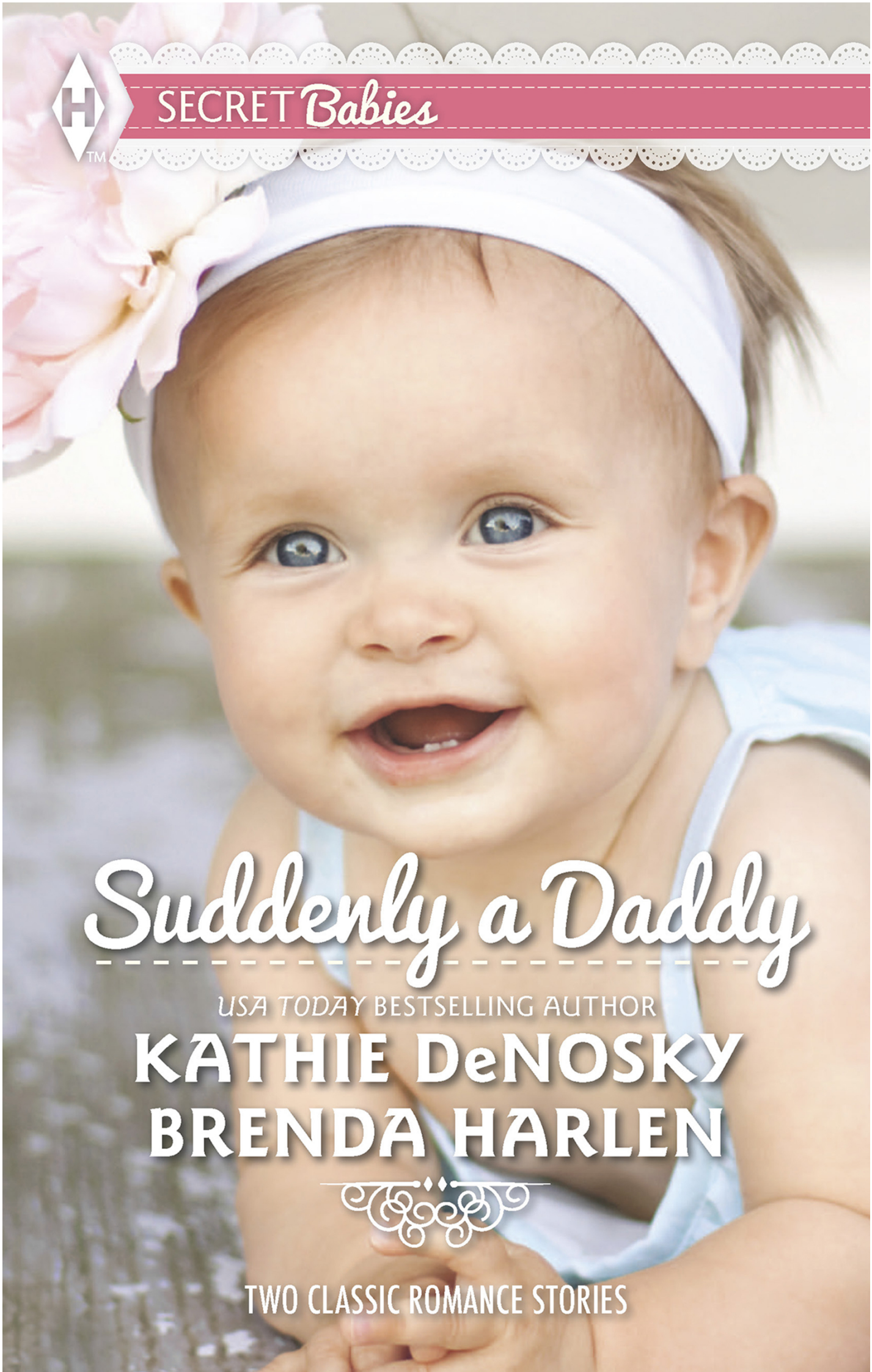

SECRET Babies
Suddenly a Daddy
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KATHIE DeNOSKY
BRENDA HARLEN
TWO CLASSIC ROMANCE STORIES

Kathie DeNosky

Suddenly a Daddy: The Billionaire's Unexpected Heir / The Baby Surprise

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Suddenly a Daddy: The Billionaire's Unexpected Heir / The Baby Surprise / K. DeNosky — «HarperCollins»,

Two fan-favorite romances from USA Today bestselling author Kathie DeNosky and Brenda Harlen.The Billionaire's Unexpected HeirBecoming the owner of Hickory Hills Thoroughbred farm isn't in Jake Garnier's plans. Becoming a father is even more unimaginable. For his new business comes with Heather McGwire, ranch manager…and mother to Jake's secret child. Marriage seems the only solution. But Heather won't settle for simple sweet talk and seduction. If Jake wants a real family, he'll have to saddle up for the long ride.The Baby SurprisePaige Wilder is married to her job as a high-powered attorney—until she suddenly becomes guardian to a baby girl. And when Zach Crawford appears, her life really goes topsy-turvy. Because the sexy military pilot is determined to win custody of his little girl…if the sparks that fly every time he and Paige are together don't distract him first!

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The Billionaire's Unexpected Heir

USA TODAY bestselling author Kathie DeNosky writes highly emotional stories laced with a good dose of humor. Kathie lives in her native southern Illinois and loves writing at night while listening to country music on her favorite radio station. Visit her online at kathiedenosky.com.

Look for more books by Kathie DeNosky in Harlequin Desire—the ultimate destination for powerful, passionate romance! There are six new Harlequin Desire titles available every month. Check one out today!

This series is dedicated to Charlie, the love of my life.

And a special thank-you to my editor, Krista Stroever.

Here's to new beginnings.

Chapter 1

"Hi, I'm Jake Garnier, the new owner of Hickory Hills."

From the corner of her eye, Heather McGwire saw the man stick out his hand in greeting, but she chose to ignore the gesture. She knew who he was and she'd just as soon have a snake crawl up beside her. Jake Garnier was the last person she wanted or needed to have to deal with this close to the big race. But now that he was the new owner of the thoroughbred farm she managed, there was no way of getting around it. She either had to get used to working for him or stick it out until after Stormy Dancer won the Southern Oaks Cup Classic, then look for employment elsewhere.

Besides, after what they'd shared, she took exception to the fact that he didn't even have the decency to remember her. The thought hurt more than she would have imagined or was comfortable with.

When she remained silent, he stared at her a moment as if trying to place her. "Heather?"

His smooth baritone caused her nerves to tingle and her heart to speed up, reminding her that a little over a year ago all it had taken was the rich sound of that voice to make her lose every ounce of sense she ever possessed. Now it only made her want to smack him for being the biggest jerk to ever draw a breath.

"Jake." She barely managed a short nod of acknowledgement.

Standing with her forearms resting on the white board rail surrounding the practice track, she concentrated on the stopwatch in her hand as Dancer passed the quarter-mile post and headed down the backstretch. The top contender for the prestigious Southern Oaks Cup Classic, the thoroughbred was on pace to break his own record.

"Come on, Dancer. You can do it." She glanced from the watch to the horse. "Just keep it up."

"I remember you mentioning that you worked at a thoroughbred farm, but I wasn't aware that it was Hickory Hills," he said, sounding a lot happier to see her than she was to be seeing him.

"For the record, I'm the manager here." As Dancer headed for the homestretch, she added, "The name of the farm and where it was located never came up. Besides, you weren't that interested in hearing personal details, were you?" She glanced his way, and it was apparent her hostility didn't set well with him.

"Heather, I don't know what you think I've done, but—"

"It doesn't matter now," she interrupted. She didn't care to be reminded of how foolish she'd been.

He was silent for a moment. "At the risk of pissing you off further, how have you been?" he asked tightly.

Like you really want to know. If you had, you wouldn't have refused to take my phone calls.

She shrugged. "I've been all right." She didn't bothering asking how he'd been because she had a fair idea of what he'd been doing since they parted ways and didn't particularly care to hear the specifics.

"Is that our contender for the big race?" he asked, pointing toward Dancer.

Doing her best to ignore the man beside her, she urged the jockey, "Let him have his head, Miguel. Turn him loose." She glanced at the silver stopwatch again, and clicked the button on the side as the big bay sprinted past them. "Fantastic."

"I take it that was a good run?"

When Jake leaned close to see the time, his arm brushed hers and a tiny jolt of electricity shot straight through her. "It was excellent," she said, gritting her teeth and backing away. Turning to make her escape, she added, "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do." She barely suppressed the urge to run when he fell into step beside her.

"I'd like for you to give me a tour of the farm if you have the time."

"I'm sure you need to unpack first," she said. Thanks to the mansion's housekeeper, Clara Buchanan, Heather had received a phone call the moment he passed through the security gates at the end of the half-mile-long driveway leading up to the mansion.

She desperately tried not to notice how his outstretched arms caused his snug hunter green T-shirt to outline the muscles of his broad chest and emphasize his well-developed biceps when he stretched. "I've been cooped up in the car for the past four days on the drive from Los Angeles and it feels good to be out in the fresh air again."

"Mornings around here are pretty busy—we have our daily workouts and grooming," she hedged.

When they reached the stables, she grabbed a lead rope by one of the stalls, slid the half-door back, then eased inside to attach it to Silver Bullet's halter in an effort to escape Jake's disturbing presence.

"All right," he said, stepping back as she led the big dappled gray gelding out of the stall and down to the tack room. "This afternoon will be soon enough."

She shook her head as she tied the rope to an eye hook by the tack room door, attached another rope to the halter, then tied it to another hook on the opposite wall of the wide stable aisle. "That won't work. My schedule is pretty full today and to tell you the truth, tomorrow isn't looking all that good."

"Clear it for this afternoon." Jake's no-nonsense tone indicated that he was quickly running out of patience.

For the first time since he walked up beside her at the practice track, Heather met his irritated blue gaze full-on with a heated one of her own. "Will there be anything else, Mr. Garnier?"

Scowling, he stared at her for several long moments before he finally shook his head. "I'll be back after lunch." Turning to leave, he added, "And you might as well plan on working late this evening. After you show me around, I intend to meet with the other employees, then I want to go over the accounting records."

As she watched him walk away, a nudge against her leg had her glancing down at the big Bernese mountain dog that had sidled up beside her. "You could really use some work on your guard dog skills, Nemo. Instead of taking a nap in my office, you're supposed to keep varmints like him away."

The dog didn't act the least bit repentant when he looked up at her adoringly and wagged his thick black tail.

Returning her attention to the matter at hand, she released a frustrated breath as she picked up a brush and began grooming the gray. She had no idea how he'd managed to get his hands on Hickory Hills, but she'd told herself when she learned Jake was the new owner that she'd be able to handle seeing him again. That she could keep what happened between them all those months ago separate from their working relationship.

Unfortunately, that was going to be a whole lot easier said than done. The sound of his voice carried with it the memory of him calling her name as they made love.

Closing her eyes, Heather rested her forehead against the big thoroughbred's shoulder. Over the past year, she'd done everything she could to convince herself that Jake wasn't that good-looking, that her perception of their only night together had been clouded by loneliness and the haze of too much champagne. But she realized now that she'd been in deep denial.

Jake Garnier was well over six feet of pure male sex appeal and it was no wonder that he had an endless stream of women clamoring for his attention. With broad shoulders and narrow hips, he had the lean, muscular body of an athlete. When they'd met at the thoroughbred auction in Los Angeles, he'd been striking in a suit and tie, but today in jeans and a T-shirt, he was raw sensuality from his thick black hair to the soles of his outrageously expensive running shoes.

Sighing heavily, she went into the tack room, retrieved a saddle, then returned to place it on the horse's back. She tightened the saddle's girth, then bridling Silver, led him out of the stable toward the practice track.

As much as she'd like to forget what happened that night in L.A., she couldn't regret it. Jake was arguably the biggest player on the entire West Coast. But there was an earnestness to his charm that she'd found completely irresistible. And she was reminded of how captivating it was each and every time she gazed into her baby daughter's eyes. Eyes that were the same cobalt blue and held the same sparkle of mischief as Jake Garnier's.

* * *

Walking back up the path from the immaculately kept stables, Jake wondered what the hell had just taken place. He wasn't used to getting the cold shoulder from women and Heather's blatant snub didn't sit well.

There were only two things besides his siblings and highly successful law practice that caught and held his attention for any length of time and that was fast, flashy cars and shamelessly uninhibited women. And to his immense pleasure, the first frequently attracted plenty of the latter.

So why did one woman's obviously low opinion of him matter? He wasn't sure, but there had been a sparkle of hostility in Heather's eyes that had taken him completely by surprise.

Thinking back to the first time he'd seen her, he still couldn't believe how captivating she'd been. He'd attended a thoroughbred auction to personally see that the woman he'd represented in a bitter divorce sold the horses she and her husband had purchased as an investment. Jake had quickly lost interest in the parade of equine offerings and looking around spotted a pretty little filly of the human variety to divert his attention. And from the moment he introduced himself to her, he found Heather to be the most enchanting woman he'd ever had the pleasure of meeting.

They'd spent the rest of that day and one incredibly sensuous night together and over the course of the past year he'd come to the conclusion that he should have asked for her last name and a number where he could reach her. It was totally out of character for him and something he'd never contemplated before. Once he parted ways with a woman, he never looked back, never had the slightest regret about not contacting her again. At least he hadn't until Heather.

