



Silhouette®

1729  
July

# The Boss's Baby Surprise

LILIAN DARCY

SILHOUETTE  
*Romance*®



Soulmates

Mills & Boon Silhouette

Lilian Darcy

**The Boss's Baby Surprise**

«HarperCollins»

## **Darcy L.**

The Boss's Baby Surprise / L. Darcy — «HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon Silhouette)

Down-to-earth, dependable Cecelia Rankin was not the kind of woman who believed in dreams-come-true...but that's exactly what seemed to be happening! She kept dreaming of her gorgeous, millionaire boss Nick Delaney—no surprise there—but with a crying baby? Then Nick discovered he was guardian of an orphaned baby boy....Nick was surprised—absolutely shocked! What did he know about bottles or baby booties? Thank goodness his assistant, Cecelia, was there to help him. But as they spent intimate moments together, Nick found that now he was dreaming...that he could make shy, sexy Cecelia his wife!

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## **She'd dreamed about Nick and a baby....**

The baby had looked as good in his arms as a designer gown on a supermodel. They'd accessorized each other. Cute big dark head of hair, cute little dark head of hair. Broad shoulders, tiny fingers. Red tie, blue sleepsuit. The man and the infant had belonged together like apple pie and ice cream, like tulips and springtime, like baseball and hot dogs.

Cecelia's multimillionaire boss had held the little boy in a way that had made both man and baby look oddly vulnerable, so that both of them had tugged at her heart in a way she didn't want at all.

And she certainly never thought of her boss in a personal context like this. It was a point of professional pride to her that in seven years as an executive assistant for a total of six increasingly successful men in three different jobs, she'd never even come close to falling for her employer.

And I'm not falling for him now.

Dear Reader,

If you can't beat the summer heat then join it! Come warm your heart with the latest from Silhouette Romance.

In *Her Second-Chance Man* (SR #1726) Cara Colter enchants us again with the tale of a former ugly duckling who gets a second chance with the man of her dreams—if only she can convince him to soften his hardened heart. Don't miss this delightful story of love and miracles!

Meet Cinderella's Sweet-Talking Marine (SR #1727) in the newest book in Cathie Linz's *MEN OF HONOR* miniseries. This sexy soldier promised to take care of his friend's sister, and he plans to do just that, even if it means marrying the single mom. A hero's devotion to his country—and his woman—has never been sweeter!

Talk about a fantasy come to life! Rescued by the handsomest Native American rancher this heroine has ever seen definitely makes up for taking a wrong turn somewhere in Montana. Find out if her love will be enough to turn this bachelor into a husband in *Callie's Cowboy* (SR #1728) by Madeline Baker.

Lilian Darcy brings us the latest *SOULMATES* title with *The Boss's Baby Surprise* (SR #1729). Dreams of her handsome boss are not that strange for this dedicated executive assistant. But seeing the confirmed bachelor with a baby? She doesn't believe it...until her dreams begin to come true!

We hope you enjoy the tender stories in this month's lineup!

Mavis C. Allen

Associate Senior Editor

**The Boss's Baby Surprise**  
**Lilian Darcy**



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## **Books by Lilian Darcy**

Silhouette Romance

The Baby Bond #1390

Her Sister's Child #1449

Raising Baby Jane #1478

\*Cinderella After Midnight #1542

\*Saving Cinderella #1555

\*Finding Her Prince #1567

Pregnant and Protected #1603

For the Taking #1620

The Boss's Baby Surprise #1729

Silhouette Special Edition

Balancing Act #1552

## LILIAN DARCY

has written over fifty books for Silhouette Romance and Harlequin Mills & Boon Medical Romance (Prescription Romance). Her first book for Silhouette appeared on the Waldenbooks Series Romance Bestsellers list, and she's hoping readers go on responding strongly to her work. Happily married with four active children and a very patient cat, she enjoys keeping busy and could probably fill several more lifetimes with the things she likes to do—including cooking, gardening, quilting, drawing and traveling. She currently lives in Australia but travels to the United States as often as possible to visit family. Lilian loves to hear from readers. You can write to her at P.O. Box 381, Hackensack NJ 07602 or e-mail her at [lildarcy@austarmetro.com.au](mailto:lildarcy@austarmetro.com.au).

June 10, 1904

Dearest Mama,

This will be my last letter to you before your muchanticipated visit. I must confess I am counting the days, as I am getting so heavy and already feeling the heat. I am sitting in my favorite room as I write this, and I cannot wait for you to see it—well, the whole house, too. Frederick has worked so hard to make it perfect.

