian studied Annie’s calm features, and for a few seconds he felt wrapped in that serenity. She seemed to know how to put people at ease. “He went to a children’s counselor, but little was accomplished. Frankly, I don’t know what to do next.” The second he said that he wanted to snatch it back. He was Jeremy’s dad. He should know what to do, shouldn’t he? “I’ve reduced my hours at the clinic to be around more, but all Jeremy and I do is butt heads.”

A light danced in the young woman’s eyes. She leaned forward, clasping her hands and resting her elbows on the arms of the chair. “There will be a period of adjustment with any new nanny, but I don’t run from problems. I like challenges. They make me dig in. They make life interesting.”

Ian would be trusting Annie with his children, so he needed to trust her with all the background on his eldest child. “I should warn you, Jeremy is also having trouble at school. He never talks about his mom like Jade and Jasmine do. They are always asking me to tell them stories about Zoe and me. Whenever they start talking about her, Jeremy leaves the room—or rather, stomps away. I’m at my wits’ end.” For three months he’d been thinking that, but now he’d spoken it out loud to another person. The very act made some of his stress dissolve.

“Counseling is good, but sometimes you need to be with a child outside an office to understand what’s really going on. I’ll do my best to help Jeremy.”

When Annie said those words, Ian felt hope for the first time in a while.

“I’ve checked your references, and they are excellent. I know how picky Tom is, and he never would have recommended you if you weren’t good. Do you have any questions about the job?”

Annie sat back again, scanning the living room. “What are my duties?”

“I have a cleaning lady who comes in three times a week, but in between there may be light cleaning. I love to cook, but there will be times when I’m held up at the clinic. Tom told me you are a good cook.”

“I like to when I get a chance.”

“The kids will be out of school for the summer in six weeks. The older ones have some activities you’ll need to drive them back and forth to, but Joshua doesn’t yet.”

“In other words, he’ll need to be watched closely,” she said with a chuckle.

“Yes. One time he managed to climb to the top of the bookcase then couldn’t get down.”

“Where will I be living?”

“I have an apartment over the garage you can use. We have a breezeway that connects the garage to the house. You’ll have your own place but be close if needed quickly. Will that be all right?”

“That will work perfectly. I’ll need Sundays off unless you have a medical emergency, and I’ll take off the other time according to the children’s schedules.”

"That's fine with me. I'll supply health insurance and a place to live. Your starting salary will be five hundred a week on top of your benefits. After three months we can discuss a raise. Is that all right with you?"

"Yes."

"When can you start?"

"Monday. I'll move in on Sunday. I'll have my family help me."

Only four days away. "Great. Will you share Sunday-night dinner with us so I can introduce you to the children? I'm cooking."

"I think that will be a good way for me to meet them. A school day is always hectic with everyone trying to get where they need to be."

"I have a Ford Explorer you'll use to drive the children. It'll be at your disposal at all times." Ian rose. "Let me give you a tour of my house, then the apartment, before you leave. I'm afraid it was a mess from the last nanny. The guy remodeling it will be through in a couple of days. We'll only be able to peek inside because he's refinishing the wooden floors today."

"Will I get to meet Joshua before I leave?"

"Probably. When he takes a nap, it's usually only an hour or so."

Annie pushed to her feet, looking around. "I imagine you don't use this room much, or your children are neater than most."

"They don't come in here often. The cleaning lady comes every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning. She has her own key, so she'll let herself in."

"That's good. If I have to do any shopping that'll be the time to do it. Do you want me to go to the grocery store for you?"

"Yes. I understand you did that for Tom and his wife."

Annie nodded as she followed Ian into the dining room. "If you plan some meals, you can add what you need to my list. With such a large family, I'll probably have to go twice a week."

When Ian walked into the kitchen, he swept his arm wide. "Right before you came, this place was a disaster." He crossed to the dishwasher and opened it. "I'll have to empty this and refill it properly after you leave."

She laughed, a light musical sound that filled the room.

Ian went to the utility room and swung open the door. "This is where I stuck all the mess I couldn't take care of. I didn't want to scare you away."

"Then, why are you showing me now?"

He smiled. "Because I believed you when you said you like a challenge."

"I don't scare easily." Annie chuckled.

"Good. The nanny who stole from me used to hide the mess rather than pick up. Sadly, I copied that method." Ian gestured toward a door at the other end of the utility room. "That leads to the short breezeway and garage."

The next place Ian showed her was the huge den. "This is where the family hangs out the most." He indicated the room full of comfortable navy-blue-and-tan couches, a game table, a big-screen TV and several plush chairs with ottomans.

"I can see kids relaxing and enjoying themselves in here."

"The only other room downstairs is my home office." Ian pointed to the closed door across from the den then headed for the staircase. "On the second floor I have six bedrooms. I had the first nanny staying in Aunt Louise's room, but my kids got upset. I quickly renovated the area over the garage, but she was fired before she had a chance to move into the apartment."

"Those women give the nannies of this world a bad name. The ones I've gotten to know love children and go above and beyond."

At the last room at the end of the hallway, Ian stopped and gestured. “This is Joshua’s bedroom. I’m surprised he isn’t up, but he’s been getting over a virus or—” He eased open the door to find his son drawing on the wall.

* * *

After church on Sunday, Annie joined her large family at her twin sister Amanda’s house for the noon meal. When not working, Annie spent a lot of time with her twin. Annie had been thrilled when Amanda had married Ben last year. Amanda would be a great mother, and Annie knew her sister wanted children.

The day was gorgeous with the temperature around seventy degrees and not a cloud in the sky. Annie made her way around back where her father stood talking with Ben at the grills, flipping hamburgers. With his thinning blond hair and the deep laugh lines crinkling at the corners of his brown eyes, Dad was no doubt telling her brother-in-law another Amanda and Annie escapade from childhood.

The scent of ground beef saturated the air and Annie’s stomach rumbled. She scanned the yard, enjoying the sound of merriment from the children playing on the elaborate swing set. Her twin might not have children yet, but she spoiled her nieces and nephews.

“Ah, it’s about time you arrived,” Amanda said as she put a Band-Aid on the youngest child’s knee. “We’re almost ready to eat. What took you so long?” She rose as her nephew ran back to play with the others.

“I went back to the house to say goodbye to the Hansen family. The moving van will come tomorrow. They were heading to the airport when I left.”

“Aren’t we supposed to help you move later today?” Her dad laid the spatula on the plate for the burgers and turned toward her. “Is everything boxed up?”

Annie nodded. “Ben and Charlie’s trucks should be enough for the small pieces of furniture I have. After we empty my suite of rooms at the Hansen house, I’ll lock up and we’ll go to Dr. McGregor’s. Then the hard work starts. There are stairs on the side of the garage that we’ll have to climb with all the boxes.”

Her youngest brother, twenty-year-old Charlie, came out of the house and clapped her on the back. “Remember, you promised me my favorite pie for helping. I’ve been thinking about that for days.” He rubbed his stomach in a circular motion.

“I’ll bake you an apple pie this week.”

Charlie’s dark eyebrows shot straight up. “Apple? Bah! Double-chocolate fudge is the only one I’ll accept.” Then he said to Ben, “I’ve been sent to find out when we’re going to eat.”