But surely she wasn't angry that he hadn't kept in touch over the fifteen months since. Besides the fact that he didn't know how to reach her, it was a well-known fact that he wasn't looking for a relationship of any kind and that none of his liaisons went any further than a good time.

He had no idea if that's what the problem was, but he had every intention of finding out and settling the animosity between them once and for all. If she was going to be running the horse farm that his newfound grandmother, Emerald Larson, had insisted he take over, it was essential that they get whatever had her panties in a twist straightened out so they could at least be civil.

In the meantime, he needed to unpack and put in a call to Emerald, Inc. headquarters to find out what the hell Emerald had up her sleeve this time. Given her track record of setting her grandchildren up to find their soul mate, he wasn't naive enough to think that she wasn't attempting to do the same thing with him. He wasn't sure how she'd done it, but she had to have discovered that, however brief it had been, that he and Heather had a bit of history.

But the old girl was in for a big disappointment if she thought her tactics were going to work with him. He wasn't looking to settle down with a wife, kids and the requisite canine. Nor was he inclined to trade his sleek little red Ferrari for a family-friendly minivan with car seats and clumps of dog hair.

With a plan of action to set down a few ground rules for both Emerald and his farm manager, Jake followed the path around the antebellum mansion to the circular drive in front where he'd parked his sports car. Just as he pressed the remote on his keychain to open the trunk, a teenage boy wearing stylishly ragged jeans, an oversize chartreuse T-shirt with It Is What It Is screen-printed on the front and a red baseball cap turned backward on his head came out of the house to greet him.

"Hi, Mr. Garnier," the kid said, crossing the veranda and bounding down the steps. He came to a sliding halt at the side of the car, then stood staring at it as if in awe. "Suh-weet."

"Thanks," Jake said, chuckling at the way the boy stretched the simple word into two syllables. "And you are?"

"Daily." He grinned. "My dad was a horse trainer before he died and talked my mom into naming me after the Daily Double at Churchill Downs." He reverently circled the car. "Dude, I have got to get me a ride like this when I get old."

Jake realized that the kid was talking to himself and meant no disrespect. But the comment reminded him that within a few short weeks he'd mark his thirty-seventh year and he supposed that in the eyes of a young teenager, he was probably considered a fossil.

Smiling, Jake reached into the trunk for the suitcase he'd packed for his short stay at Hickory Hills. But Daily jumped forward to grab the handle.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Garnier. I didn't mean to get so carried away looking at your car." He hoisted the suitcase out of the trunk. "My grandma sent me out to get your luggage and take it upstairs for you."

"You're Mrs. Buchanan's grandson?" Jake asked, following Daily up the steps of the veranda.

The boy nodded. "Grandma's in charge of the house and Heather is in charge of everything else." Daily's youthful face suddenly split into a wide grin. "Wait until you meet Heather. For an older chick, she's way hot. Having her to look at every morning makes my chore of mucking out stalls a lot easier."

When Emerald and her stoic assistant, Luther Freemont, had met with him to turn over ownership of the farm, they'd informed him that Clara Buchanan was the live-in housekeeper. But they hadn't said a word about Heather being the farm manager. That just reinforced Jake's theory that Emerald was definitely up to something. Why else would she mention the name of the housekeeper and leave out all reference to the woman who ran the majority of the farm?

"I've met Heather." The kid couldn't be more than fourteen or fifteen years old, but it seemed he already had an appreciative eye for the ladies. "And I agree. She's very pretty."

When Daily opened the double doors and stood back, Jake entered the foyer and immediately felt as if he'd taken a step back in time. Decorated with furniture he had no doubt were period antiques, he half expected to see a woman in a wide hoop skirt descend the sweeping circular staircase. Or more likely a Kentucky colonel dressed in a white suit and holding a mint julep come strolling out of the study.

"Grandma told me to take your luggage up to the west wing," Daily said, walking toward the stairs. "If you want me to, I can show you where your room is, Mr. Garnier."

"Lead the way." When they reached the top of the staircase, Jake grinned. "I'll bet sliding down a banister like this one is as close to being on a roller coaster as you get without going to an amusement park."

"Oh, dude, talk about a rush," Daily said, his voice enthusiastic. He stopped suddenly, a concerned expression crossing his youthful face. "Uh, you probably don't want me doing that because of scratching the finish."

"It's water under the bridge now." Jake shook his head. "But I'm not as concerned with a few marks on the wood as I am about you taking a fall. That's a long way down and you could be badly injured."

"You won't tell my grandma, will you? She'll kill me if she finds out."

Jake took pity on the kid. "As long as you don't do it again, I think we can keep it between the two of us."

Clearly relieved to hear Jake would be keeping his secret, the boy smiled. "Thanks. You're really cool, Mr. Garnier."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Every time Daily called him Mr. Garnier, he felt as old as dirt. "And while you're at it, why don't you call me Jake?"

* * *

After a delicious lunch, Jake strolled back down the path leading to the stables and couldn't help but wonder if he'd lost his touch with the opposite sex. He'd never had this much trouble with women in his entire life. If things didn't change, he just might end up developing a complex.

Emerald, for one, was purposely avoiding him and unless he missed his guess, she'd continue to do so for a while. She had to know he was on to her latest matchmaking scheme and no doubt wanted to avoid having him tell her to mind her own damned business.

But Mrs. Buchanan's sudden disappearance right after serving him lunch was a complete mystery. She'd been friendly enough when he first walked into the kitchen. But as soon as she put his plate in front of him, she'd apologized and rushed off to the housekeeper's quarters as if she thought he was contagious.

And then there was the chilly reception he'd received from Heather that morning. Her body language and obvious contempt let him know in no uncertain terms exactly how she felt about his reappearance in her life. But try as he might, he couldn't figure out why. He hoped for better luck with her during their meeting this afternoon, but he wasn't fool enough to count on that happening.

Entering the stable, he walked past several stalls to the opposite end of the structure where the manager's office was located. He wasn't the least bit surprised that Heather was nowhere in sight. Given her attitude toward him, he really expected no less. He wasn't, however, prepared for the very large black dog that got up from a blanket in the corner, walked over and stretched out on top of his feet.

"At least you're friendly," he said, reaching down to pet the dog's head.

Irritated that she'd obviously blown off his request to set up a meeting with the farm employees, he extricated his feet from beneath the animal and covered the short distance to where the broodmares were kept. He found Heather bent over a horse lying on its side in one of the stalls, and his mouth went completely dry. She was dressed in a pair of faded blue jeans and a pale pink T-shirt. With the denim hugging her shapely little bottom to perfection, he didn't think twice about taking in the delightful view.

As she straightened, an older man Jake assumed to be one of the grooms brushed past him to enter the stall and hand her a pair of rubber gloves. When she pulled them on they extended up to her shoulders.

"What's going on?" he asked, venturing farther into the enclosure.

"The stork is going to make it before the vet." She knelt down behind the horse in the middle of the oversize stall. "Jake, I want you to hold her head to keep her from trying to get up, while Tony and I take care of things on this end," she instructed.

Jake wasn't used to anyone issuing him orders, but something in Heather's tone had him kneeling down to carry out the directive. As he watched, the man she'd called Tony held the horse's tail, while she helped guide the foal from the mare. She quickly lifted a membrane away from the colt's nose, then vigorously massaged the animal's small, wet body with a towel.

"Is that to make sure it starts breathing?" He found her skill and efficiency to be very impressive.

Nodding, she pulled off the gloves and stood up. "He was doing pretty good on his own, but it never hurts to have a little insurance when it comes to foals this valuable." She smiled down at the weak little creature. "We may be looking at the next Triple Crown winner."

Rising to his feet, he moved away from the mare's head as she started to get her legs under her. "Do you have to do this sort of thing very often?"

Before she could answer his question, the cell phone clipped to the waistband of her jeans rang, and she stepped out of the stall to take the call.

Jake turned to the groom. "By the way, I'm Jake Garnier, the new owner here."

Grinning, the man nodded. "I figured as much. Welcome to Hickory Hills."

"I have to go up to the main house for a few minutes," Heather interrupted, stepping back into the stall. "If you have any questions about the broodmares, training schedules or the farm's daily routine, Tony can fill you in."

Jake walked over to stand beside her. "I think I'll go with you, then you can show me around."

"There's really no need." Her long golden brown ponytail swayed back and forth as she shook her head. "I'll only be a few minutes and there's no sense in you walking all that way just to turn around and walk back."

Had that been a hint of panic he'd detected in her soft voice? Why didn't she want him going with her?

"I don't mind at all," he said, placing his hand to the small of her back to usher her along. There was no way she'd leave him behind now. "Afraid of a little exercise?"

Jake could tell she wanted to protest at his wisecrack, but clamping her lips together, she quickly stepped away from his touch and preceded him out of the stall. Neither spoke as they walked side by side up the path to the back entrance of the mansion and he couldn't help but wonder what she was trying to keep from him. And he had no doubt there was something. He hadn't been an attorney for the past twelve years without learning to recognize when someone was trying to conceal a secret.

When they entered the kitchen, Jake stopped short at the sight of Clara Buchanan with a crying baby in her arms. Never in a million years would he have thought the emergency calling Heather away from work would be a baby. But his astonishment was compounded tenfold when Heather hurried over to them and took the child from the housekeeper. The baby instantly calmed down and it was obvious that Heather was the child's mother.

"I think she might be running a little bit of a fever," Clara said, touching the baby's round little cheek.

Heather nodded. "I thought she felt warm when I got her up this morning." She tenderly pressed her lips to her daughter's forehead. "I think she might be trying to cut her first tooth."

"That's what the pediatrician said when I called her." The housekeeper smiled fondly at the tiny girl. "But I wanted to let you know and see what you thought about taking Mandy in to her office."

"It might not be a bad idea to have a doctor check her over," Jake said from behind her.

He knew even less about babies than he did about horses. But he and his twin brother, Luke, had raised their ten-year-old sister after their mother was killed in a car accident and remembered that when a child had an elevated temperature it was always better to err on the side of caution.

"Just to be on the safe side, I think I will take her to see Dr. Evans."

"I'll get the diaper bag," Clara said, disappearing down the hall toward her apartment.

As she and Jake stood in uncomfortable silence while she waited for Clara to return, Heather felt as if her nerves had been stretched to the breaking point. Was Jake aware that he was standing barely four feet away from his own daughter? Had he noticed that Mandy had his blue eyes and dark hair?

Ever since she'd learned that he was taking over Hickory Hills, she'd wondered how she was going to break the news to him about the baby. But she hadn't anticipated him meeting their daughter before she had a chance to tell him about her.

He hadn't said anything. Maybe he hadn't noticed how much Mandy looked like him. If that was the case, she'd be able to explain everything in a much less rushed fashion. She hoped.

"Needless to say, I won't be giving you that tour of the farm this afternoon or holding the meeting you wanted with your employees," she finally said as she cradled the baby close.

He nodded. "That's understandable. We can reschedule for tomorrow morning or even the day after if she's still not feeling well."

When the housekeeper came back into the room, he reached out and took the diaper bag from her. "I'll help Heather and the baby get to the car."

"Call me when you get back to let me know what you find out from the doctor about our little angel," Clara called after them as they left the house.

"Would you mind letting Tony know that he's in charge until I get back?" Heather asked as they walked the short distance to the carriage house.

Jake shook his head as he watched her open the back door of the older-model sedan parked in front. "No problem. I'll take care of it. Is there anything else?"

"Not that I can think of."

When Heather turned to put the baby in the car seat, the little girl looked at him over her mother's shoulder for the first time and he felt as if he'd been flattened by a steamroller. He couldn't have gotten his vocal cords to work if his life depended on it and simply stood back as Heather got into the car and drove away.

As he watched the vehicle disappear around the corner of the mansion and head down the drive toward the main road, his heart pounded against his ribs and he found it extremely hard to draw air into his lungs. The baby had dark hair and big blue eyes. Eyes the color of cobalt. The same color of cobalt that met his gaze when he looked into the mirror each morning to shave.

Chapter 2

That evening, when Heather answered the insistent knocking on her cottage door, she wasn't the least bit surprised to find Jake standing on the other side. In fact, she'd been expecting him. She'd known that once he saw Mandy it was just a matter of time before he put it all together.

"We need to talk." Instead of waiting for her to invite him in, he took hold of her elbow and propelled her back into the living room, kicking the door shut behind him. "I want answers and I'm not leaving here until I get them, Heather."

"It never crossed my mind that you would," she said calmly. She wasn't going to allow him to upset or stress her out in any way.

"That baby belongs to me, doesn't she?" he demanded, cutting right to be heart of the matter.

"That baby has a name—Amanda Grace. I call her Mandy. She's almost seven months old." Heather walked across the room to pull the nursery door closed to keep their raised voices from disturbing her daughter. "And if by belong, you mean are you her biological father? The answer is yes."

"What happened? I used protection."

Was he actually questioning that he was the father of her child?

"I'm well aware of that. It obviously had a defect." She raised an eyebrow. "Surely you're aware that nothing is one hundred percent effective except abstention. And if we'd gone that route—"

"We wouldn't be having this conversation," he finished for her.

"Exactly." She looked him directly in the eye. "But let me assure you, Mandy is your daughter."