I spend so many happy hours here in my sewing parlor, looking onto the street. I have just finished making dear Cousin Lucy's wedding gown, a summer hat for me and Jemima's christening robe, as well as all sorts of pretty things for the baby, of course. I sit here in the afternoons and listen for my dearest Frederick to come home, and my thoughts fly all over the place. Mama, I never imagined I could be so content!

Sometimes I think that even a hundred years from now, my spirit will live on in this room, sending out hope and happiness and perhaps just a little mischief.

Your loving daughter,

Charlotte

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## Chapter One

One of the best things about flying business class, if you were an organized, efficient executive assistant like Cecilia Rankin, was that it was located right up at the front of the plane. There were no long, narrow aisles to negotiate, and no obstacle course of fellow travelers to apologize to as you eased your way past.

Stepping aboard the New York to Columbus flight in Nick Delaney's wake, Celie's fingers already itched to open her laptop, and she wasn't surprised when her boss himself picked up a conversation they'd abandoned midsentence a few minutes earlier, cut off by the boarding announcement.

"In fact, don't even get out the Fadden McElroy file," he said, stopping beside his seat.

"No, they didn't seem to have a grasp of the Delaney's ethos, I felt," Celie answered. The Delaney's chain of steak houses had recently fired its advertising agency, and this two-day trip to New York had been part of the process of selecting a new one. Celie had found it fascinating, though tiring.

"Exactly," Nick said, in answer to her comment. "The other agency presentations I want to review inflight, but I'll make that call to the Chicago office, first."

"They'll want cell phones switched off soon," she reminded him.

"It's a quick call."

He pulled his cell phone from his pocket, flipped it open and keyed in the number. His strong body almost managed to fill the wide business-class aisle. Celie and Nick had been nearly the last passengers to board, and the flight attendants were beginning to make their final checks. Nick looked down at his seat as he spoke into the phone. There was a blue pillow on the seat, and he picked it up with a preoccupied expression, then stood back for Celie to pass.

As she took her seat, she debated removing the pillow from his grasp, but he had it tucked into the crook of his arm like a baby, and he was listening intently to the voice at the other end of the phone right now. She didn't want to distract him, even though she was sure he didn't really want the pillow.

It reminded her of something, suddenly, and she blinked. A baby. Nick and a baby. Nick and a baby that he didn't really want.

She'd dreamed this. Something very akin to this. The night before they'd left Columbus for New York, two days ago.

Celie lived in a cozy apartment in a big old house in the Columbus, Ohio, neighborhood of Victorian Village. It was a place that she sometimes felt might be too cozy, and too dangerously romantic, for an efficient, organized person such as herself, and she'd certainly never before had the vivid dreams she'd been having since she moved into it two months ago.

And this week, she'd dreamed about Nick and a baby. She could remember it in detail, now.

The baby had looked as good in his arms as a designer gown on a supermodel. They'd accessorized each other, so to speak. Cute big dark head of hair, cute little dark head of hair. Broad shoulders, tiny fingers. Red tie, blue sleepsuit. White shirt that was coming untucked, and a blue flannel blanket, also untucked. The man and the infant belonged together like apple pie and ice cream, like tulips and springtime, like baseball and hotdogs.

Celie's multimillionaire boss had held the little boy in a way that had made both man and baby look oddly vulnerable, so that both of them had tugged at her heart in a way she didn't want at all, and wasn't used to. He'd seemed different in the dream, not like the Nick Delaney she knew so well from the hours she spent in the same office with him. That Nick was confident, driven and impressive in every way.

In contrast, the dream Nick had had a softness to his eyes that had looked partly like fatigue and partly like tenderness, and both qualities had called forth an almost painful hunger inside the

Celie-in-the-dream to go up to him, real close, lean into his tall, well-muscled body, lift her fingers to his face and—

Celie frowned and sat up straighter.

She didn't like having such vivid dreams, nor did she like remembering them in such detail. She was practical, responsible, efficient and in control. She wasn't a visionary. And she certainly never thought of her boss in a personal context like this. It was a point of professional pride to her that in seven years as an executive assistant for a total of six increasingly successful men in three different jobs, she'd never even come close to falling for her employer.

And I'm not falling for him now.

This employer, in particular, she sensed, would be a dangerous man to care for. He organized his emotions the same way he organized his life—in separate compartments, with strict labels. Celie valued this quality in a boss, but she didn't think she'd want it in a lover.

Still on the phone, Nick paced back and forth, the way Celie's sister's husband, Alex, sometimes paced back and forth when he was trying to soothe their crying baby girl. Little Lizzie had recently celebrated her three-month birthday with a weeklong visit from Kentucky to Columbus with her parents, and her aunt Celie adored her.