Ben pressed the spatula down on each patty. “One minute, so get the kids to wash up inside.”

As Charlie corralled the children and headed for the house with them, her dad chuckled. “Get ready for the onslaught.”

Annie stood back with Amanda as ten children from the ages of three to fourteen invaded the deck, all talking at the same time. The other day Dr. McGregor had wondered if she could handle looking out for four children, but Annie was usually the one assigned to keep her nieces and nephews in line or make sure the older ones kept an eye on the younger ones because Annie enjoyed helping with them.

Her gaze drifted to Amanda, an exact replica of Annie, although her twin usually wore her long blond hair pulled up in a ponytail. She doubted there was anything Jade and Jasmine could pull that she and Amanda hadn’t tried years ago. They had never fooled her parents, but they had confused a couple of their teachers when they exchanged places in each other’s classes. Now they went out of their way to be different.

Annie herded the kids into a line so they could fill their plates with hamburgers, coleslaw and fruit salad while Amanda and Samantha, who was married to her eldest brother, Ken, helped the two youngest children with their food.

As Annie's nieces and nephews sat at their table, she arranged older ones to be near younger ones. "Let's pray. Carey, do you want to say the prayer?"

"Yes," her ten-year-old niece said, then bowed her head. "Bless this food and, Lord, please don't let it rain tomorrow on my soccer game."

When the children dug into their meal, Annie went to make a plate for herself. As she dished up an extra helping of coleslaw, she glanced at the lettuce for the burger. The green reminded her of the color of Dr. McGregor's eyes, except his had a sparkle in their depths, especially toward the end of their conversation about his kids. She'd felt his relief that he'd told her everything about them and she hadn't declined the job. He didn't understand—instead of frightening her off, he'd intrigued her. Annie had decided years ago to help children in need, and Jeremy needed her whether he knew it or not. The Hansens' middle daughter had, too, at one time, but now she was fourteen and growing up to be a mature young lady.

"You haven't told me much about your new position," Amanda said when she joined Annie at the end of the food line. "What's your boss like?"

"He seems a little overwhelmed at the moment."

"Four children will do that."

"More than that. He lost his wife and then his aunt, who was assisting him with the kids. All in two years' time."

Amanda gave her a long, assessing look. "Sounds as though you want to do more than help the children."

"Any kind of loss can be hard to get over. I don't think Dr. McGregor's even had time to think about either his wife or aunt. He's had his hands full."

"You got all of that from an hour interview?"

Annie started for the adult table. "Well, not exactly. I asked Tom and his wife about him. I have a nurse friend at the hospital where he does surgery. She told me some things, too."

One perfectly arched eyebrow rose. "It sounds as though you also checked his references."

"I could be working for him for quite a while—his youngest is four years old. I discovered that his colleagues respect him as a surgeon, but what I particularly like about him is that he spends some of his time at a free clinic for children, fixing things like cleft palates. Tom told me Dr. McGregor has had to reduce his regular work time because of his trouble with the nannies, but he didn't decrease his hours at the free clinic."

Seated at the table, Amanda leaned close to Annie. "So he's a plastic surgeon. Maybe you should talk to him about your situation."

Annie gripped her fork and whispered, "No. I was told there's nothing else that can be done."

"That was fourteen years ago. Methods are bound to be better now."

"I don't have the money. The last operation nearly cost Dad his house. I can't do that again. I'll live with the scars. I have for over fourteen years. Besides, the fire wouldn't have happened if I hadn't left the candle burning when I went to sleep."

Tears filled Annie's eyes. She'd forgotten about the candle that day at the cabin because she'd been too busy moping and missing her boyfriend.

The memory of that day when she had been fifteen and the family had been staying at their grandparents' cabin on Grand Lake inundated her with feelings of regret. The fire that had destroyed the vacation home had also nearly killed her when a burning beam had pinned her down. Part of her body was burned. The pain swallowed her into a huge dark hole that had taken a year to crawl out of. But the worst part was her mother had never made it out of the cabin. Her dad had managed to get to Annie, but when he'd tried to go back in, the building had been engulfed in flames.

"You have four brothers and two sisters who can help you with the money. We all have jobs. Even Charlie works, and he's still in college."

“He has to pay for his classes. And each of you has a family to support and your own expenses. Amanda, let this go before I get up and leave.”

Amanda harrumphed. “You’re stubborn.”

“So are you. Remember, I know you better than anyone, probably even Ben.”

Amanda narrowed her brown eyes. “And the same goes for me. Annie, it was an accident. The family doesn’t blame you for Mom’s death. You need to forgive yourself and let the past go or you’ll never have the life the Lord wants for you. When are you going to figure that out?” Her twin raised her voice above a whisper.

“Annie, what do you need to figure out?” her father asked from the other side of the table.

“Nothing, Dad. Amanda and I are just arguing.”

“What’s new?” Ken, her older brother who sat across from Annie, picked up his hamburger to take a bite. “Ouch! Which one of you kicked me?”

The twins pointed at each other.

* * *

Emotions clashed inside Annie when she turned into the McGregors’ driveway and drove to the large white stone house set back from the road on the outskirts of Cimarron City, Oklahoma. She was excited for a new opportunity to help children in need, but it had been several years since she’d been challenged with a grieving child. The Hansen kids’ drama had been normal teenager or preteen stuff for quite some time. What if she’d lost her touch?

Annie glanced in her rearview mirror and saw her brothers’ vehicles at the entrance of the driveway. Parking in front of a three-car garage, she inhaled a deep breath, then climbed from her red Honda, hefted a large box with her pots and pans from the backseat and headed toward the stairs on the side. Dr. McGregor had told her yesterday he would leave the apartment unlocked.

She carefully started her climb up the steps, her view partially blocked by the carton. A giggle from above drifted to her. She lowered the box and gasped.

Grinning at her, Joshua stood on top of the upstairs railing wearing a red cape that flapped in the breeze.

“I have special powers. I can fly.” The four-year-old spread his arms wide as though he was going to demonstrate.

“Don’t!” Annie shouted as Joshua wobbled.

Chapter Two

I shouldn’t have shouted. Annie sucked in a breath.

Joshua regained his balance.

Heart thumping, Annie dropped the box on the stairs, jumped over the cardboard box and scrambled up the steps. “Joshua, it’s great to see you again,” she said in the calmest voice she could muster. “I sure could use a big, strong superhero like you to help me bring my stuff upstairs. How about it?”

By the time she reached the landing, the four-year-old had turned his body so he could see her better, but the motion caused him to wobble again on the six-inch-wide railing. He flapped his arms to catch his balance. This time, Annie lunged toward him as an ear-piercing scream from below split the air.

She grasped his ankle as the little boy fell backward and held his leg with both hands. Annie leaned over the railing as she heard footsteps behind her and the wailing sound still coming from the bottom of the stairs. While Joshua dangled two stories above the ground, someone pounded up the steps.

Muscular arms came around her and gripped Joshua. “I’ve got him. Let him go, and I’ll bring him up.”

Relief washed over her as she released her fingers. Annie dropped down between Dr. McGregor's arms and moved to the side so he could hoist his son up to the landing. While she watched, she took deep, fortifying breaths to calm her racing heartbeat.