He shook his head. "I wasn't questioning that. She looks just like me."

Heather watched a muscle work along his lean jaw as Jake stared at her for what seemed like an eternity. She could tell his anger was bordering on outrage, but that was just too bad. As far she was concerned, not knowing he'd fathered a child was his own fault and she wasn't about to let him turn the blame back on her.

"Did you even think about getting in touch with me when you discovered you were pregnant?" he finally asked, his voice low and menacing.

Heather had told herself that she wasn't going to let him get to her, but his accusatory tone angered her as little else could. "I really don't think you want to go there, Jake. Believe me, you won't like hearing what I have to say."

"Go ahead. Try me." He took a step toward her. "I told you I'm here to get answers."

"Then I would suggest you drop the intimidation tactics as well as the idea of being the wounded party in all of this because you're not." When she turned to walk into the kitchen to put a little more distance between them and the nursery, she fully expected him to follow.

He didn't disappoint her. "Did you or did you not consider letting me know that you were expecting my child?"

Turning on him, she took a deep breath in an effort to calm down. She had a lot to say and she was going to savor every second of it. She'd wanted this conversation for over a year, but never thought she'd have the chance to have her say. She wasn't going to allow herself to lose momentum by becoming overly emotional. She refused to give Jake that kind of power over her.

"I not only considered letting you know, I spent my first trimester leaving messages that I needed to talk to you urgently." She met his angry gaze head-on. "You never returned my calls, and I wasn't comfortable leaving that kind of information with your secretary."

"I—"

Holding up her hand to stop whatever lame excuse he came up with, she went on, "Then I spent the second trimester trying to convince myself that there had to be a reasonable explanation for you

ignoring my requests to get back to me. It turns out I was wrong. There wasn't a good reason, other than you really are an insensitive, self-absorbed jerk who uses women, then casts them aside."

He opened his mouth to no doubt refute her assessment of his character, but she cut him off again.

"And somewhere during the course of my third trimester, I came to the conclusion that you really didn't deserve to know about our daughter and that we were both going to be a lot better off without you in our lives." She folded her arms beneath her breasts. "Any more questions?"

Heather could tell by the stunned look replacing the angry expression on his handsome face that she'd gotten through to him.

Rubbing the back of his neck as if to relieve tension, he shook his head. "I have my secretary—"

"Screen your calls so that you don't have to deal with uncomfortable situations with the women you've bedded," she interrupted. When he remained silent, she knew that her comment had hit a little too close to home. "And you don't have to worry, Jake. Mandy and I are just fine on our own."

His eyes narrowed. "You're going to try to cut me out of her life?"

Heather shook her head. "That's not what I said. I'm telling you that you're off the hook. You're free to go back to Los Angeles and resume your life as if nothing happened. I don't want or need your help—financially or otherwise. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of and providing for my daughter. I just thought you had the right to know about her."

"She's mine, too."

Having had her say, she suddenly felt drained of energy. "I'm relieving you of that responsibility, Jake."

"I think we need to get this straight once and for all, Heather."

He stepped forward to place his hands on her shoulders. The heat from his touch seeping through her T-shirt and the determination she detected in his deep baritone sent tingles zinging straight up her spine. But when he used his thumb and forefinger to lift her chin until their gazes locked, the sensation danced across every nerve in her body.

"I accept that it was my own damned fault I didn't know about the pregnancy. But it doesn't mean that now that I'm aware I have a child I don't intend to be a big part of her life. And that will be much easier for me to do when I move you and Mandy into the mansion with me."

"That's not going to happen, Jake. We're very happy right here in the carriage house."

"We'll see about that."

Before she could protest or step away, his mouth covered hers and the feel of his firm lips once again caressing hers with such care caused her head to spin. She tried with all of her might to remain unaffected, but her traitorous pulse took off and a delicious warmth began to flow through her veins.

Placing her hands on Jake's wide chest, instead of pushing away from him as she intended, she reveled in the feel of his strength beneath her palms and the steady beat of his heart. This was total insanity. He'd used her, then cast her aside with little or no regard for her feelings. But when he traced the seam of her mouth with his tongue, she parted her lips without so much as a second thought and allowed him to deepen the kiss.

As he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her more fully against his large frame, he teased her with a tenderness that caused every fiber in her being to quiver to life and her stomach to flutter wildly. The excitement she'd experienced in his arms fifteen long months ago began to fill her from head to toe and it scared her as little else could. Losing herself to Jake's kiss was the very reason they found themselves in their current set of circumstances.

"Please…stop," she said, leaning away from him.

Jake immediately put a bit of space between them, but continued to hold her loosely in his arms. "All things considered, I probably shouldn't have done that." He gave her the same seductive smile that had been her downfall that night in Los Angeles. "But I'll be damned if I'm sorry I did. You have the sweetest lips I've ever tasted."

She shook her head. “Forget my lips. It’s not going to happen again.”

He stared down at her for endless seconds and just when she thought he was going to argue the point, Nemo chose that moment to come lumbering in through the doggie door. Finding the two humans standing face-to-face, he apparently took it as an open invitation to push his way between them and plop his big, bulky body on top of their feet.

“What’s his deal?” Jake asked, staring down at the dog. “Every time he sees me, he traps my feet beneath him.”

Thankful for the distraction Heather stepped back then knelt down to scratch the big gentle dog behind his floppy ears. “It seems to be a trait of his breed. I think they realize that they’re too big to sit on your lap, so they lay on your feet to be close to you.”

Jake bent down to pet Nemo’s thick, black coat. “So I guess this means he likes me, huh?”

“It looks that way.” Only inches apart, they stared at each other for endless seconds before she straightened to walk back into the living room to peek inside the nursery door.

She should have named the dog Benedict Arnold. Nemo was supposed to be loyal to her, not cozy up to the enemy like they were long lost friends.

“What did the pediatrician say this afternoon?” Jake asked from behind her shoulder. “Is she cutting her first tooth or is something else wrong?”

Unaware that he’d followed her, Heather jumped as much from the unexpected sound of his voice as from his close proximity. “Uh…yes, she’s teething. The doctor said she has two that should be through her lower gum by the end of the week.”

“She’ll start feeling better after that happens, right?”

Heather nodded as she pulled the door to and moved away from him. The concern in his voice touched her and that was something she didn’t like one bit. It was much safer for her to think of him as the shallow, uncaring man who refused to take her phone calls, than a daddy worried about the welfare of his baby girl.

“I think it would be a good idea if you leave now, Jake.” She walked over to open the front door. “I have to be up by five in the morning and I really need to get some sleep.”

Glancing at the gold watch on his left wrist, he nodded. “I have a lot to do tomorrow and need to be up early myself.”

He walked over to her, then cupping her cheeks with both hands lightly pressed a kiss to her lips. As he raised his head, the determination she saw in his incredible blue eyes sent a shock wave all the way to her soul.

“If you and the baby need me before morning, don’t hesitate to give me a call. You have my word that from this day forward, no matter what I’m doing or where I am, I’ll always be available for you and our daughter.”

Once the front door closed behind him, Heather squeezed her eyes shut against the tears of frustration threatening to spill down her cheeks. She’d known the former owner was looking to sell, but why did Jake Garnier have to be the new owner of Hickory Hills? What cruel quirk of fate had caused their paths to cross again? And why, after all that had happened, did she still find him to be the most handsome, irresistible man she’d ever met?

When he’d introduced himself at the annual thoroughbred auction in Los Angeles, he’d not only charmed his way past her defenses and swept her off her feet, he’d stolen her heart, as well. She’d always heard about love at first sight, but she’d never given it a lot of thought, never believed it would happen to her. Not until last year. Not until Jake.

Swallowing hard, she reminded herself of the disillusionment and emotional pain she’d suffered when he refused to return her calls and she’d realized she meant absolutely nothing to him. It had taken her a long time to move past that and no matter how drugging his kisses were or how wonderful it had felt to be in his arms, she wasn’t about to put herself in that position again.

Besides, it wasn't just her emotions at stake anymore. She had Mandy's well-being to take into consideration, as well. And Heather wasn't going to stand back and watch her daughter bond with Jake, then be devastated when he moved on like the playboy he was.

* * *

As he walked down the long driveway toward the big wrought-iron entrance gates, Jake still couldn't quite wrap his mind around everything that had happened. In the span of a few hours, his life had changed in ways he could have never imagined. He had reconnected with the only woman he'd ever regretted not keeping in touch with, learned that by taking over Hickory Hills she'd become his employee and discovered that a little over six months ago she'd given birth to his baby.

Unbelievable.

But as he thought about Heather making several attempts to get in touch with him, his gut burned with anger. He deeply regretted that she'd been forced to go through the pregnancy alone. If his secretary hadn't become overly zealous about screening his calls, she wouldn't have. He'd have not only been there for Heather throughout the pregnancy and birth, he wouldn't have been cheated out of the first six months of his daughter's life.

His daughter.

Jake's heart slammed against his rib cage and he took several deep breaths. He had a tiny baby girl who looked just like him.

It blew his mind that he had a child. Fatherhood had been something he'd never expected to experience. And it wasn't because he didn't like little kids. He did. He'd just made a conscious decision years ago never to marry and have one of his own.

His own father had twice walked away after impregnating his mother, and even though Jake didn't think he was capable of doing something like that, he hadn't wanted to take the chance. What if he carried the same narcissistic gene that had caused his father to shirk his responsibilities to his children in favor of pursuing his next good time?

Jake shook his head. It was all a moot point now. He had a daughter. And even though it scared the living hell out of him to think that he might somehow let her down the way his father had his children, Jake was going to do everything he possibly could to be a good father.

Lost in his disturbing introspection, it took a moment for Jake to notice the shadowy figure climbing over the gates at the end of the drive. "Daily?"

The boy froze halfway over the gate. "Mr. Garnier, I…oh, dude, this probably doesn't look real good, does it?"

"No. It looks like I just busted you for sneaking out of the house." Stopping a few feet from where the boy was perched, Jake planted his feet and folded his arms across his chest. "You want to come down from there and tell me why you're out this late, as well as why you don't want to alert anyone up at the house that you're leaving by activating the gates?"

When Daily dropped to his feet in front of Jake, he seemed to take a great interest in the tops of his untied high-top tennis shoes. "It's kind of personal, Mr. Garnier."

Jake hid a smile. "Want to tell me what her name is?"

The boy's head snapped up so fast, Jake wouldn't have been surprised if Daily had suffered whiplash. "How did you know I was going to meet a girl?"

Jake did his best not to laugh out loud at the astonished look on the kid's face. "I know it's probably hard to believe, but I was fourteen once, Daily."

"I'll be fifteen in a couple of weeks," the boy said, straightening his skinny shoulders.

"That's still too young to be out this late. Not to mention the fact that you don't have your grandmother's permission."

The boy's shoulders slumped. "Yes, sir."

"I think you'd better give your girlfriend a call and tell her that you won't be able to make it this evening," Jake suggested.

As he watched Daily whip out a cell phone and rapidly punch in a text message, a knot began to form in the pit of Jake's stomach. In about thirteen years some pubescent boy with more hormones than good sense could very easily try to set up a midnight meeting with his daughter.

He barely managed to suppress a groan. He'd already raised one girl through the teen years when he and his twin brother finished raising their younger sister, Arielle. And just thinking that he was going to have to do it all over again with his own daughter was enough to give him an ulcer. His only consolation was that this time he'd be sharing that responsibility with Heather, instead of his brother who had turned out to be as clueless as he'd been.

When the boy slipped his cell phone back into his jeans pocket, Jake motioned toward the tree-lined drive leading up to the mansion. "Come on, Daily. I think it's time we both called it a night."

They remained silent for some time before Daily asked, "Are you going to tell my grandma about me trying to sneak out tonight?"

Jake shook his head. "No, I'm not. But you are."

"Me?"

"Part of growing up is learning to accept responsibility for your actions," Jake said, reminding himself as much as Daily.

"I'm gonna be grounded for the rest of my life," the boy complained when they entered the mansion through the kitchen door.

"I doubt it will be that long," Jake said, chuckling. "But as long as you're going to be sticking close to home for the next week or so, there are a few things around here I'm going to need help with. Do you think you'd be interested in the job?"

"A real job? Really? Oh man, that would be awesome," Daily said, his voice suddenly filled with enthusiasm.

"You'll have to keep up with your other chores and check with your grandmother first, to make sure she has no objections." Jake gave the boy a pointed look. "Right after you tell her about what happened this evening and accept whatever punishment she deems necessary."

Daily nodded. "I will."

"Then you'd better get some sleep," Jake warned. "We have a big day ahead of us."

"Yes, sir."

As he watched the teenager hurry down the hall to his grandmother's apartment, Jake headed for the stairs. He'd made Heather a promise and he fully intended to keep it. While she oversaw Stormy Dancer's morning workout and attended to whatever else her job entailed, he and Daily were going to get her and the baby moved from the carriage house into the mansion. And once he accomplished that, he had every intention of spending the rest of his stay at Hickory Hills getting to know his daughter.

* * *

"Jake Garnier, how dare you?" Heather demanded when she found him sitting at the desk in the study. She was angry enough to bite nails in two and it was all his fault.

His unrepentant grin when he looked up made her want to throw something at him. "I assume you're referring to the moving of the baby's things and yours from the carriage house to the rooms upstairs?"