"Maybe I got Alex and Nick mixed up in the dream," Celie muttered to herself, as she opened her laptop.

"You okay?" he said, with his hand over the phone.

"I'm fine."

Nick saw that she had her laptop out. "Bring up the spreadsheets from Hampton Finn Lloyd, would you?"

He continued to pace. This was his caged-lion look, and he did it a lot, although today his movements were confined to a smaller area than usual. To and fro he went, like a big cat, with every muscle coiled, as if he had too much energy at his disposal to expend on a mere telephone call.

He would have to sit down, soon. The flight attendants had begun to close the aircraft doors. Celie managed to take the blue pillow from him, at last, in a deft maneuver that didn't disrupt his train of thought, the way her sister would take Lizzie from Alex, sometimes.

Nick didn't have any babies in his life that Celie knew of. Not one of his own, and no nieces and nephews, either. His only brother, Sam, although married, was childless. And if Nick was dating anyone, Celie didn't know. He wasn't the kind of boss who asked his assistant to buy gifts—or kiss-offs—for his girlfriends.

If she'd had to guess, Celie would have said he was uninvolved, right now.

Which means he's available, said a sneaky little voice inside her head.

She frowned at the voice, and mentally argued it down. For the second time in as many minutes.

Sure, she liked Nick. Respected him. Was aware of the powerful impression he made on almost everyone he met, with his clear gaze, his strong handshake, his quick mind. She even felt a little possessive toward him at times, running so many important aspects of his life the way she did.

Professionally, they accessorized each other, so to speak. Like baseball and hotdogs. Like tulips and springtime.

But all of this was a long way from feeling, like Celie-in-the-dream, as if she wanted to reach up and—

"Okay, now, these figures here," Nick said.

"Cost breakdowns on their proposed print ad campaign," Celie answered at once, happy to snap off that other, much more disturbing train of thought and focus on work.

The airplane engines began to speed up, ready to taxi away from the gate. The flight attendants launched into their safety announcement. Nick and Celie were forced to pause briefly during takeoff, when laptop and briefcase had to be stowed beneath their seats, but apart from that, Nick was as tireless as ever.

Only toward the end of the flight did he announce, “Okay, we’ll leave it there. I’m going to call Sam.”

“Do you want me to—?”

He shook his head, pulled out the phone again, and hit the speed dial. His eyes looked clouded, which they hadn’t a few minutes ago, and his mouth looked a little tight. Celie had become adept at picking up Nick’s emotional signals over the past eight months.

He was worried about his younger brother, the way Celie herself often worried about her mom.

He probably didn’t realize he let it show, but Celie could tell, and she wasn’t surprised. Sam was only eleven months younger than Nick, and she knew they’d always been close—close enough to make a spectacular success of working together for the past ten years. Sam’s marriage had been in trouble, in recent months, and her boss didn’t want his brother to get hurt.

“Where are you?” Nick asked him at once. “Home? Anything to report?” He listened for a minute, then told Sam, “No, just checking in. You on your own? Eating out?” He listened again, then added a little too casually, “Maybe I’ll drop by.”

In contrast to the casual manner, his eyes looked serious, focused and very blue. Actually, they were almost the same shade of blue as the airline pillow and the baby blanket in Celie’s dream, she realized. The fact unsettled her again. Was that why she’d suddenly remembered the dream? Baby blankets, baby-blue eyes, his daddy’s blue—

No. Surely not.

I’m just tired.

The flight landed on time, their bags were waiting for them on the carousel, and Nick’s personal driver Leo whisked them away from the airport in Nick’s personal limo within minutes. Since her apartment was almost on the route to his home in Upper Arlington, Nick dropped her there as usual.

“You look wiped,” he told her. He wasn’t being unkind, she understood, he was just making a statement of fact. His gaze flicked over her, taking in the creases in her knee-length charcoal-gray skirt, and around her eyes and mouth.

Her nerve endings heated under his regard in an unexpected way, and she nodded, feeling awkward. “Yes, I am,” she answered. “It’s good to be home.”

“Take the morning off, okay? Come in at around two. If you need longer, just call and let me know.”

“I’ll be fine. Two o’clock.”

“You sure?”

“We have the regional figures to go through,” she reminded him. “And meetings to prepare for.”

“We do. Okay, then. Two o’clock it is. Have a good night.”