Giggling, Joshua hugged his dad. "That was fun. Can I do it again?"

"No." Thunder descended over Dr. McGregor's features as he put down his son and glanced at Annie. "Thanks. One second he was playing in the den and the next he was gone. I figured he'd come out here since I told him to give you and your family time to unload your possessions." He picked up Joshua and held him tight as though afraid the child would somehow wiggle free and try again to fly from the railing. "Young man, you and I are going to have a talk in the house about following directions."

"But, Dad, I wanna help Annie. That's why I'm here wearing my cape."

The first time Joshua had seen her when he had awakened from his nap a few days ago, he'd called her Annie, which was fine with her, but Dr. Hansen and his wife had insisted on "Miss Annie" when she'd worked for them. She was quickly sensing the McGregors' household was much more laid back.

Her employer started down the stairs. "I'll return in a while, Annie. And by the way, you can call me Ian."

As her brothers mounted the steps with boxes, including the one she'd dropped, and furniture, she watched Ian and Joshua exchange a few words with Ken and Charlie, then disappear around the corner followed by a little girl, who had to have been the one who'd screamed.

"That one is going to be a handful." Ken waited for her to open the door. "Reminds me of someone I know." Her eldest brother looked pointedly at Charlie, who was bigger and more muscular than Ken.

"I grew out of wanting to be a daredevil." Her youngest sibling poked Ken in the back with two cartons he held.

"Boys, let's try to be good role models for the McGregor children." Annie trailed them into her new apartment. "And, Charlie, the only reason you quit, no doubt temporarily, was because you broke an arm and leg performing that death-defying skateboard trick."

The bantering between her brothers continued as they brought up all the boxes and furniture from the three vehicles while Annie tried to decide which boxes to open first and where to put the ones she wouldn't have time to empty today. Annie paused to look at her first real apartment. When she'd gone to college, she'd lived at home to save money, then she'd moved into the homes of her employers after that.

Excitement bubbled to the surface as she walked to a door and discovered her bedroom with a double bed, a chest of drawers and one nightstand. Her grandmother's cushioned chair would look good in here. She checked the closet and smiled when she found it was a walk-in with plenty of storage space.

Then Annie moved on to the only other door and went into the bathroom, a pale-green-and-ivory color scheme. It had a tub with a showerhead, so she had a choice. She liked that because sometimes a hot bath worked the kinks out of her body on a particularly active day, and with Joshua she'd probably have a lot of them. She wouldn't have to exercise much with him around if that stunt was any indication.

When she went back into the main room with a living area at one end and a dining table with four chairs and a small kitchenette taking up the other half, her brothers stood in the middle of the stack of boxes, arguing.

Annie put two fingers in her mouth and gave a loud whistle. They stopped and stared at her. "Are you all through bringing up my belongings?"

"Yes. We were just waiting to see if you want us to do anything else. We were discussing the merits of our favorite basketball teams and as usual our little brother has it wrong. The Thunder *will*

win the NBA championship. If you're from Oklahoma, you have to root for them." Ken shot Charlie a piercing look.

Annie needed a few minutes of peace before she was introduced to the rest of Ian's children, especially after that incident with Joshua. "I think I can handle this. Thank you for your help." She grinned. "Try not to hurt each other on the way down the stairs."

When they left, Annie sat on the tan couch and laid her head against the cushion. Quiet. Tranquil. She'd better cherish this moment because tomorrow she officially started her new job. The memory of Joshua standing on the railing revved her heartbeat again. Then she remembered Ian leaning over her and clasping his son. Remembering the brush of his arms against her gave her goose bumps.

Ian was strong. Capable. Caring.

Annie quickly shook the image from her thoughts. They were employer/employee, and that was the way it would stay. She remembered the scars on her body, a constant reminder of the tragedy that had taken her mother away.

If only I could relive...

But there were no do-overs. She had to live with what was left. She was damaged goods.

A knock at the door roused her from her thoughts. Annie pushed off the couch and weaved her way through the stacked boxes to the entrance. Maybe having quiet time wasn't the answer right now. When she let Ian inside, she spied a very contrite child trudging behind his father. Head down, Joshua chewed on his thumbnail.

She wanted to scoop the adorable little boy into her arms and tell him everything was okay, but she wouldn't. Ian's stern expression spoke volumes about a serious talk with his son, and rightly so. But he was so cute with blond curly hair, big dimples in his cheeks, the beautiful brown eyes and long, dark eyelashes that any girl would want.

"Joshua, don't you have something to say?"

The child mumbled something, but Annie couldn't make out what it was. She knelt in front of the boy. "What did you say? I didn't hear you."

Joshua lifted his head enough that she had a peek at those beautiful eyes that told the world what he was thinking. "I'm sorry. I promise I won't do it again."

She hoped not, but she knew Joshua still had to be watched carefully until he developed a healthy respect for dangerous activities. "I'm glad to hear that. I noticed some cushions on the ground. Did you put them there?"

He nodded. "They're soft."

"But not soft enough to break your fall."

"I know. Daddy told me. I have to put the cushions back—by myself."

Annie rose. "That makes sense." She glanced at Ian and saw that, like his son's, his eyelashes were extralong, framing crystalline green depths. She took in his disheveled dark brown hair that looked as though he'd raked his fingers through it when he'd talked with his child. She could just imagine how he'd felt when he'd seen her gripping Joshua's leg, his only safety line. Her heart went out to him. In the past two years Ian had buried two loved ones, and she suspected he was still dealing with his grief like Jeremy.

"Joshua, I'll watch you from the landing," Dr. McGregor said. "You need to put the cushions back exactly like you found them."

"Yes, sir." With slumped shoulders, the little boy made his way out of the apartment. The sound of his footsteps on the stairs resonated in the air.

Annie went out onto the landing with the doctor. Looking at the ground twenty feet below reminded her all over again about how tragic today could have been. She saw a flower garden with stones around it that Joshua could have hit his head on.

"Thanks, Annie, for grabbing Joshua. I went into the kitchen to make sure I had all the ingredients for dinner tonight. When I returned to the den five minutes later, he was gone. At first I'd thought he'd gone to his room, then I remembered all his questions about when you were going to show up. Something told me he went to see you. I was coming to bring him back inside so you could get settled without stumbling over him. He can get underfoot."

While Joshua wrestled with a two-seat cushion from the lawn furniture, finally deciding to drag it, Annie took in the beautifully landscaped yard with spring flowers bursting forward in their multicolored glory. The air smelled of honeysuckle. She leaned over and saw a row of bushes below the staircase. "I like your yard. Is gardening a hobby of yours?"

"More like a means to keep my sanity. When I'm troubled, I go outside and tinker in the yard. My wife got me hooked on it. She started this, and I'm just keeping it going. How about you?"

"Can't stand to garden, but I love to look at a beautiful one. I'm a great spectator—not such a good participant."

Ian turned toward her, not a foot away, and smiled.

"How about your children?" she asked. "Do they help outside?"