"You know good and well that's what I'm talking about. You had no right to do that."

He walked around the side of the desk to stand in front of her. "I don't know why you're so upset," he said calmly. "I told you last night that's what I intended to do."

She couldn't believe his arrogance. "And I told you it wasn't going to happen. Mandy and I are perfectly fine in the carriage house. It's all she's ever known."

"I'm sure you're happy." He took another step toward her. "But you'll be even happier here. There's a lot more room. And besides, it will be more convenient for all concerned."

"You've got to be joking." Where did he come up with that idea? "It might be more convenient for you, but it certainly isn't for me."

He was a lot closer than she was comfortable with. But there was no way she was going to back away. That would only give him the satisfaction of knowing he still had an effect on her.

"I fully intend to be a big part of my daughter's life," he said, sounding so darned reasonable it made her want to punch him.

"We live less than a hundred feet away. How is moving to the big house going to change anything?"

He gave her a smile that caused her heart to skip a beat. Just because he smiled at her it wasn't going to get him off the hook.

"I want to watch you put her to bed at night and get her up in the morning."

"You could do that at the carriage house."

"So you're telling me that you want me to move in with you and Mandy?" he asked, giving her that same charming smile.

"N-no. That wasn't what I said at all and you know it." She should have known he'd twist her objections around to suit his purpose. After all, he was an attorney. "You knew what I meant. You could stop by around those times, then leave."

He took the last step separating them, then lightly touched her cheek. She suddenly had to remember why she was angry with him.

"If Mandy wakes up in the middle of the night, I want to be able to get up with her." He shook his head. "If I'm here and the two of you are in the carriage house, I can't do that."

"Take my word for it, being awakened from a sound sleep is highly overrated," she said before she could stop herself.

"I'm sure that taking care of her by yourself and trying to work has been very tiring at times. Wouldn't it be nice for a change to have someone sharing that responsibility?"

When he looked at her the way he was doing now, Heather was lucky to remember her own name, let alone what he'd asked. "No. I'm fine with the way things are."

"I could get up with her while you sleep," he pressed.

The heat from his touch branded her and the scent of his aftershave made her want him to hold her, kiss her and… She swallowed hard. She needed to escape his presence before her traitorous body had her agreeing to go along with what he wanted.

"I—I don't mind at all being solely responsible for Mandy," she insisted.

"But you don't have to be, honey. Not anymore." He moved his hands down to her waist, then pulled her into his arms. "I'm here now and you don't have to do everything alone."

"Please, Jake," she interrupted. "Don't." Pulling from his arms, she somehow found the strength to back away from him. "I won't try to stop you from being part of Mandy's life. But I want you to keep a couple of things in mind before you take that step. First and foremost, it's all or nothing. You're either her father for life or not at all. I don't want her becoming attached to you, then you walk away when you get tired of playing daddy. And second, count me out. I'm not part of the package."

He stared at her for several long moments before he slowly shook his head. "You have my word that I will never do anything that isn't in her best interest or yours."

"Good. Because hurt my daughter and you'll have me to deal with." She could tell from his expression that he meant what he said—now. The only problem was, whether they intended to or not, people sometimes broke their promises and others ended up getting hurt.

"Now that we have your main concern out in the open and settled, are you and the baby going to stay here in the mansion?" he asked, seating himself back behind the desk.

"Jake, I don't think—"

"I've missed out on a lot with her already, Heather." His chest rose and fell as he took a deep breath. "All I'm asking is that you give me a chance to get to know my daughter and build a relationship with her."

She knew if she and the baby did stay in the mansion with him, she would be taking a huge risk for both Mandy and herself. If she hadn't known that before he kissed her last night, she did now. No matter how much he'd hurt her or how hard she tried to resist his charm, she still found Jake to be six feet two inches of pure temptation. And that could very well prove to be disastrous for her if she didn't keep her wits about her.

But she'd told him she wouldn't stop him from trying to bond with Mandy and she couldn't, in good conscience, deny either of them the right to get acquainted. And while he was getting to know their daughter, she intended to learn more about him, his family and where he grew up. After all, she had the right to know about her daughter's father.

Heather sighed heavily. Unfortunately, now wasn't the time to put him through the third degree. Aside from the fact that she'd already put in a grueling day, she was still too angry. She wanted to be calm, rational and in complete control when she talked to him.

"We'll stay in the mansion as long as you're here at Hickory Hills. But only on one condition."

His eyes narrowed ever so slightly before he asked, "And what would that be?"

Walking to the door, she turned back. "I meant what I said about not being part of the equation, Jake. Don't count on me to be one of your…diversions when you get bored."

Chapter 3

Jake frowned as he watched Heather place their sleeping daughter into the small baby bed that he and Daily had set up earlier in the day. “Is that thing full size? It looks awfully small.”

When she placed her finger to her lips, it was all he could do not to groan. He couldn’t forget the kiss they’d shared the night before and wanted to once again taste her sweetness and feel the softness of her perfect mouth beneath his own. But he knew better than to push. She’d outlined her conditions and he had to admit it was probably for the best. It wouldn’t be long before they had to address some very sensitive issues concerning shared custody and how they were going to raise Mandy. If they became involved, it could make doing that a lot more difficult. He just wished that the attraction between them wasn’t as powerful now as it had been when they first met. That would certainly make things a lot easier.

“It’s a mini crib,” she whispered, drawing his attention back to his question.

He waited until she turned on the baby monitor, clipped one of the receivers to her belt and they’d both stepped out into the hall before he asked, “Why didn’t you get a regular size bed for her?”

“The room I turned into the nursery at the carriage house is small and I wanted to save space,” she answered as they started downstairs.

“What about when she gets a little older?” he asked, following her. He didn’t like the idea of his child being in a room that was too small when she had every right to live in the mansion and enjoy the spaciousness of any one of the spare bedrooms. “How will you fit a regular size bed into that room and still have enough space for her to play?”

“When the time comes, I’ll convert the room I use for a study into another bedroom.” At the bottom of the steps, she turned to face him. “Why are you asking about this now? It won’t be an issue for another year or two.”

He smiled as the germ of an idea took root. “I was thinking that the two of you could live here in the mansion even after I go back to L.A.”

“No. That’s not an option,” she said, shaking her head until her ponytail swayed back and forth.

“Why not?”

She started toward the hall leading to the kitchen. “Because it’s not my home.”

Reaching out, he took hold of her arm and the feel of her soft skin beneath his palm sent heat straight to the pit of his belly. He did his best to ignore it. “This is my house now and Mandy is my daughter. She has every right to live here.”

Heather gave him a look that stated in no uncertain terms that she didn’t like his idea one damned bit. “But it’s not mine, Jake.”

He knew as surely as he knew his own name that there was a good deal of pride holding her back from accepting his offer. “I’m telling you it can be, Heather.”

“I work for you and living in the carriage house is part of my contract.”

“I’m offering you an amendment to that agreement.” Barely resisting the urge to pull her into his arms, he hastened to add, “You don’t have to make a decision about the move being permanent now. But I would like for you to give it some serious thought.” Unable to stop himself, he reached up to brush a wayward strand of hair from her soft cheek. “It would make life for you and Mandy a lot more comfortable than being cooped up in a space where there’s barely room for one.”

Before she could come up with any more excuses why she and Mandy shouldn’t live in the mansion permanently, he reluctantly dropped his hand to his side and crossed the foyer to enter the study. If he hadn’t put some distance between them, there had been a very real possibility that he would have acted on his first impulse to grab her and kiss her until she agreed to his proposal. And that would have been a huge mistake.

It would take a fool not to see that just like a magnetic force, the attraction between them was too strong to fight and impossible to resist. But at this point, she didn't trust him anymore than she would a snake coiled to make a strike. And until he proved himself to her and they worked out an agreement to raise their daughter, he had no other choice but to bide his time and no doubt end up taking more than his share of cold showers.

He sighed heavily as he lowered himself into the chair behind the desk and reached for the phone. As he punched in his brother's number, he thought about the irony of it all. The only woman he hadn't been able to forget was back in his life, was the mother of his only child and thought him lower than the stuff she scraped off her boots after a trip through the stables.

"My life is just about as freaking wonderful as it can get right now," he muttered sourly.

"As a matter of fact, mine is going pretty good, as well," Luke said, laughing.

Wallowing in his own misery, Jake had missed hearing his brother answer the phone. "Good to hear, bro. How are things in Nashville?"

"We couldn't be better. Haley has passed the point where morning sickness is an issue and we're just waiting for the sonogram to see if we're having a boy or a girl." His twin sounded happier than Jake could ever remember.

"Glad to hear my favorite sister-in-law is feeling better," he said, wondering if Heather had experienced a lot of problems with morning sickness when she'd been pregnant with Mandy.

They were both silent a moment before Luke asked, "So what's wrong, Jake?"

"What makes you think there's a problem?"

He wasn't surprised by his brother's intuitiveness. As with many twins, he and Luke shared a sixth sense where the other was concerned and instinctively knew when things weren't going right. But Jake wasn't entirely certain how to deliver the news that upon his arrival at Hickory Hills he'd discovered he had a daughter and avoid having to listen to the I-told-you-so speech that was sure to follow. Luke had been warning him for years that his "love 'em and leave 'em" ways were going to catch up to him one day.

"You're talking to the only person who knows you better than you probably know yourself." Luke paused. "So you want to tell me what's going on?"

"I have a daughter." Jake hadn't meant to deliver the news quite so bluntly, but once the words were out, he realized there wasn't any easier way to say it.

"Whoa! You want to back up and say that again?"

"You heard me," Jake said, wanting to reach through the phone and throttle his twin. "I have a six-and-a-half-month-old daughter named Mandy."

His brother was silent for so long, Jake wasn't sure they hadn't lost the connection. "And you found this out when you moved to the horse farm Emerald gave you?" Luke finally asked.

"Yeah." He took a deep breath. "Heather's the manager here at Hickory Hills. I'm betting when the old girl's investigators found us, they discovered that a woman I met at a thoroughbred auction last year had become pregnant from our one night together."

"That explains why you ended up in a place about as far removed from your life in Los Angeles as it's possible to get," Luke agreed. "Arielle and I wondered why you were given an enterprise that was totally out of your element when we were given businesses in our respective career fields."

"I don't know why Emerald didn't just tell me about Heather and Mandy instead of blindsiding me like this," Jake complained. "Didn't she think I would step up and do the right thing?"

His brother made a strangled sound. "You're getting married?"

It was Jake's turn to choke. "Hell, no. You know how I feel about marriage. It's not for me."

"Don't knock it until you've tried it," Luke advised. "I didn't think I was husband material, either, and look at me now."

"Whatever."

They were silent a moment before Luke asked, “Why didn’t the baby’s mother tell you about the pregnancy?”

“She tried, but my secretary didn’t see fit to give me the messages.” Jake made a mental note to call the woman the first thing in the morning and discuss her not bothering to give him a list of callers.

“Ah, if you’ll remember, I told you—”

“Don’t say it, bro.”

Luke’s laughter grated on Jake’s nerves. “So when do we get to meet our niece and her mother?”

“That’s the reason I called. How would you and Haley like to come up to Louisville for the Southern Oaks Cup Classic in a couple of weeks? The favorite to win the race came along with the farm.”

“Sounds good,” Luke said. “I assume you’re inviting Arielle and Zach?”

“Of course, along with the rest of the clan.”

A few months ago, when he and his siblings learned that the most successful woman in the corporate jungle was their paternal grandmother, they’d also been informed that they had three half brothers. After meeting them at one of Emerald’s receptions and finding themselves in the unique position of being the unexpected heirs of one of the world’s richest women, they’d become friends.

“And before you ask, I fully intend to invite our illustrious grandmother and her stiff-as-a-board assistant, too. She and I are going to have a little talk about her withholding information about my daughter,” he added.

Luke snorted. “Good luck with that.”

Making plans to talk again before the impromptu family reunion, Jake hung up, then called his other siblings to invite them to the gathering. With promises from all to attend, he walked into the foyer and ran right into Heather.

“Are you all right?” he asked, placing both hands on her waist to keep her from falling. A jolt of electric current as strong as a lightning strike shot through him and when she looked up, the awareness he detected in her aqua eyes let him know that she’d felt it, too.

“I—I’m fine.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t see you,” he said, filling his senses with her. The scent of her herbal shampoo and the feel of her softness beneath his hands sent heat coursing straight to the region south of his belt and his body’s reaction was not only predictable, it was inevitable.

“I…was just…on my way upstairs.” She sounded delightfully breathless and sent his blood pressure up a good ten points or so.

As if an invisible force held them captive they remained silent for so long, Jake finally forced himself to speak. “I…uh, was on my way to take a shower and call it an evening myself.”

Still operating on West Coast time, he hadn’t even entertained the idea of calling it a night. But he did need a shower. A cold one.

She nodded. “Well… I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

“What time does Mandy wake up?” he asked, still holding her at the waist.

“Early.”

Finally forcing himself to step back, he motioned toward the staircase. “Then it would probably be a good idea if we call it a night.”

As if awakening from a trance, she blushed suddenly and ducking her head, started walking toward the steps. “Good night, Jake.”

“Night.”