Watching Joshua finish with the last cushion, Ian pressed his lips together as though weighing what he said. "Joshua loves to, but his assistance isn't quite what I need. Jasmine helps often. She takes after her mother, but Jade and Jeremy will do anything to get out of work—whether outside or inside." He frowned. "In fact, if Jeremy joins the family at all it's an accomplishment."

"Will he be at dinner?"

"Yes, for as long as it takes for him to eat. I used to make him sit there until we were all ready to get up. Finally, I decided the hostile atmosphere he created wasn't fair to the other children."

"How was Jeremy with the other nannies?"

"He had as little to do with them as possible. The only one who seemed to get through to him was Aunt Louise. When she died, he took her death doubly hard."

"He's old enough to understand the losses he's had," Annie said over the stomping of Joshua's feet as he came up the stairs. "Can I help you with dinner?"

"Nope. You aren't officially on the clock until tomorrow."

"What time do you want me to come to eat tonight?"

"Six-thirty, and I hope to have the food on the table shortly thereafter." Dr. McGregor clasped his son's shoulder to keep him from going into her apartment. "No guarantees, though. Joshua, we're leaving. You have a room to clean."

"Do I hafta? I told Annie I'm sorry."

"Yes, but it has nothing to do with your room. It's Sunday, and it's supposed to be done before you go to bed."

Joshua huffed and raced down the stairs, jumping to the ground from the third step.

"If he doesn't give me a heart attack, I'll be surprised," Ian said with a chuckle.

But Annie had spied the tense set to his shoulders and the clamp of his jaw as his son had made the leap. "I imagine my parents felt the same way about some of my brothers."

"But not you?"

"Well...probably so." Some of Annie and Amanda's antics could rival her siblings'. "But nothing like my younger brother."

Ian grinned. "What is it about the youngest in the family?"

Annie smiled and shrugged, then watched Ian descend the steps. He moved with an ease and confidence.

Her new employer was easy to talk to. He was nothing like what she had expected. Tom had told her yesterday Dr. McGregor could work anywhere he wanted and make a ton of money. His reputation as a plastic surgeon was known throughout the United States. He chose to stay in Cimarron

City, his wife's hometown, and to donate part of his time to the free clinic. Annie couldn't deny that the man intrigued her.

As she entered her apartment, she remembered an article she'd found on the internet when she'd applied for the nanny position. Recently, a world-renowned model had gone to Dr. McGregor to erase the effects of a car accident. Even with the scars from the wreck she'd been beautiful, but once the surgery had been performed and she'd recovered, there wasn't a trace of what had happened to her.

Annie had an hour until dinner and decided to take a long, hot bath. As she stood in front of the counter in the bathroom, she pulled her turtleneck off. She usually didn't look at herself in the mirror, but her gaze lit upon her reflection—zeroing in on her pink-and-white scars. She'd learned to accept them, but she recalled once when one of her nieces had glimpsed them, wide eyes glued on the scarred tissue, she'd clapped her hand over her mouth in shock. Annie wouldn't forget that look—ever.

* * *

The door in the kitchen from the utility room opened, and Ian glanced at Annie entering the house. Dressed in jeans and a black turtleneck, she looked more relaxed since the scare with Joshua earlier. Her shoulder-length blond hair framed her face and emphasized her expressive dark brown eyes. She wasn't classically beautiful, but she was cute and pert. And those eyes were so appealing and mesmerizing.

Suddenly he realized he was staring at her. He dropped his attention to the pot on the stove and stirred the sauce. "I hope you're hungry. I think I went overboard."

Annie inhaled and smiled. "It smells delicious. Italian?" She bridged the distance between them. "Spaghetti. I love it. From scratch?"

"Yes, that's the only way. It's one meal all of my kids will eat. That's not the case with a lot of food. Their palate hasn't expanded much beyond pizza, macaroni and cheese and hamburgers."

"I saw some hope the last few years with the Hansen children."

"Oh, good. I have something to look forward to. There are a lot of recipes I'd like to try, but I know they won't go over with my kids." Ian continued to stir the sauce.

"I have a niece who is five and loves snow crabs. She will crack the shells and eat them until you think there couldn't possibly be any more room in her stomach. I'm usually right there with her, but the last time she kept going when I couldn't eat another bite."

Ian laughed. Annie was easy to talk to, nothing like the other nannies. Earlier, when she'd caught Joshua, she'd been calm and efficient. He remembered when the second nanny had freaked out when Jeremy was cutting up an apple and sliced his finger. Thank goodness he'd been home to take care of the wound because the woman had frozen when she'd seen the blood then yelled for him. He imagined Annie would have handled it and had the bleeding stopped before he came into the kitchen.

Ian put the spaghetti noodles on to cook then glanced around to make sure everything else was ready.

Those beautiful eyes connected with his. "Can I help you? Set the table?"

"It's already set in the dining room." Ian swung back to the stove, stirring the sauce when he didn't need to. He had to do something. Looking at her was distracting.

"Do you usually eat in the dining room?"

"No—" he waved toward the table that sat six in the alcove "—usually in here, but this is a special occasion. We're welcoming you to our home. I want this evening to be a nice calm one. Now, if only my children cooperate, it might be."

"The least I can do is help you carry the food to the table."

Ian made sure he had eye contact with Annie then said, smiling, "What part of 'you are our guest' do you not understand? Guests are supposed to relax and enjoy themselves. Nothing more than that."

A grin twitched at the corners of her mouth. "Aye, aye, sir. I've got that. It's awfully quiet. Where are the children?"

Ian frowned. "Come to think of it, Jade was the last one in here. That was fifteen minutes ago. I haven't heard a peep out of them since." He walked to the intercom and pressed a button. "Time for dinner, everyone. Don't forget to wash your hands."

"I like that. Does it work?"

"Yes. Saves me yelling or going in search of them, if you meant the intercom. Otherwise, not always about washing their hands."

A few minutes later, the first to appear in the kitchen was Jade quickly followed by Jasmine, exact replicas of each other down to the clothes they wore. "You two can help put the food on the table. Where's Joshua? He was with you in the den doing his homework."

Jasmine put her hand on her waist. "He was coloring. He doesn't have any homework."

"You and I know that, but since you, Jade and Jeremy do, he thinks he should. Did you leave him in there alone with the crayons?"

"No, he left to go to the bathroom."

"How long ago?"

Jade looked at the ceiling and tapped her chin. "I guess a while ago."

"Jade, Jasmine, this is Annie, your new nanny." Ian turned off the oven then headed for the hallway. "Annie, would you remove the pasta when it's done? I'll be back after I find Joshua. He marches to his own music."

"Don't worry. I'll help your girls get everything on the table."

Ian paused at the doorway, started to tell her she didn't have to and then decided instead that he'd give her an extra day of pay. He was afraid she would earn every bit of the money and more by the end of the evening. For starters, his daughters dressing alike didn't bode well.

Ian went to the downstairs bathroom and checked for Joshua. It was too clean and neat for Joshua to have been there. He mounted the stairs two at a time. He knew Joshua was still in the house because he'd set the alarm to beep twice when someone opened an outside door. The last time it had gone off was when Annie had come in.

The children's bathroom on the second floor was empty, so Ian made his way to the one connected to his bedroom. No Joshua. He returned to the hall and looked into his youngest son's room. Empty.

Maybe he got outside somehow. Giggles wafted to him. He marched down the hallway to where Aunt Louise used to stay and turned the knob. More laughter pealed. Quickly Ian crossed to the bathroom and found Joshua in the big tub, washing himself.

Sitting in a foot of water, Joshua beamed up at him. "I'm washing my hands."

"I see. Why did you come in here?"

"I miss Aunt Louise. Jeremy was asleep, so I came in here. Is Annie here?"

Joshua's sometimes-disconnected thoughts could be hard to follow. "Yes, she is and hungry." Ian held a towel open for his son. "Time to get out, get dressed and come downstairs." At least this time Joshua had taken off his clothes before getting into the bath.

Joshua jumped up, splashing the water, and stepped out onto the tile floor. "Okie dokie."

Ian waited at the doorway for his youngest to dress himself. When Joshua ran past him and toward the stairs, Ian made a detour to Jeremy's room and knocked on the door. No answer. He decided to make sure Jeremy was there, so he pushed the door open and found his eldest curled on the bed, his eyes closed.

Ian sat next to Jeremy and shook his shoulder to wake him up.

His son's arms lashed out at Ian. "Get away." Blinking rapidly, Jeremy pushed away as if he was coming out of a nightmare and didn't know where he was.

"What's wrong? A bad dream?"

Jeremy looked around him, then lowered his head.

"Dinner is ready." Ian spied Joshua in the doorway and waved him away.

His eldest son clenched the bedcovers. When he didn't say anything, Ian rose, not sure what was going on. "I expect you downstairs to meet the...Annie."

Jeremy flung himself across the bed and hurried out of the room—leaving Ian even more perplexed by his behavior. Not sure his son would even go to the dining room, Ian hastened after him.

Chapter Three

Annie took the seat at the end where the twins indicated she should sit. All the food was on the formal dining room table, and Jade and Jasmine sat on one side, constantly looking over their shoulders toward the foyer or staring at Annie.

She checked her watch. "Maybe I should go see if your dad needs help."

"Knowing Joshua, he's probably hiding. He does that sometimes," the girl closest to Annie said.

Jasmine? They were both wearing jeans and matching shirts and ponytails. According to Ian, they didn't dress alike anymore. Obviously, tonight they had other plans.

The other sister grinned. "We should go ahead and eat."

Annie shoved her chair back. "Wait until the others come. I think I'll go see what's keeping them." Something didn't feel right. She started for the hallway and found Joshua coming down the staircase, his lower lip sticking out. She hurried to him. "Is something wrong, Joshua?"

"Daddy is in Jeremy's room. He made me go away."

She escorted Joshua to his seat across from one of the twins. "Well, sometimes parents need private time with a child without any interruptions."

"Jeremy was telling Daddy to leave. I saw his angry face."

"Jeremy is in one of his moods," one of the twins chimed in.

"Jade, I think—"

"I'm Jasmine."

"Okay, Jasmine. I think we should go ahead and eat before the food gets cold."

"But you said we should wait," the real Jade said, her pout matching Joshua's.

A sinus headache, common for her in the spring, hammered against Annie's forehead behind her eyes. Remaining calm was the best way to deal with children. She took a moment to compose herself then bowed her head.

"What are ya doin'?" Joshua grabbed a roll from the basket near him.

Annie glanced at him. "Blessing the food."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, Joshua. I pray over my meal before I eat."

All evidence of a pout vanished, and he grinned. "I pray at night before bed."

"We used to with Aunt Louise, but those other nannies didn't," Jasmine said, grabbing the bowl of spaghetti and scooping pasta onto her plate.

"We do when Daddy eats with us." Jade folded her arms over her chest. "I'm waiting."

"I'm not. I'm staaarving," Joshua said.

While Jasmine joined him and piled sauce all over her spaghetti, Jade glared at her sister, then her little brother. When her two siblings started eating, she slapped her hand down on the table. "We should wait."

Out of the corner of her eye, Annie spied Ian entering the dining room with a scowling Jeremy trailing slowly behind him.

"Good. You have started. Spaghetti is best when it's hot." Ian winked at Annie then took his chair at the head of the table. "Jeremy, this is Annie."

"Hi, Jeremy," Annie said.

"I don't need a nanny. I'm gonna be ten at the end of next month." Jeremy's mouth firmed in a hard, thin line.

"Neither do we." Jade mimicked her older brother's expression. "We're eight. Nannies are for babies." She sent Joshua a narrow-eyed look as if he were the only reason Annie was there.

"I'm not a baby." Joshua thumped his chest. "I'm four. I'm gonna be five soon."

"How soon?" Annie asked him, hoping to change the subject.

Joshua peered at his father.

"Two weeks. The twenty-seventh."

"You act like a baby. Look at what you did today. You could have *died* today." Jade shoved back her chair, whirled around and ran from the room.

Annie's first impulse was to go after the girl, but she didn't know her yet. Jade must have been the one who'd screamed at the bottom of the steps earlier when Joshua was on the railing.

Instead, Ian stood. "Keep eating." Then he left the room.

Wide-eyed, Joshua looked at Jeremy, then Jasmine and finally Annie. "I won't die."

The pounding in her head increased. "Jade was just worried about what you did today. Standing on the railing is dangerous."

"Yeah, dork. You have a death wish." Jeremy snatched a roll and began tearing it apart.

"Death wish?" Confusion clouded Joshua's eyes. Tears filled them. "I don't wanna die."

"Then, stop doing dumb things." Jeremy tossed a piece of bread at his younger brother.

Joshua threw his half-eaten roll at Jeremy. It plunked into the milk glass, and the white liquid splashed everywhere.

Grabbing for a roll in the basket, Jeremy twisted toward Joshua.

"Stop it right now." Annie shot to her feet. "The dinner table is no place for a food fight. If you don't want to eat peacefully, then go to your rooms."

Jeremy glared. "I don't need a nanny telling me what to do."

Annie counted to ten, breathed deeply and replied, "Apparently you do, because civilized people don't act like this at the table. It's your choice. Stay and eat politely or leave." She returned his intense look with a serene one while inside she quaked. She might be fired after tonight.

Jeremy took the roll and stomped away from the dining room while Joshua hung his head and murmured, "Sorry."

"Apology accepted." Although her stomach was knotted, Annie picked up her fork and took a bite. "Delicious. Your dad is a good cook." If only she hadn't walked around the yard enjoying the beautiful flowers before coming inside, she wouldn't be contending with a headache. In spring she limited her time outside because she had trouble with her allergies.

"One day I'm gonna be a good cook, too." Jasmine continued eating.

"Jasmine, I can teach you a few things. I especially enjoy baking."

"I'm Jade." The girl lowered her gaze. "Sorry about that. We were just playing with you."

"I understand. I have a twin sister."

"You do? I have a girlfriend who has a twin brother. They don't look alike, though."

"They're fraternal twins. You and Jasmine are identical, like I am with my sister, Amanda."

"I'd like to meet your twin." Jade—at least Annie hoped that was who she was—took a gulp of her milk.

Ian reentered the dining room with Jasmine. "I'd like to meet your twin, too." He scanned the table. "Where's Jeremy?"