He stood in the foyer long after Heather reached the second floor and disappeared down the hall. The sound of her voice and the realization that she would be sleeping just down the hall from him had him fully aroused in less than a heartbeat.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he made a beeline for the master bathroom. By the time he reached his bedroom, he'd already stripped off his shirt and left a trail of clothing on his way to the shower.

As he stood there punishing his body beneath the frigid spray, he couldn't help but wonder how long Heather was going to deny the chemistry that flowed between them. They could fight it, try to run from it and argue that it even existed, but it was just a matter of time before they made love again. He had no doubt about that. The only question was when.

With a record-breaking crop of goose bumps and his teeth chattering like the wind-up ones found in a novelty store, he turned off the water. He grabbed a thick towel and began to vigorously dry off. They were going to have to work out the agreement for Mandy, and Heather had to come to her senses and accept the inevitable. He didn't particularly like shivering his ass off in a shower so cold he could spit ice cubes.

* * *

"Heather, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to watch Mandy for you this afternoon. I forgot that I have an appointment with the high school counselor to get Daily enrolled and set up his freshman schedule."

"I suppose I could take her with me," Heather said slowly, wondering how she was going to attend a meeting at Churchill Downs with a baby in tow.

"We can change that to another day, Grandma," Daily offered, sounding hopeful. "I don't care. I'm not all that into school anyway."

"Young man, you'd better get 'into it' real fast," Clara said sternly. "You're in enough hot water as it is after that stunt you pulled the other night."

"Listen to your grandmother, Daily. If you want a car like mine when you get 'old,' you're going to need a good job. And that takes education."

"Yes, sir," Daily answered, shoveling a fork full of scrambled eggs into his mouth.

Looking up, Heather's heart skipped a beat as she watched Jake stroll into the kitchen and seat himself at the head of the table. Dressed in a light blue polo shirt that emphasized the width of his broad shoulders and a pair of jeans that hugged his muscular thighs like a glove, he wasn't just his usual good-looking self. This morning, he was white-hot. Busying herself with Mandy's breakfast, she tried her best not to stare.

"What time is the meeting?" Clara asked. "Maybe we'll be back before you have to leave."

Heather shook her head. "It's a luncheon meeting and probably won't be over until late afternoon." She spooned a bit of baby cereal into Mandy's eager mouth. "I'll just take her with me and hope she has a good long nap during the speeches."

"I can watch her," Jake spoke up as he took a couple of strips of bacon from the platter in the center of the table.

"That's okay. I'm sure you have better things to do." She wasn't at all comfortable leaving her daughter with a man who she was almost positive had zero experience babysitting an infant.

Smiling, he shook his head as he took a sip of his coffee. "I don't have anything going on this afternoon. Besides, it will give Mandy and me a chance to get acquainted."

"Really, it's not a problem," she said firmly. "I'll take her with me."

An ominous silence suddenly reigned throughout the kitchen as Jake put down his coffee cup and their gazes locked. "Don't be ridiculous, Heather. She's my daughter, too. I have every right to watch her while you're busy."

"No way!" Daily said, his eyes wide. "You're Mandy's dad? I didn't know that."

"Come on, young man," Clara said, removing the boy's plate from the table. "You can finish your breakfast in our apartment before you go down to the stables to muck out the stalls."

"But, Grandma—"

"You heard me," the housekeeper said, cutting him off. "These two need to talk and they don't need you hanging on their every word. Now move."

Heather waited until Clara and a reluctant Daily left the kitchen before she turned her full attention back to Jake. "How many babies have you taken care of?"

"None."

"That's what I thought." When Mandy protested loudly, Heather spooned another bite of cereal into her mouth. "You don't have the slightest idea what to do with a baby."

His frown deepened. "I've got to start somewhere."

"My daughter isn't an experiment."

"She's our daughter." He placed his hand on top of hers. "I know you're worried I won't know what to do. But I promise, I'd never let anything hurt her."

She could tell from the sincerity in his voice and the look in his eyes that he meant every word he said. But he admittedly had zero experience with babies.

"I won't let her out of my sight the entire time you're away," he promised.

"Jake, I'm not at all comfortable with—"

"I'll even stay in the same room with her while she takes her nap," he interrupted.

"Have you ever changed a diaper?"

"No, but it can't be that hard to figure out. Besides, I'm a quick study," he said confidently. "You can show me how to put a new one on her before you leave."

She barely managed to hide a smile at his misguided self-assurance. He had no way of knowing that their daughter thought diaper changes were great fun and the perfect time to exercise her legs by kicking like a little karate champion.

"What about lunch?" she asked, beginning to realize she didn't have any other option. She couldn't get out of the meeting and it was no place for a baby. "Do you think you'll be able to feed her?"

"I watched you feed her breakfast and it didn't look all that difficult." He grinned. "Piece of cake."

Spooning the last bit of cereal into her daughter's mouth, Heather wiped the baby's face. "You'll call me if you have even the slightest problem?"

"Of course."

She lifted Mandy from the high chair and handed her to him. "Would you mind holding her while I wipe off the high chair and put it away?"

Jake had been too busy yesterday with the unauthorized moving of her things from the guesthouse to do more than watch her or Clara with the baby. It was time that father and daughter met officially. Besides, she needed to see how Jake was with Mandy before she agreed to him watching the baby.

He gently lifted Mandy to sit on his arm. "Hey there, Honey Bunny. I'm your daddy."

As Heather watched, the baby gazed at him intently for several seconds, then giggling, happily slapped her tiny hand against his cheek. But it was the look of awe and complete wonder that instantly came over Jake's handsome face that had her blinking back a wave of tears.

She wouldn't have believed it was possible to actually see it happen. But right before her eyes, Jake fell hopelessly in love with their daughter.

Chapter 4

When Heather returned from her meeting, she practically burst through the back door of the mansion. She'd tried several times on her drive from the Downs to call Jake on her cell phone, but he hadn't answered and with each passing second her concern increased. Searching the rooms downstairs, her heart began to pound hard against her ribs when she couldn't find either of them. Why had she let him talk her into allowing him to watch her baby?

But her anxiety turned to mind-numbing fear when she hurried up the staircase and entered the bedroom where Jake had set up the crib. The two were nowhere in sight.

In a near panic, she raced down the hall to the master suite. "If he's let something happen, I'll never forgive…"

Her voice trailed off as she came to a skidding halt just inside the suite door and a knee-weakening relief washed over her. There in the middle of the king-size bed her daughter lay curled up on top of Jake. Both were out like a couple of lights.

Leaning against the door facing, her panic began to recede and as she stood there catching her breath, she couldn't help but be touched by the moment. Heather knew for certain she'd never forget the poignant sight of her tiny baby girl sleeping so trustingly on her daddy's wide bare chest. For the second time in a matter of a few hours, she found herself blinking back tears.

Quietly, so as not to disturb either of them, she gently lifted Mandy into her arms and, walking back to the bedroom where the crib was, placed the baby in the small bed. Turning on the monitor, she clipped the receiving unit to the waistband of her khakis and turning to leave, came face-to-face with a wild-eyed Jake.

"Dear God, Heather, why didn't you wake me up to let me know you were taking Mandy?" he demanded. "When I opened my eyes and she wasn't there, I—"

Heather placed her index finger to his lips to silence him when the baby moved restlessly and let out a little whimper. "I'm sorry," she mouthed. She motioned for him to follow her out into the hall. "You looked like you might be a little tired from babysitting and I thought I'd—"

"Give me a heart attack," he finished for her.

That's when she realized that he'd been as terrified as she had when she'd been unable to find them. "I really am sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you."

Running a frustrated hand through his thick black hair, he took a deep breath. "I've never been that scared in my entire life."

As they stood there, she couldn't help but stare at his bare chest. Every muscle was well-defined and as her gaze drifted lower, she had an almost uncontrollable urge to reach out and trace her fingers over each one of the ridges on his abdomen.

"W-what happened to your shirt?" she asked instead.

"Oh, that." He frowned. "Do you know how disgusting baby food spinach looks? And dear God, it smells even worse. But when it gets on clothes, it's just plain nasty."

She laughed. "It is pretty gross, isn't it?"

"It's horrible." He made a face. "I thought I was going to lose it a couple of times when Mandy decided to take a handful and rub it in her hair."

Heather couldn't stop laughing. "Don't tell me. You set the dish too close to the high chair."

Nodding, he chuckled. "By the time lunch was over, she had more food on her than in her. And I'm positive our daughter could hold her own in a frat house food fight."

"No doubt about it," she agreed, smiling. "Any other problems? How did the diaper changes go?"

"When I finally got her to hold still it went all right. Up until then, it was a little hazardous." He rubbed his flat stomach. "She's got a hell of a kick." His expression turned serious and he fell silent a moment before reaching up to touch her cheek. "Thank you, Heather."

The back of his knuckles stroking her skin sent a shaft of longing all the way to her toes. "W-what for?"

"For today." His voice took on a husky quality that stole her breath. "For giving me the chance to get to know my daughter."

Without a second thought, she closed her eyes and leaned into his tender touch. She might have been able to resist had it not been for the sincerity in his tone and the genuine gratefulness in his amazing blue eyes. But no matter how much she tried to fight it, he was the man who had stolen her heart all those months ago and given her a precious baby daughter.

"I want to kiss you, Heather."

His whisper made her feel warm all over. "Th-that probably wouldn't be a good idea."

"Oh, I disagree, I think it's an excellent idea." His firm lips lightly grazing the shell of her ear and his warm breath feathering over her skin caused excited little shivers to course throughout her entire body.

She was flirting with danger. This was Jake Garnier, player extraordinaire. But even as she tried to reason with herself, she swayed toward him.

Apparently, that was all the encouragement he needed because the next thing she knew he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. She opened her eyes just in time to watch him slowly, deliberately, lower his head and when his mouth covered hers in tender exploration, she thought she just might melt into a puddle at his feet.

As his tongue stroked her lips apart, her eyes drifted shut again and the intensity of his kiss caused her head to spin. But when he coaxed, demanded and persuaded her to respond, every cell in her body tingled to life and Heather found herself holding on to him for support.

She should stop him. It wasn't smart to kiss the man who obviously hadn't wanted anything more to do with her until he learned that she'd given birth to his daughter. But the thought evaporated when Jake crushed her to him and she felt his hard muscles against her tightening nipples and his insistent arousal pressed into her lower belly.

Her knees threatened to buckle and a swirling hunger began to flow through her when he moved his hand to cup her breast, then chafed the hardened tip through the layers of her clothing. She wanted him with a fierceness that frightened her more than she'd ever thought possible.

Jake must have sensed the change in her because he slowly eased away from the kiss, but continued to hold her close. "We've got plenty of time."

She could deny that having him kiss her, that being in his arms and having his body entangled with hers wasn't what she wanted, too. But they'd both know it was a total lie.

"No, it can't happen, Jake." It was hard to be convincing when his large hand still covered her breast. But she couldn't seem to find the strength to pull free of his arms.

"I'm not going to stand here and argue. Right now, I have to take a shower."

As she watched him retreat to the master suite, Heather couldn't help but wonder if she shouldn't take her daughter and run as fast as she could back to the safety of the carriage house. It was obvious that no matter what she said, he wasn't going to listen to her. And living in such close proximity was going to make resisting him extremely difficult.

But thankfully with the Southern Oaks Cup Classic only two weeks away and all of the activities that preceded it, they were both going to become very busy in a very short time. If she could just hold out a few more days, everything should be fine.

She was going to have to attend to Dancer seven days a week and make sure that he was ready to run the race of his life. And as the owner of the favorite to win the Cup, Jake would be away at the almost non-stop receptions and balls that were held to celebrate the annual event.

With her going to bed early in order to oversee the thoroughbred's dawn exercises and Jake sleeping in after being out late with Louisville's social elite, their paths probably wouldn't cross more than a handful of times. And the few times they did, it would most likely be in a public setting for pictures and publicity for the race.

Then, by the time the festivities came to a close, Jake would no doubt be bored with the comparatively slower pace of Hickory Hills and more than ready to head back to his exciting life in Los Angeles. She and Mandy would move back into the carriage house and once again settle into their comfortable, familiar routine.

* * *

As Jake sat in the study thumbing through a pile of invitations to teas, receptions and balls being held in honor of the big race, he frowned. How the hell was he supposed to work things out and reconnect with Heather when he was going to have to attend a string of social events?

But staring at the elaborate print on one of the invitations, a slow smile curved the corners of his mouth. The words "and guest" had him rising from his chair.

"Clara, could you watch Mandy for a few minutes while I walk down to the stables to talk to Heather?" he asked when he entered the kitchen.

"No problem." She smiled when he handed her the baby monitor. "How long has our little angel been down for her nap?"

"About a half hour." He checked his watch. "I'm not sure how long she sleeps, but I'll only be a few minutes."

"Take your time." Clara grinned as she motioned toward Daily seated at the kitchen table peeling a pile of potatoes. "We won't be going anywhere for at least the next two weeks."

"I keep telling you, Grandma. When somebody's grounded, it doesn't mean they have to do stuff like this," the boy complained. "It means they just can't go anywhere."

Jake hid a smile as he left the mansion and walking past the pool, started down the path toward the stables. Since his grandmother learned about his plan for a late night rendezvous, Daily had mucked out stalls, mopped floors, polished silver and performed any other menial task she could think to assign him.