"He chose not to eat." Annie took another bite of her spaghetti as the knots in her stomach began to unravel.

Joshua huffed. "He threw food at me."

Ian's eyebrows rose. "Why?"

"He's mean."

Ian swung his attention to Annie, a question in his eyes.

"Jeremy chose to leave rather than calmly eat his dinner," she answered while her head throbbed.

Ian nodded then said to the children, "Tell Annie about what you're doing this week in school."

* * *

Later, contrary to what Ian had asked, Annie finished putting the dishes into the dishwasher. She had to do something while she waited for Ian to return from upstairs.

He came into the kitchen after putting Joshua to bed. "He fell right to sleep. Thankfully he usually does, while Jade and Jasmine rarely do. Often I'll find one of them in the other's bed in the morning. They shared a room until a year ago when they decided they should have their own rooms like their brothers."

"I shared one with Amanda until I went to college." Annie hung up the washrag and faced him.

His gaze skimmed over the clean counters and stove. "I should have known you would do the dishes."

"I figured it was part of my job."

"Let's go into the den and talk where it's more comfortable. I'm sure after the evening we had, you have a ton of questions."

Annie went ahead of him from the kitchen. "A few."

In the den she sat at one end of the tan couch while Ian took the other. A fine-honed tension electrified the air. As she turned to face him, he did the same. Exhaustion blanketed his features, his green eyes dull. The urge to comfort him swamped Annie, but she balled her hands and waited for him to speak first.

He cleared his throat. "What happened tonight has been the norm ever since Aunt Louise died. Life wasn't perfect before, but she established a routine and gave my children boundaries." He combed his fingers through his brown hair then rubbed his palm across his nape. "I'm finding it hard to make a living and be here for my children. I've tried to do what Aunt Louise did, but my efforts seem to fall flat."

A dilemma a lot of parents had. "We live in a society that seems to be constantly on the go. If we're not busy, we're bored," Annie said. "A lot has happened to your children in the past two years. This especially affects Jeremy because he's the eldest and knows what's going on. Even to a certain extent your girls do, especially about your aunt's death."

"I've talked to each of my kids about Aunt Louise unexpectedly dying."

"Have you ever sat down and talked with them all together? I think the best thing my parents did was have a family meeting once a week, or more if needed."

"Sometimes because of our busy schedules it's hard to do that. Tonight was the first time in a while we've even eaten together."

"Decide on what you feel has to be done, what you can do away with and what would be nice if there's enough time."

"I love my children and have rules that they need to follow, but I can't seem to get a handle on it. Maybe when you've been with the kids awhile, we can talk again."

Annie thought of the day planner she'd used to track the children's activities and school functions at her other employers'. She wished her mother was still alive to talk to, but she could go see her eldest sister, Rachel, who'd taken over and helped raise them when their mother died. "I'd like to get a weekly calendar and put it up in the kitchen to help us and the kids keep up with everything. That's where family time can be scheduled."

"I'm interested in hearing more about your family meetings. What did you talk about?"

Thinking back to a few she'd had with her siblings, Annie chuckled. "Some could get quite heated, but a rule my parents had was that no one left the room until a solution to a conflict was reached. Once we were two hours late going to bed."

"So there are rules?"

"Yes, a few my parents insisted on and some we got to add. It's a time for everyone in the family to have a voice."

Ian smiled, and for a moment the tired lines vanished from his face. “I like the concept. After you’ve been working for a week or so, I’d like to see if we could try that.”

“Have your children talked with a grief counselor?” *Have you? Have you let life get in the way of grieving?*

“As I told you, I had Jeremy go to a counselor, but he refused to cooperate. Our pastor came over after Aunt Louise’s funeral and talked with the whole family. The same when my wife died.”

“How long has Jeremy been so angry?”

“He was some before Aunt Louise died, but mostly since then. It’s getting worse. There are times he almost seems frightened. Before all this began, he was the sweetest child, but in the past nine months... I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Is he being bullied at school?”

“I’ve talked with the teacher. She’s noticed he keeps to himself more. In fact, a few months ago he bullied another classmate. That’s when he started counseling. So far there hasn’t been another incident. I won’t tolerate bullying, and he knows it.”

The feeling that the child was screaming for help kept nagging her. Was it grief? Something else? A stage he was going through? “What does he say?”

“Nothing. He used to tell me everything. Now I can’t get anything out of him. I feel like I’m losing my son.”

Not if she could do anything about it. This was why Annie had chosen to be a nanny and why she had been led to this family. “No, you aren’t losing your son. If it’s a phase he’s going through, he’ll grow out of it. If it’s something else, we’ll find out what it is and deal...” Her words faded into silence.

Surprise flashed across Ian’s face.

Did the word *we’ll* sound presumptuous? Ian was her employer. Yes, she would help with Jeremy, but he was the parent. Not her. “What I mean is as his nanny I’ll try to help you and him as much as possible. But you’re his father, and whatever you say is what I’ll do.”

A gleam sparkled in Ian’s eyes. “I want your input. I need it. So I think you’re right—we’re a team. I’m determined, at the very least, to get my family back to the way it was when Aunt Louise was here.”

Annie heard the sincerity in his voice. *A team*. It might be the closest she’d come to raising children as if she were their mother. The Hansens had been great to work for and had valued her input, but she’d always felt like an employee. As of late, she realized she wanted more, and yet she hadn’t dated much. She was always so busy with her own family or the children she was taking care of.

“I won’t be going into work tomorrow until after we take the kids to school,” Ian said.

“I thought that was something you wanted me to do.”

“You’re right, but I want to go with you so I can introduce you to the teachers. If there’s a problem with one of them at school, sometimes I can go take care of it. But if I’m in surgery, that will be hard. I don’t anticipate trouble with the girls, but there might be with Joshua or Jeremy. I’ve already had to go to school for Jeremy four times this year and once for Joshua when he fell on the playground and hit his head.” He shook his head. “Probably one of many times he’ll have to have stitches.”

“I like the idea of meeting their teachers. I want to find out what kind of homework to expect from them. That way we can get it done before you come home on the days I’m not taking them to lessons. I find if they tackle it after getting a snack when they come home from school they’ll finish quickly so they can play. It cuts down on whining later when they’re more tired.”

“The other nannies didn’t want to help with their homework, which left me doing it late and yes, they usually complained and made the process longer.”

Annie tried to stifle a yawn, but she couldn’t. “I think it’s time I go to bed. Six will be here in—” she glanced at her watch “—nine hours, and I still need to find some of the items I’ll need tomorrow.” She stood and stretched out her hand toward him.

Ian rose, clasping hers and shaking it. “Thank you, Annie.”

“For what?” She slipped her hand from his warm grasp.

“Taking this job. I’m not sure what I would have done. I know you had several offers. What made you accept mine?”

“I prayed about it, and like I said, I love a good challenge.”

“You may regret those words.”

Would she? If she became too invested in the family and Ian remarried, no longer needing her services, she might. She wanted to care but not so much she would get hurt.

“Dad! Dad!” one of the girls shouted.

He hurried into the foyer with Annie right behind him. “Why aren’t you in bed?”

“Something is wrong with Jeremy. Come quick.”

Chapter Four

Annie followed right behind Ian as he took the stairs two at a time and rushed down the hallway. He pushed his way between his twin daughters into Jeremy’s bedroom. With a glimpse at the bed, Annie knew what was happening. His head was thrown back, his stiff body shaking: Jeremy was having a seizure.

One of the twins grabbed the other’s hand, tears running down both girls’ faces. “What’s wrong with Jeremy?”

Annie herded them away from the door and closed it behind her. Jeremy was in good hands with his father being a doctor, but right now the twins were scared and upset. Trying to decide what to tell them, Annie drew them away from the room a few yards before the one dressed in a nightgown jerked away.

“What’s wrong?” the child shouted at Annie.

The other girl threw herself at Annie, wrapping her arms around her and clinging to her. “Is he going to die?”

“No, Jeremy will be fine. Your dad is helping him.” Annie forced calmness into her voice to counter the twins’ raising panic. Since Ian had never told her about the seizures, this must be the first one. She’d gone to school with a friend who’d had epilepsy, and Annie had learned to deal with the episodes when they happened. Some of her classmates had steered clear of Becca because of that, but she hadn’t. Becca had needed friends more than ever.

The twin who wore the nightgown pointed toward her brother’s bedroom, her arm quivering as much as Jeremy had been. “No, he’s not. His eyes rolled back.”

The door opened and Ian stood in the entrance, his attention switching back and forth between the girls and Annie. “Your brother will be all right. He had a seizure, which makes him act differently for a short time, but he’s falling asleep now, and you all need to go to bed, too. You have school tomorrow.”

“But, Dad—” the twin wearing the nightgown said.

“Jasmine, this is not the time to argue.”

Annie clasped both girls’ shoulders. “Would it be okay if they peek in and see for themselves that Jeremy is fine now?”

Ian glanced at her, and he nodded. “Quietly. Then to bed.”

Annie walked with them and peered into the bedroom. Jeremy’s eyes were closed and his body was still, relaxed. “See? After a seizure a lot of people are really tired and will sleep.”

Jade slanted a look at Annie. “Will he have another one?”

“I’ll be here if he does,” Ian answered then leaned over and kissed the tops of his daughters’ heads. “Good night. Love you two.”

After the twins hugged their dad, Annie gently guided them toward their end of the hall. When both entered Jade’s room, Annie didn’t say anything to them. Given what they witnessed, they’d probably start the night together.

“Have you two brushed your teeth?”

“Yes,” they said together.

“Do you have your clothes laid out for school tomorrow?”

They looked at each other then at Annie as if she'd grown another head. Jasmine said, “No, why would we do that? I never know what I feel like wearing until I get up.”

Jade glanced at her closet. “Well, actually I do know. The same thing I always do, jeans and a shirt. So I guess I could.”

Jasmine jerked her thumb toward her sister. “She wears boring clothes. I don't, and my mood makes a difference.”

Jade charged to her closet and yanked down a shirt and tossed it on a chair where a pair of jeans lay. “And that's why we're always late.”

Before war was declared, Annie stepped between the twins. “We won't be late tomorrow. Jasmine, do I need to wake you up fifteen minutes early so you can pick out your clothes?”

“No! I need my beauty sleep.” A serious look descended on Jasmine's face.

Annie nearly laughed but bit the inside of her mouth to keep from doing it. These twins were polar opposites. Even if they dressed alike, their behavior would give them away eventually. At least Amanda and she were similar in personalities, especially when they were young, which made it easier to change identities.

“Fine. We'll be leaving on time so you'll need to be ready. I won't make the others late because you are.”

Jasmine's eyes grew round. “Dad won't like that.”

Annie smiled. “Be on time and there won't be a problem.”

“What about Jeremy? What if that happens on the way to school?” Jade asked, drawing Annie's attention away from her sister.

“Again, don't worry. We'll deal with what happens at the time. My mom used to say we shouldn't borrow stress by worrying. What we fear might never happen.” Annie paused a few seconds to let that bit of wisdom sink in then added, “Time for bed. Have you said your prayers?”

Jade shook her head. “But we will. Jeremy needs our help.”

“Yes, he can always use your prayers.” Annie stood back while the twins walked to the double bed.

The two girls knelt and went through a list of people to bless. At the end Jasmine said, “God, please fix my brother. Amen.”

When they hopped up, Jade crawled across the bed to the other side while Jasmine settled on the right. Annie moved to the doorway and switched off the overhead light.

“Good night, girls.”

Jasmine turned on the bedside lamp then pulled the covers up over her shoulders, saying, “I need a light on to go to sleep,” while Jade murmured, “Good night.”

“Door open or closed?” Annie clutched the knob.

“Open,” Jade replied while Jasmine said, “Closed.”

“I'll leave it partially open.”

Surprisingly, the two girls remained quiet, and Annie hurried toward Jeremy's room to see how the boy was doing. She rapped lightly on the door and waited for Ian to answer. A few seconds later, he appeared with a weary expression on his face.

He stepped into the hallway but glanced at Jeremy asleep on the bed. “I need to call a doctor I know who deals with seizures in children. I hope to get Jeremy in to see him tomorrow before his office opens. He'll need to run some tests and possibly prescribe medication for Jeremy. Will you watch him while I make that call?”

“Of course. I'll stay as long as you need me.”

“Thanks. How are the girls?”

“They are in bed in Jade's room. They prayed and asked God to help Jeremy.”

"Then, He's been bombarded with prayers this evening. I'll be back in a few minutes." Ian gave her a tired smile and headed for the staircase.

Annie checked to make sure Jeremy was still sleeping then took the chair Ian had been sitting in. She needed to come up with what she'd do when Jasmine was late to go to school. If not tomorrow, she would be probably soon, and the child needed to know the consequences. Annie could remember some of her own battles with her mother over boundaries and how neither parent ever backed down. No meant no. She realized she needed to talk with Ian to see how he'd want her to handle it.

Ian returned ten minutes later and motioned for her to join him in the hallway. Some of the tension in his expression relaxed as she came toward him.

"You couldn't have come at a better time. I don't know what I would have done if you weren't here. More and more I realize a person can't be in two places at once." One corner of his mouth hitched up. "Although I've been trying to these past months."

"Take it from me, it's scientifically impossible. I've tried myself, though. Did everything work out with the doctor?"

"Yes, Brandon will see him first thing tomorrow morning, but I'll need to postpone introducing you to the teachers until Tuesday. I've let the school know that you'll be bringing them and picking them up, so it'll be okay. The one thing that's working for us is they all go to the same school."

"So you want me to take Joshua, Jade and Jasmine in the morning?"

Ian nodded. "And be prepared for a hundred questions from Joshua the whole way. He'll want to know exactly what happened to Jeremy and what the doctor will say even before we know it."

"What do you think is happening?"

Sighing, Ian glanced toward his son in his room. "It could be epilepsy, but it takes more than one seizure to determine that." He rubbed his chin. "Now I'm wondering if some of Jeremy's behavior these past months might have indicated petit mal seizures. I haven't had a lot of experience with epilepsy, so I might be wrong."

"I'm glad I'm here for you and your family."

Ian grinned. "Just in the nick of time. Do you have any questions about tomorrow?"