In a few days, the kid would get a bit of a reprieve from doing household chores. Jake had already talked to Clara about having Daily help him with a few projects to improve the place. The housekeeper had readily agreed and expressed her gratitude for Jake's influence with the boy. It seemed that Daily was having a hard time adjusting to his mother remarrying after the death of his father and she'd sent him to Hickory Hills in an effort to keep him out of trouble.

Shaking his head, Jake couldn't help but wonder what his friends in L.A. would think of that one. With his reputation for partying and entertaining a different woman every night, he was the last person most people would want influencing their teenage boy. But since his arrival at Hickory Hills, Jake had found that he was enjoying the slower, laid-back pace and had started thinking less and less about getting back to the hectic schedule he'd kept for the past several years.

Maybe it had something to do with finding out he'd fathered a child. Or it could be that it was just so vastly different from his usual lifestyle the novelty hadn't worn off yet.

He frowned. So why didn't going back to L.A. sound all that appealing?

As he entered the stable, another thought occurred to him, but he dismissed it. He refused to believe that he might finally be ready to settle down. That was just ludicrous. Of course, he wanted to return to his condo and highly successful law practice. He'd be a fool not to want that.

Greeting Tony and another groom as they attended to one of the thoroughbreds, Jake relegated his self-analysis to the back of his mind. It was amusing to think that he owned over two dozen of the finest animals in the country and he'd never been on the back of a horse in his entire life.

"What's up?" Heather asked when he walked into her office. "Is everything all right?"

Jake nodded. “Mandy is taking a nap and Clara is making Daily rue the day he even thought about sneaking out to see his girlfriend by making him peel potatoes for dinner.”

Heather’s smile sent a shockwave of heat straight to the pit of his belly. “Poor Daily. I doubt that he’ll be eager to try that again.”

Jake barely managed to suppress his frustrated groan. He seriously doubted she realized just how pretty she looked with soft curls escaping her ponytail and her creamy cheeks flushed from the early summer heat.

But it was her coral lips that fascinated the hell out of him. Since kissing her outside of Mandy’s room two days ago, all he’d been able to think about was doing it again and a whole lot more. And it was the “whole lot more” that was about to drive him over the edge.

“Jake, did you hear what I asked?”

“Uh…sorry.” Lost in his own misery, he hadn’t realized that she’d been talking to him. “What was that again?”

“I asked if you needed something,” she said patiently.

Oh, yeah, he needed something all right. But she didn’t want to hear what that was.

“As a matter of fact, there is something I need your help with.” That was an understatement, he thought sardonically. Forcing himself to focus, he sat down in the chair in front of her desk. “I have a million receptions and a couple of balls over the next two weeks.”

She nodded. “That’s part of the Southern Oaks Cup celebration and as Dancer’s owner, you’re expected to make an appearance.”

“From the number of invitations I’ve received, I’m beginning to realize just what a big deal this is,” he said, choosing his words carefully. Over the course of the past several years, he’d gotten into the habit of attending parties without a date. Now, he couldn’t believe how out of practice he had become at asking a woman out. “And I’d really like for you to go with me.”

He watched her open and close her mouth several times before she found her voice. “You can’t be serious.”

He smiled. “I’m very serious. I wouldn’t have asked you to be my date if I weren’t.”

“I…um, appreciate it, but I can’t,” she said, her eyes still wide with disbelief.

That wasn’t the answer he wanted to hear. “Why not?”

“I’m going to be far too busy overseeing Dancer and preparing for the race to be able to attend.” Her smile looked suspiciously relieved when she added, “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to go without me.”

It was perfectly clear to him why she was turning him down. The more time they spent together, the bigger the possibility she could no longer deny the pull between them. And that was the very reason he was going to insist that she go with him.

“But you would attend the various functions with me if not for your job, right?”

“Well… I…uh…since I’m not about to quit, it’s not an issue,” she hedged.

He knew he had her and if the look on her pretty face was any indication, she knew it, too.

Rising from the chair, he walked over and called for Tony to come to the office. When the man walked to the door, Jake smiled. “From now until the race is over, you’re in charge of the stables. I want Heather free to concentrate on overseeing Dancer’s training, preparations for the race and attending social functions.”

The man looked as if he thought Jake might be joking. “Me?”

“Yes,” Jake answered decisively. “Do you think you can handle the job?”

He watched the man’s gaze cut to Heather, then back to him. “Sure. I can handle it, but—”

“Then it’s settled.” Jake shook Tony’s hand. “If anything comes up, you’re still to consult with Heather.”

When he turned to walk back and lower himself into the chair in front of Heather’s desk, she looked as if she might blow a gasket. “What do you think you’re doing?”

"I'm relieving you of your other duties until after the race is over." He smiled. "This way you'll be able to focus on Dancer and the race and attend the social side of this thing with me."

"You can't do that to me," she said, standing up to pace back and forth behind the desk.

"Sure I can."

She stopped to glare at him. "I have a signed contract that says otherwise. You may own this place, but I run it. I'm in charge and I call the shots."

"You're still in charge, Heather." He hadn't anticipated that she'd get this upset.

"At least running this farm will look good on my résumé," she muttered.

He narrowed his eyes. "You haven't been looking for a position elsewhere, have you?"

"Not yet," she admitted belligerently. "But you just made the decision to start the search a lot easier."

Rising to his feet, he walked around the desk and took her into his arms. "Look, you're still in charge. You're still overseeing Dancer's racing career. That hasn't changed. I'm just making it easier for you to concentrate your efforts on him."

"Get real, Jake. We both know the reason you relieved me of the majority of my responsibilities was purely self-serving. You want me to attend the social events with you. That's the only reason you did this."

He took a deep breath. "That's the way it started out. But the more I think about it, the more it makes sense for Dancer to be your top priority now."

"I can't argue that," she grudgingly agreed.

"And won't it make the next two weeks easier if you can turn your sole attention to that goal?"

She slowly nodded.

"I'm sorry I usurped your authority, but I'm used to being the one in charge." He kissed the top of her head. "From now on, I'll consult with you before I make a decision about the stables."

She leaned back to look him square in the eyes and he could tell she was only slightly less furious with him. "You'd better, because if you interfere again, I'm out of here."

If he'd doubted how seriously she took her job before, he didn't now. "Understood. Now, will you please consider attending events with me. It would be nice to have someone I know at my side."

"There isn't a shy bone in your body. You'll do just fine without me."

He smiled as he brushed an errant strand of golden brown hair from her soft cheek. "Yes, but I want you with me."

"I told you, I'm not one of your diversions while you're here," she stated flatly.

She wasn't going to give in easily. But then he wasn't, either. "Would you at least think about going with me?" he whispered close to her ear.

Staring at him for what seemed an eternity, she finally nodded. "I'll consider it, but I'm not promising anything."

Satisfied that his plan to spend more time with her had a chance, Jake lowered his mouth to hers to seal the deal with a kiss. His blood pressure skyrocketed as he slowly caressed her lips with his, and he decided he could easily become addicted to her sweetness as he savored the taste of her.

When he traced the seam of her mouth to deepen the kiss, he took advantage of her soft sigh and slipped inside to stroke her tongue with his. Teasing and coaxing, he encouraged her to explore him, as well, and when she tentatively acquainted herself with him, Jake felt as if a fire had been ignited in the pit of his belly.

But it was the feel of her breasts pressed to his chest, her nipples scoring his skin through the layers of their clothing, that caused his body to harden so fast it left him feeling lightheaded. He moved his hands down her back to the flare of her hips. Pulling her forward allowed her to feel the effect she had on him, how she made him want her. She whimpered softly and sagged against him, letting him know without words that she desired him as much as he did her.

Unfortunately, his timing was lousy. They were in her office in the stable with several people close by. And going back to the mansion was out of the question.

Reluctantly easing away from the kiss, Jake took a deep breath as he leaned back to stare down at her. He didn't think he'd ever seen a more beautiful sight. Heather's porcelain cheeks were flushed and her eyes were glazed with the haze of unfulfilled desire.

"I suppose I should let you get back to work now," he finally managed to get out through his dry throat. Before she could gather her thoughts and tear into him over kissing her again, he released her and, walking to the door, added, "Our first reception is this evening. You can fill me in on our host and hostess on the drive over to their place."

Chapter 5

Heather accepted the hand Jake offered as she got out of his Ferrari in front of the home of John and Martha Wainwright, then waited for him to hand his keys to the valet. She was still upset with him over his disregard for her authority at the farm, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized attending these social events with him could work to her advantage. If she did have to look for a position elsewhere, the contacts she made at receptions like this one could prove invaluable.

"So tell me about these people," he said as he cupped her elbow and they walked the short distance to the tall, carved oak front doors of the estate.

"John Wainwright is president of the Southern Oaks Bank and Trust and Martha is the treasurer of the local ladies' club," she said, quickly filling him in on their host and hostess. "Neither of them have the slightest interest in horses or the Classic. But they would both have a coronary before they passed up an opportunity to host a reception for it."

"In other words, they're all about showing off with a big party and getting a mention in the society column."

"Exactly."

When he handed the doorman their invitation, the man smiled broadly and swung one of the entry doors wide. "Welcome to Waincrest, Mr. Garnier." He nodded and gave her a wink. "And Miss Heather."

"Hi, Hank. How is Mae?" she asked, smiling.

The man's grin widened. "She's doing just fine, Miss Heather. Thank you for asking."

As they followed his directions past a sweeping staircase and out a set of French doors onto the terrace, she felt as if she'd stepped into a fairy tale. The place was decorated with a canopy of tiny white lights, white wrought-iron patio furniture and huge bouquets of red and white roses in marble urns. Clearly, the Wainwrights had spared no expense in transforming their lawn into a very elegant cocktail party.

"That's our host and hostess," she said, discreetly nodding toward a couple standing by the bar.

"This is why I needed you with me," Jake said, leaning close. "You know who all these people are and what role they play in all of this hoopla."

She rolled her eyes. "Like you wouldn't have figured it out on your own."

When a waiter carrying a silver tray with glasses of champagne stopped in front of them, Jake removed two of the flutes, then handed one to her. "If I remember correctly, I think this is how we met."

She swallowed hard when his fingers lingered on hers a little longer than necessary and a feeling of déjà vu swept through her. He'd walked over to her, handed her a glass of champagne and the rest was history.

He leaned close. "Do you think the evening will end the same way it did that night?"

"With me pregnant?"

Jake's teasing smile faded. "I didn't mean that. But I'll be damned if I'm sorry it happened. We wouldn't have Mandy if it hadn't."

She could tell he was completely sincere, and she had to agree. "She's brought more joy into my life than I could have ever imagined."

Before either of them had a chance to say anything further, John Wainwright walked over to greet them. "You must be the owner of Stormy Dancer," the man said, turning up the wattage on his smile. Almost as an afterthought, he nodded at her. "Miss McGwire."

Wainwright wasn't interested in talking to her and she knew why. His bank handled the accounts for Hickory Hills and he wasn't going to waste his time with a lowly farm manager when he could schmooze with the owner of one of the premier stables in the entire country.

As the man engaged Jake in a conversation about becoming a member of the local country club, Heather quietly excused herself and started to walk away.

Jake put his hand on her arm to stop her. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Smiling, she pointed toward the buffet table. “I’ll be over there.”

She could tell he wasn’t happy with the way John Wainwright had dismissed her as insignificant. But she really didn’t mind being excluded from their conversation. She was far more comfortable talking to the Wainwrights’ staff than she was mingling with people who thought they were better than everyone else.

“Dear, would you mind helping me?” a small, elderly woman asked politely. With a cane in one hand and a mint julep in the other, the poor woman had no way of carrying her plate of appetizers.

Smiling, Heather shook her head. “I don’t mind at all. Where are you sitting?”

“As far away from these pompous asses as possible,” she replied, her expression so sweet that Heather thought she might have misheard.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard right, dear. I called them pompous asses,” the older woman repeated proudly. “I’ve finally reached the age where I speak my mind and don’t give a fig what people think. Now, come. Let’s find a place to sit and get acquainted.”

When Heather followed the elderly lady to an empty table away from the majority of the crowd, she helped the woman get settled. “Is there anything else you need, Mrs…”

“Wainwright.” The old lady shook her head disgustedly. “My son is the windbag who snubbed you in favor of kissing up to your young man.” She patted the chair beside her. “Sit, dear. I need someone to talk to who doesn’t act like they’re something they’re not.” She gave a disgusted snort. “I just hate when John and Martha throw one of these receptions. They put on such airs, it’s a downright disgrace.”

Heather didn’t know what to say. But she couldn’t help but like the elderly woman and her candid observations.

“It’s all right, dear.” The old woman patted Heather’s hand. “I have no illusions about how important most of these people think they are. And my son and daughter-in-law are the two biggest ducks in the puddle.”

“Well, your son is the president of Southern Oaks Bank and Trust.”

“Pish posh. It doesn’t matter what job somebody ends up with, they should never forget where they came from.” Mrs. Wainwright grinned. “I’ll bet you didn’t know that John grew up the son of a tobacco farmer who was land rich and dirt poor.” She pointed an arthritic finger toward Jake. “But your young man seems to be different. You can tell he’s got money, but he doesn’t appear to act like he’s better than everyone else. I’ll bet he hasn’t forgotten who he really is and where he came from.”

Heather stared at Jake. She still knew very little about him. Busy getting ready for the race, she hadn’t had the opportunity to ask where he grew up, about his childhood or his family.

Were his mother and father still alive? Did he have siblings? Could Mandy have family that Heather knew nothing about?

She didn’t have a clue. But she had every intention of finding out.

As Heather continued to think about it, she had to admit that Mrs. Wainwright was correct in her assessment of him. Jake had never made her or anyone at the farm feel as if they were beneath him. Even Clara had commented that he went out of his way to make everyone feel comfortable.

Heather had watched him with the grooms and stable boys and he never failed to greet them by name or stop and talk to them for a few minutes. And he was probably the only billionaire she’d ever heard of who sat at the kitchen table to eat his meals with his housekeeper, her teenage grandson and his farm manager.

“Are you ready to thank our host and hostess for a nice evening and head home?”

Heather jumped. Lost in thought, she hadn't realized that Jake had ended his conversation with the bank president and crossed the lawn to join her and the man's mother.

Introducing him to the elderly Mrs. Wainwright, she smiled. "It was nice chatting with you."

"It was my pleasure, dear." Mrs. Wainwright placed a bony hand on Heather's arm and motioned for her to lean close. "You hang on to your young man," she said in confidence. "Mark my words, he's the real deal."

"Thank you, Mrs. Wainwright." She smiled. "I'll try to remember that."

* * *

After bidding the Wainwrights a good evening, Jake waited until he and Heather were seated in his car before he apologized. "I'm sorry, honey."

"What for?" She looked thoroughly bewildered and so damned beautiful it was all he could do to keep from stopping the car and taking into his arms.

"Wainwright had no right to ignore you the way he did." When the man dismissed Heather as if she didn't exist, a protectiveness he'd never known he possessed had consumed him and Jake had wanted to punch the bastard in his big pretentious nose.

They fell silent for some time before he felt Heather staring at him. "What?"

"Tell me more about yourself."

Glancing her way, he frowned. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything. Where did you grow up? Do you have siblings?" She laid her soft hand on his thigh and he had to concentrate to keep from steering the car into the ditch. "Does Mandy have an extended family?"

"What brought this on?" he asked, covering her hand with his to keep her from moving it. He liked when she touched him.

"Jake, we have a child together and beyond the fact that you're a successful divorce attorney in Los Angeles, I know very little else about you," she said quietly.

"There's no big mystery. My siblings and I were born and raised in San Francisco. I have an identical twin brother named Luke—"

"My God, there are two of you?" She sounded truly shocked.

Grinning he nodded. "But don't worry. He's always been the quiet, more serious one of us."

"In other words, your exact opposite." She looked thoughtful. "Is he married?"

"As a matter of fact, he just got married a few months ago. He and his wife, Haley, are expecting their first child in about six and a half months." To his surprise, Jake found that he liked sharing details about his family with Heather. "And we have a sister, Arielle. She's ten years younger. She got married last month and is five months pregnant with twin boys."

Heather was silent so long, he thought she might have fallen asleep. "I'm so happy that Mandy is going to have aunts, uncles and cousins." She paused. "What about grandparents? Are your parents still alive?"

"No, our mother was killed in a car accident when Luke and I were twenty." He took a deep breath. No matter how long it had been, he still missed the woman who had give him and his siblings life.

"I'm so sorry. What about your father?"

He snorted. "We only met our father once. After he made our mother pregnant with me and Luke, he took off and she didn't see him again until we were almost ten. That's when he showed up, stuck around only long enough to make Mom pregnant with Arielle, then took off again." It was his turn to pause. "We recently got word that he was killed in a boating accident a couple of years ago."

"Who finished raising your sister after your mother died?" she asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

"Luke and I were in college and managed to work out a pretty good system. He would work one semester and take over most of Arielle's care while I went to school. Then I'd lay out the next semester, get a job and I'd be responsible for her while he attended classes."

"My God, Jake, that had to have been so hard for both of you." She turned her hand, palm up, to clasp his. "Did you try to get in touch with your father to see if he would send money to help out with your sister?"

Stopping the car at the entrance to Hickory Hills, he used the remote Clara had given him to open the wide iron gates. "We tried, but it proved to be impossible. We didn't even know his real name."

Her mouth dropped open. "He lied about who he was?"

Jake nodded. "We didn't find that out and who he really was until we were told he was dead."

When he drove the car through the gates, he pushed the button to swing them shut and as they traveled the long oak-lined drive, he decided to omit his newly discovered grandmother's name. Emerald Larson was Mandy's great-grandmother but he still wasn't comfortable with the fact or with the way she manipulated her grandchildren.

"Mandy does have a great-grandmother," he said, watching Heather from the corner of his eye. "We learned about her at the same time we found out about our father's death."

She smiled. "It's nice that you finally found each other."

"More like she found us." He shrugged. "She knew how wild and unsettled her son was and after he died, she had a team of investigators search to see if he had any children so that she could set things right with all of us."

"That's when she got in touch with you and your siblings?" Heather asked, seemingly fascinated with what he was telling her.

"Among others."

He could tell from her expression that Heather was thoroughly shocked. "You mean…he fathered more children than just you and your siblings?"

"It turns out our father took the biblical passage where it says 'Be fruitful and multiply' to heart." He smiled as he parked the car in the circular drive in front of the mansion. "He also fathered three other sons by three different women in the ten years between fathering me and Luke and Arielle."

Her eyes grew even wider. "Wow! He certainly was…um, active."

"To say the least."

Jake got out of the car and as he walked around to open the passenger door for her, he couldn't help but see the parallel between the way he'd been living his life and the way his father had. And he wasn't overly proud of it. But he was different from his father in one very important way. Jake was going to be there for Mandy where his father had failed his children in every way possible.

When Heather got out of the car to stand in front of him, he didn't hesitate to put his arms around her. "I know it seems like I've been living my life a lot like my father did, and maybe to a certain extent, I have. But let me assure you, I'll always be there for Mandy…and for you."

"Jake—"

"I mean it, Heather. I'm not the irresponsible jerk my father was."

Deciding that enough had been said about his notorious father and atypical family, he let his gaze travel from her silky hair swept up into a stylish twist, down the length of her black strapless cocktail dress, to her impossibly high, black heels. In L.A. they had a colorful phrase for those kind of shoes and he seriously doubted that she realized some women wore them to send a message that they were open to a night of unbridled passion.

Groaning, he raised his head to rest his forehead against hers. "Do you have any idea how sexy you are? How beautiful?"

Before she had the chance to speak, Jake teased and coaxed her mouth with his own until she granted him the access he sought. But he was completely unprepared and not at all disappointed when Heather took control of the kiss and touched her tongue to his.

At first tentative, her shy stroking sent electric sparks to every nerve in his being. As she gained confidence and engaged him in a game of advance and retreat, the sparks touched off a flame in the pit of his belly that quickly had him wondering if he was about to burn to a cinder.

The reaction of his body was instantaneous. He hadn't become aroused this fast since his teens.

With his knees threatening to buckle and his head swimming from a serious lack of blood to the brain, he reluctantly broke the caress. If he didn't put an end to the kiss, and right now, he was in real danger of making love to her right there on the steps of the veranda.

"Honey… I can't believe… I'm going to say this." He stopped long enough to draw some much needed air into his lungs. "Unless you're ready to go upstairs with me—to my room, my bed—we'd better call it a night."

He watched her passion-flushed cheeks turn a deep shade of rose a moment before she shook her head. "I'm sorry… I…not yet." She suddenly clamped her mouth shut, then took a step away from him, then another. "I mean…no. That's not going to happen."

When Heather turned and fled up the steps, across the veranda and disappeared into the house, Jake reached up to unknot his tie and unbutton the collar of his shirt. Then, stuffing his hands in his pants pockets, took off at a brisk walk back down the long drive toward the entrance gates.

He couldn't believe how the evening had turned out. He wasn't in the habit of divulging personal information to the women he dated. It kept things from becoming complicated when he went his way and they went theirs.

But Heather was different. For reasons he didn't care to contemplate, he wanted her to know all about him. And he wanted to learn everything about her. What had inspired her to choose her career? Did she have siblings? Were her parents still alive?

Shaking his head, he fell into a steady pace as he started back toward the house. He had no idea what had gotten into him. Yet as he got better acquainted with his only child, he had every intention of getting close to her mother, as well.

* * *

Checking on her daughter sleeping peacefully in her crib, Heather crossed the hall and, entering the bedroom she'd been using since Jake moved her and Mandy into the mansion, closed the door. What on earth had possessed her to take control of that kiss? And why had she the same as told him that at some point she would be ready to make love with him again? Had she lost her mind?

As she removed her heels and unzipped her dress, she thought about the details he'd shared with her about his family. There was a lot more to Jake Garnier than first met the eye or that he allowed people to see.

He was a self-made man who hadn't always had an easy life. He'd been there right along with his twin brother to step in and accept the responsibility of raising their younger sister, while still managing to complete his education. That had been a monumental undertaking and she could tell that he wouldn't have considered doing it any other way. He and his siblings had struggled to stay together and they'd made it. That certainly wasn't something a self-indulgent playboy would do.

She slipped out of her dress and hanging it in the closet, took down her hair and changed into her nightgown. When she climbed into bed, she closed her eyes and hugged one of the pillows tightly against her.

The more she learned about Jake, the more she admired him. Considering she was finding it almost impossible to resist him, that was extremely dangerous. She couldn't afford to let go of her preconceived notion that he cared little or nothing about anyone but himself. If she did, there was a very real possibility that she and her daughter would both end up getting hurt.

Lying there hugging the pillow, she must have drifted off to sleep because the next thing she knew, her daughter's cries coming through the baby monitor awakened her. She tossed the pillow aside and, getting out of bed, reached for her robe. But the sound of Jake's voice stopped her.

"What's wrong, Mandy? Did my little honey bunny have a bad dream?" He must have taken the spare receiver to his room before he turned in for the night.

As she listened to him comfort their daughter, tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. It was clear from the tone of his voice that he loved Mandy, and Heather knew as surely as she knew her own name that he would be just as committed and protective of their daughter as any father could possibly be.

Without a second thought, she quietly opened her door and tiptoeing across the hall, watched Jake gently cradle Mandy to his bare chest. She waited until he put their sleeping daughter back in the crib, then walked out into the hall. "I appreciate your trying to let me sleep."

Running his hand through his thick hair, he shook his head. "Too bad it didn't work out."

When they both fell silent, Heather found it hard not to stare. Dressed in nothing but a pair of navy silk pajama bottoms, he looked absolutely…yummy. She suddenly felt warm all over.

"Heather, are you all right?"

"I…um, yes." She needed to make her escape while she still had the presence of mind to do it.

His slow smile said that he knew exactly what she'd been thinking. "I like the way you look, too." Reaching out, he traced one of the thin spaghetti straps of her gown with his index finger. "You make turquoise look real good, honey."

"I thought that was supposed to be…the other way around," she said, realizing that she'd forgotten all about her robe when she'd heard Jake talking to the baby. "Isn't the color supposed to complement the person wearing it?"

"Not in your case, Heather." He trailed his finger down the strap to the gown's rounded neckline. "You make everything you wear sexy."

A shiver flowed through her when the tip of his finger lightly grazed the slope of her breast. "I'm…going back to…my room."

He took her into his arms. "I'd rather you stay with me."

"Out here in the hall?"

Staring up at him, she knew she was playing with fire. The feel of him holding her and the rich sound of his voice lowered to an intimate timbre caused an ache that she knew for certain only he could ease.

"I was thinking more like my room." His seductive smile sent her pulse into overdrive.

What she wanted was to go with him. What she needed was peace of mind. And that would be in serious jeopardy if she let her heart overrule her head. She took a deep breath as she summoned every ounce of strength she possessed. "I want you to go to your room and… I'll go to mine."

"Are you certain that's what you really want, Heather?"

They both knew she was telling a huge lie. The last thing she wanted was to go back alone to the big empty bed across the hall. But making love with Jake would only add another wrinkle to their already complicated situation, not to mention pose a serious risk to her heart.

"Y-yes." Turning to go across the hall to her room, she wished she'd sounded more convincing. "Good night, Jake."

When he placed his hand on her shoulder to stop her, the look in his amazing blue gaze caused her heart to beat double time. "You can only run from this—from us—for so long." He leaned forward to kiss her with such tenderness she thought she might do something stupid like give in. "Sleep well, sweet Heather."

As she watched him stroll down the hall toward the master suite, she had to lean against the door frame to keep her knees from folding beneath her. How on earth was she ever going to be able to resist such blatant sexuality?

She somehow managed to walk into the bedroom and close the door. If it was just a matter of physical attraction, she was pretty sure she'd be successful. But the more she learned about Jake and the more she saw how much he cared for their daughter, the closer she came to listening to her heart. And that was something she couldn't let happen again.

She climbed into bed and hugged the pillow close again. There was no doubt about it. If she intended to survive Jake's visit to Hickory Hills, she was going to have to keep her emotions in check. She was in danger of losing a lot more than her heart if she didn't. They still had yet to discuss how they were going to raise Mandy, and considering the high-handed way he'd relieved her of most of her duties, she might end up losing her job.

But as she lay there thinking about how it felt when he touched her, held her, she knew that keeping her wits about her was going to be all but impossible to do. She was falling for him all over again and there didn't seem to be anything she could do to stop it.