"I may be wrong, but I have a feeling Jasmine will test me about getting ready for school on time."

"No, you aren't wrong. She even did with Aunt Louise. She has always been my prima donna, even as young as two. I think she was trying to be as different from Jade as she could."

"I've told her I won't allow her to make her siblings late for school, so I have a plan to stress my point." Annie looked into Ian's green eyes and for a second lost her train of thought.

"What?"

Okay, he had great eyes. She had to ignore them. Annie peered down the hall toward the girls' bedrooms. "She will ride with me to school dressed or not. I'll drop the others off, come home and let her finish getting ready, then take her back to school."

"But that's—"

"The consequence of having me drive twice to the school is that the next morning I will be waking her up thirty minutes earlier. That means she'll go to bed thirty minutes earlier, so she'll get the required amount of *beauty rest* she insists she needs."

Ian chuckled. "My daughter is an eight-year-old going on eighteen. I wish I had thought of that diabolical plan."

"So you're okay with it?"

"Yes. I like your creative way of dealing with it."

"I try to look for ways to have natural consequences for a child's actions. It tends to work better."

Ian checked his watch. "You'd better catch some sleep yourself."

"I'll peek in on the girls and Joshua, then leave."

She started to turn when Ian clasped her upper arm and stopped her. “Thanks again. Just taking the girls to their room and putting them in bed was a huge help.”

Ian’s touch on her skin riveted her attention to his hand for a few seconds before he released his hold. Her heartbeat kicked up a notch. In her previous nanny positions she usually dealt with the mothers, but since Ian was a single parent she would be working with just him. She’d never thought that would be a problem—until now.

“It’s part of my job,” she murmured then continued toward Joshua’s room next to Jeremy’s.

When Annie climbed the stairs to her apartment, she stopped on the landing and rotated toward the yard. She saw a few lights off in the distance. The cool spring air with a hint of honeysuckle from the bushes below caressed her skin. The sky twinkled with stars—thousands scattered everywhere.

Her first unofficial evening had gone okay. It reinforced she’d made the right decision to work for Ian McGregor, instead of one of the other five offers she’d received. The family needed her, even more so because Ian was a single parent. Her only concern was the man she worked for: he was attractive, intelligent and caring, all traits she at one time had dreamed of in her future husband. Now, though, she thought of herself as a modern-day Mary Poppins, going where needed then moving on before her heart became too engaged. No sense getting attached.

* * *

Annie kept an eye on the kitchen clock while she scrambled the eggs, expecting the kids and Ian any second. When she glanced at the doorway, she spied Joshua dressed in the clothes they’d picked out together this morning. Other than his tennis shoes on the wrong feet, he appeared ready to go to school.

“Good morning, Joshua. Are you hungry?”

He nodded and plodded to the table, evidently not a morning person. He usually talked a lot, but earlier when she’d gotten him up, he’d said only a handful of words by the time she’d left him to dress.

As she turned off the burner, Ian and Jeremy entered the room. Neither looked happy. “Good morning, Jeremy, Ian.” She set a platter of toast in the center of the table, then milk and orange juice. “Did you see Jade and Jasmine?”

Ian poured some coffee and settled into the chair at one end. “They were both supposed to be coming right away.”

“I’m here,” Jade announced from the entrance. She looked ready for school. “But Jasmine is still in the bathroom. She’s decided to put her hair in a ponytail.”

“I’ll go help her.” Annie placed the eggs next to the toast then started for the hallway.

“I tried. As usual, she didn’t want my help.” Jade plopped into the chair across from Jeremy.

Annie hurried up the stairs and poked her head into the doorway of the girls’ bathroom.

Jasmine yanked the rubber band from her hair. “Ouch!” She stomped her foot and glared at herself in the mirror. “I can’t do this.”

“I can.” Annie moved toward the child.

Jasmine whirled around, her lips pinched together. “No one can pull it as tight as I want.”

“Okay. Breakfast is ready. We leave for school in half an hour.”

“I can’t be ready by then.”

“That’s your choice. You know what happens when you aren’t ready.” She’d informed Jasmine when the girls woke up. Annie left, preparing herself for the next hour and the battle to come.

When she returned to the kitchen, everyone watched her as she made her way to the table.

“Where’s Jasmine?” Ian asked, finishing up his last bite of eggs.

“She doesn’t need my help, so I reminded her of the time we’re leaving for school.” Annie sat at the other end of the table. “Which, Joshua and Jade, is in thirty minutes. Seven forty-five.”

“I can’t tell time,” Joshua said as he stuffed a fourth of his toast into his mouth.

“I’ll tell you. And you’re ready except for brushing your teeth and changing your shoes.”

“Why?”

“Dork, your shoes are on the wrong feet.”

“Jeremy, that word is unacceptable.” Ian carried his dishes to the sink.

“Well, he is one.” Ian’s eldest took his nearly full plate over to the counter then stormed from the kitchen.

“I’m not a dork. I like my shoes like this.”

“It’s not good for your feet. Here, I’ll help you.” Annie slid from her chair and knelt next to Joshua.

Once she fixed the problem, Joshua jumped up and raced toward the hallway. “I’m gonna be first ready.”

“No, you’re not.” Jade quickly followed.

The sound of their pounding feet going up the stairs filled the house.

Ian came up behind Annie to help clear the dishes. “Ah, quiet. I’ve learned to cherish these moments. Is Jasmine going to be ready?”

“I don’t know. She had her dress on but no shoes, not to mention she hasn’t eaten breakfast.”

“I’ll be leaving right after you. I don’t know how long we’ll be at the doctor. He’ll probably run some tests.”

“How was Jeremy when he woke up this morning?” Annie hated seeing the concern and weariness on Ian’s face. She hated seeing what Jeremy was going through.

“Grumpy, which isn’t unusual, but when we talked about the seizure, I saw fear in his eyes. He rarely shows that. I tried to explain about what a seizure was, and he wouldn’t listen.”

“Denial. That’s understandable. When Becca, my friend at school, had seizures she fought it. Finally she learned to accept the situation. Being less stressed helped Becca lessen the symptoms.” Although she didn’t have epilepsy, Annie had been in her share of denial while recovering from her third-degree burns. And she’d been angry at the world, too.

“Do you think Jeremy knew something was going on?” she asked. “My friend had petit mal seizures for a while before she had her first grand mal. I’d find her staring off into space, but she just said she was thinking.”

Ian frowned. “It’s possible. He’s spent a lot of time in his room lately. I’d try talking with him, but he would just say his brother and sisters bothered him. I can remember going through a stage like that when I was a kid, so I thought it was that.”

“It might be.”

“It could explain some of what’s been going on.”

Annie caught sight of the clock. It wouldn’t do for the nanny to be late with the kids the first day on her job. Jasmine would never let her forget it if she didn’t leave on time. “I’ve got to go. I might have to get up earlier tomorrow instead of Jasmine.”

“I don’t know if I’ll be taking Jeremy to school today or not. It’ll depend on what happens at the doctor. I’ll keep you informed of what happens.”

“Don’t worry about the others. I’ll take care of them.” Annie went to the intercom and announced, “Time to go to school, everyone.”

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