Chapter 6

"Where's Heather?" Jake asked when he walked into the kitchen and found Clara feeding the baby breakfast.

"Tony called. There was a problem down at the stables with one of the horses and he wanted her to come down to assess the situation." The housekeeper shook her head. "He knows Heather would never forgive him if he hadn't let her know about it."

Jake frowned. He'd put Tony in charge to free Heather from having to deal with this sort of thing until after the race. "Is there something wrong with Dancer?"

"No. I think she said one of the other studs has a really nasty cut on its pastern." She spooned a mouthful of cereal into Mandy's open mouth. "Heather's almost as good as a vet when it comes to taking care of horses and I'm pretty sure Tony wanted her to take a look at the injury to see how bad it is."

Clara might as well have been speaking a foreign language for all he understood about where the horse was injured. "How did she learn so much about horses?" he asked as he grabbed a mug from the cabinet, then poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Bless her heart, she learned from the best," the housekeeper said, smiling fondly. "Before he died five years ago, her dad, George, was the manager here. From the time she was old enough to walk, she followed him around like a shadow and soaked up everything he knew about horses."

Fascinated by the details he was learning about Heather, Jake leaned against the kitchen counter. "What about her mother? Is she still around?"

Clara snorted. "No, and I say good riddance. She was a wild one, always looking for a good time. She took off when Heather was six and they never heard from her again."

It sounded to him like Heather's mother and his father were a lot alike—narcissistic and completely irresponsible. "I think I'll walk down to the stable and see what's going on. Would you mind watching Mandy until Heather and I get back?"

"Not at all." Clara grinned as she wiped the baby's face. "Take all the time you need. The only thing I have to do this morning is come up with another list of chores to keep Daily busy after he finishes mucking out the stalls."

Chuckling, Jake wondered how much longer the woman was going to make the boy suffer for his lapse of judgment. "I have another project that I'd like his help with. Do you think you could pencil that in on the schedule for tomorrow?"

Clara nodded. "Will you need him all day?"

"Probably several days. Will that be a problem?"

"Not at all." She smiled. "What have you got up your sleeve this time?"

"When we moved Heather and the baby, I noticed the carriage house could use a fresh coat of paint and some new carpet."

As Jake left the house and walked the distance to the stables, his thoughts returned to Heather and he couldn't help but wonder how she'd slept the night before. If he was taking bets, he'd wager that she hadn't gotten any more sleep than he had.

Entering the stable, he followed the sound of a loud commotion. What had been so important that Tony felt the need to call Heather?

"Hold him while I get him tranquilized."

Jake automatically turned at the sound of Heather's voice inside one of the stalls and it felt as if his heart came up into his throat. As he watched, she, Tony and another groom jumped back just in time to keep from being kicked by a very large, extremely agitated horse.

"Heather, get out of there." He tossed the coffee cup onto a pile of straw and reached to open the stall's half door.

"Don't you dare open that door," she warned. "Just stay back. We've got this under control."

It didn't appear that they had everything in hand. It looked as if someone was about to get seriously hurt. The thought that it might be Heather had his heart hammering so hard that he thought he'd surely end up with a few cracked ribs.

When Tony and the other man finally caught hold of the thoroughbred's halter, Heather moved swiftly to jab a long needle into the animal's shoulder. The horse lurched to one side, then kicked the back of the stall with a blow that Jake knew for certain would have killed someone had it connected with one of the humans inside the enclosure. But just when he thought all hell was going to break loose, Heather and the grooms managed to open the half-door and escape.

Fear ignited an anger in him that quickly flared out of control and he was itching for a confrontation. "What the hell do you think you were doing in there?" he demanded when she stood safely in front of him.

"The job you pay me to do."

He stubbornly shook his head. "I pay a veterinarian to attend injured horses. And if the size of his bills are any indication, I pay him quite well."

As he and Heather glared at each other, Jake noticed Tony and the other man hurrying toward the far end of the barn. They apparently decided that retreat was the better part of valor.

"For your information, the vet is on the way." Her aqua eyes sparkled with anger and he didn't think he'd ever seen her look prettier.

"Then why were you in the stall? Why didn't you wait for Dr. Pennington to get here?"

"Because Magic needed a sedative immediately," she shot back. "We couldn't run the risk of him making the injury worse."

"I don't care," he said angrily. "You could have gotten yourself killed."

"I've been around horses all my life and I know what I'm doing," she insisted. "Besides, that horse is a full brother to Dancer and almost as valuable as he is. His stud fees alone are going to make you a fortune once he's retired from racing."

Reaching out, Jake took her by the shoulders. "Don't you understand? It's not about the money, Heather. Your safety is far more important to me than any money I could make off of a damned horse."

She stared at him for several long seconds before her stormy expression began to ease a bit. "Honestly, I really wasn't in as much danger as it might have seemed, Jake."

He crushed her to him. "Even the slightest chance of you being hurt in any way is one chance too many, honey."

As his heart slowly returned to a more normal beat, he couldn't get over the fear that had coursed through him when he saw the horse come so close to kicking her. It had rivaled the feeling he'd experienced a few days ago when he'd awakened to find his napping daughter missing from where she'd fallen asleep on his chest.

Before he could analyze what that might mean, he lowered his head to cover Heather's mouth with his. He told himself that he needed to reassure himself that she was indeed all right. Yet the truth of the matter was he'd become quite good at looking for reasons to kiss her.

Soft and pliant, her lips immediately fused with his as she wrapped her arms around his neck. But when she used the tip of her tongue to invite him to deepen the kiss, her eager response to the caress sent blood surging through his veins and his body hardened so fast it made him dizzy.

As he slipped inside and teased, he slid his hands from her back to her delightful little blue jeans-clad bottom and tried to pull her even closer. But an insistent nudge against his legs had him breaking the kiss to look down at the big dog trying to work his way between them.

"Thank God Nemo came along when he did." Heather's cheeks colored a pretty pink as she glanced down the wide aisle to see if anyone had been watching.

"I thought you were supposed to be man's best friend," Jake groused when he bent to pick up his discarded coffee cup. He scratched behind the big dog's ears. "How would you like it if I interrupted you and one of your female friends?"

"Since he's been neutered, I doubt he'd care," she said dryly.

"Nemo, buddy, I'm so sorry to hear that," Jake said sympathetically.

She looked confused. "Why are you sorry he's been neutered?"

"It's a guy thing." Jake shook his head. "You wouldn't understand."

"The vet just arrived," Tony called from the opposite end of the stable, drawing their attention back to the matter at hand.

"Heather and I are going back up to the house," Jake said before she could answer or find an excuse to stick around. "You assist him with whatever he needs."

"No problem, boss."

"I'm not going anywhere," she stated. "My job is to stay right here and see to Stormy Magic's welfare."

"Dr. Pennington has arrived and Tony will see that he takes good care of whatever treatment the animal needs." Turning her, Jake put his arm around her shoulders and started walking them from the stable. "Besides, if you'll remember, we have a dinner meeting with a couple of the other owners and then the Southern Oaks Ball to attend this evening."

"You could go without me."

"Nope. You agreed to be my date for these things. It's too late to back out now."

She shook her head. "It was more like you pulled rank and told me I was going."

He chuckled. "Whatever. You'll need to start getting ready early."

"Why? We're not meeting the other owners until seven this evening."

"I was contacted this morning by the television network carrying the race. They want to interview us before dinner and get some footage for their Meet the Owners pre-race segment."

"I don't own Dancer. You do. There's no reason for me to be included in that." She shrugged from beneath his arm and stopping, glared at him. "Right after he was named the favorite to win the Classic, they showed up here to tape his daily exercises and grooming. They interviewed me then and I told them everything there is to know about Dancer." She shook her head. "This particular fifteen minutes of fame is all yours."

* * *

When Jake helped her out of the back of the limousine, Heather felt as if she'd stepped right into the middle of a three-ring circus. Cameras whirred and reporters called out questions as they walked along the carpeted runway toward the entrance of one of the oldest and most prestigious hotels in Louisville.

"This is just like a Hollywood premiere," Jake said, placing his hand to her back to guide her.

"And the very reason I would have preferred staying at home," she muttered. They'd spent an hour and a half before dinner being interviewed by the television network as well as a couple of reporters from the print media. She was more than ready to escape the spotlight.

"What was that, honey?" he asked, leaning close.

"It's not important." She wasn't surprised he hadn't been able to hear her. The noise was almost deafening.

Thankfully they left most of the chaos behind as they crossed the lobby to enter the Grand Ballroom. She waited while Jake presented the doorman with his invitation, then walking into the ornate room, looked around. The light from the massive crystal chandeliers caused the gold accents on the pristine white walls to take on a rich glow and complemented the heavy floor-to-ceiling red velvet drapes. As she continued to scan the room, she spotted a few of the same guests that had attended the Wainwrights' reception along with several well-known celebrities and foreign dignitaries.

"Is that who I think it is?" Jake asked as a sheikh and his entourage strolled past them.

She nodded. “That’s Sheikh Kalid Al-Kahra. He owns Dancer’s biggest competition.”

“Do you think we have anything to worry about?” Jake asked.

“Not a chance.” She couldn’t stop her smug smile. “The sheikh’s jockey has a tendency to take the horses he’s riding to the lead right out of the gate and doesn’t let up. By the time they reach the homestretch, the horse has nothing left for the sprint to the finish.”

“I’m glad that jockey is riding the sheikh’s horse and not ours,” Jake said, grinning.

“The previous owner of Hickory Hills demanded the best. That’s why we have Miguel Santana wearing our silks.” She nodded toward a group standing off to the side of the orchestra. “See that distinguished-looking gentleman over there with all the medals and ribbons? He’s the Crown Prince of Marunda. He owns the long shot.”

“The Wainwright affair was small potatoes compared to the company we’re keeping this evening,” Jake said, accepting champagne for both of them from a passing waiter. “There are some very impressive pedigrees here this evening.”

“I suppose you could say that.” She accepted the sparkling wine he handed her and took a sip. “But I’m more impressed by the horses than I am with the people owning them.”

He looked thoughtful. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

She nodded. “Owners like the sheikh and the prince were born into their positions in life. They didn’t have to work to get where they are. But every horse starts out the same. They may have impressive bloodlines, but they still have to work and prove themselves on the track. That’s something to be admired.”

They fell silent for several moments before she felt him watching her.

“Is something wrong?”

“Not at all.” His smile caused her pulse to speed up. “Do you realize you’re the most beautiful woman here tonight?”

“I really hadn’t given it much thought,” she said truthfully.

She had, however, thought a lot about how handsome he was. Dressed in a tuxedo she knew for certain hadn’t come off of a rack, he looked absolutely amazing.

When a beautiful young woman stepped up to the microphone in front of the orchestra and began to sing the song “At Last,” Jake set both of their glasses on a nearby table. “Let’s dance.”

He took her hand and leading her out onto the dance floor, took her into his arms. The awareness suddenly arcing between them was spellbinding. Gazing into the other’s eyes, neither spoke as the orchestra played and the young woman sang about finally finding love. Jake held her close, and swaying in time to the music, Heather knew that she’d remember the moment for the rest of her life.

When the song ended, the orchestra immediately played the beginning notes of another slow, dreamy love song and he pulled her more fully to him. Resting her head against his broad chest, she closed her eyes. She’d never felt more cherished, more secure than she did at that very moment in Jake’s arms.

“Honey, I want you more right now than I’ve ever wanted anything in my entire life,” he whispered close to her ear.

His warm breath caused a shiver to course through her. She could deny that she didn’t want him just as much, but she was tired of lying. From the moment he arrived at the farm, she’d fought what she knew now to be the inevitable. Jake’s touch, his drugging kisses and being held in his arms had worn down her defenses, and she’d lost the battle she’d waged with herself. She wanted him just as much now as she had the night they’d conceived Mandy.

Leaning back to stare up at him, the heat in his cobalt gaze stole her breath.

“How long are we expected to stay at this thing?” he asked.

Her heart sped up. “We’ve put in an appearance. That’s all that’s expected.”

“Then what do you say we call it an evening and go home?” The promising look he gave her sent excitement coursing through her veins.

Before she could answer, he led her off the dance floor and out of the ballroom straight to the concierge desk. Requesting that their limousine be sent to the front entrance, Jake helped her into the backseat. He raised the window between them and the driver, then gathered her into his arms.

Touching her chin with his index finger, he smiled when their gazes met. “You do know what’s going to happen when we get back to the farm?”

Her smile robbed him of breath. “Yes.”

Crushing her to him, he covered her mouth with his and it suddenly felt as if the temperature in the car went up a good ten degrees. As she put her arms around his neck, she parted her lips and he didn’t hesitate to deepen the kiss.

Her eager response sent blood surging through his veins and he didn’t think twice about slipping his hand inside the low cut neckline of her evening gown. Caressing her breast, he touched the beaded tip with his thumb. Her moan fueled the fire building in his belly, but when she moved her hand upward from where it rested on his thigh, the rush of heat tightening his groin made him feel as if the top of his head might just come off. He would have liked nothing more than to strip her of the sexy dress and make love to her right then and there. But he hadn’t made out in the backseat of a car since he was in his teens and he’d forgotten just how uncomfortable it could be.

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