Leo had already opened the trunk to collect her bags and carry them to the door for her. Nick watched as Celie followed the older man to the side door that led up to her apartment. She had a straight back, a tidy walk, a taste for very efficient and very tailored professional clothing, and glossy dark hair that would have bounced in time to her footsteps if it hadn’t been so neatly twisted and clipped high on her head.

Something moved in the corner of his vision. A curtain in one of the Victorian mansion’s six apartments, maybe, wafting in the night breeze. Nick’s muscles tingled with a sudden urge to chase after Celie and snap the clip off her hair so that its clean, silky bounce would become fact instead of imagination.

He resisted the urge, disturbed by how unexpected and how strong it was. He could almost feel her hair in his fingers. He kept watching as she reached her door, just ahead of Leo. Typically, she had her key already in her hand.

Of course she did. He would have been surprised if she hadn’t, and Celie Rankin almost never surprised him. This was one of the things he liked about her.

She wouldn't let Leo bring her bags up the stairs, and disappeared inside within seconds. Leo headed back to the car, while Nick kept watching the big old house. A series of lights came on, showing Celie's progress up the stairs. Finally, the big, round turret room at the front of the second floor lit up. He saw a faint shadow through the drapes as she moved across the room.

Celie was a great executive assistant. Nick had kept her up until well after midnight in his hotel suite last night, working on her laptop, and he suspected her mind had been buzzing too fast afterward to wind down and permit her some good rest. No wonder she seemed tired, and a little offline.

He never had that problem. He'd learned very early in his life the trick of switching off and disappearing deep into the haven of sleep. As a young child, sleep was the only place in his life where he'd felt safe. Now his facility for deep, unbroken sleep allowed him to function at a higher level than many people during his waking hours, and he rarely remembered his dreams.

"Okay, Leo," he told his driver, dismissing Cecilia Rankin from his mind. He picked up his cell phone. "I'm going to call for some takeout and bring it over to Sam's, since he hasn't eaten yet. Can we swing by the Green Dragon, next?"

"I'm glad you're back," Celie's creaky-floored old apartment seemed to say to her.

The chandelier in the middle of the turret room's ceiling sparkled, and when she opened a window, a cool evening breeze wafted in. The antique clock on the side table by the door clacked like a percussionist playing out a rhythm. Eight o'clock, it read. Time to eat, her stomach said.

No problem, there. As efficient at home as she was at work, she kept the refrigerator in her little kitchen well-stocked with quick-to-prepare meals. Toss some frozen cheese ravioli into a pot of boiling water, heat a creamy pasta sauce in the microwave, tear up a few lettuce leaves, and she could eat in ten minutes.

Celie caught sight of her cherry-red robe hanging on a hook in the bathroom, and into her mind jumped the idea of taking a quick shower while the ravioli cooked, then eating in the robe and her matching slippers.

As a child, she'd been allowed to do that, when she was tired. Her mother would bundle her up on the couch with a crocheted blanket over her knees and a little tray table, spread with a linen place mat. She would eat a big bowl of homemade soup and fresh hot biscuits, and she'd feel so deliciously cosseted and safe.

She hadn't done anything like that for years. Since her dad's death, when Celie was seventeen, she had had to be the adult, the responsible one, the one who did the cossetting. It had seemed to frighten her mom if the daughter she depended upon displayed any sign of softness or vulnerability.

"You're exhausted. Baby yourself a little tonight, Celie," the robe on its hook seemed to say, but she ignored it and stayed in her clothes, afraid that if she gave in to the impulse she might fall asleep on the couch with the ravioli still boiling on the stove and not wake up until the kitchen caught fire.

She ate her meal, prepared for bed and fell asleep before ten.

The sound of a baby crying came to her ears after several hours of good rest. It seemed so close that it startled her awake. Or—But, no, was she awake? She found herself at the window, although she didn't quite remember how she'd gotten there. Had she walked? Or floated? Someone whispered a sound. Soothing the baby? Or calling her name?

The cries still came. In this room? They sounded close enough, but no. She looked around. There was no baby here. Outside, then? Downstairs?

The sound seemed distinct and real—as real as sounds and senses could feel in a dream, heightened more than they were in daily life.

Celie pushed the curtain aside and looked out. She'd kept the window open, as the April night was mild. The street looked quiet. She couldn't see anyone. Maybe the crying came from the apartment below. It sounded a little fainter to her ears, now. The couple downstairs didn't have a baby of their own, but they could have visitors staying with them.

She stepped back, and was about to let the curtain fall back into place when something on the windowsill gleamed in the moonlight and caught her attention. She picked it up. It was a hat pin, old-fashioned, with a long shaft of dull, dark gray metal and a big glass pearl at one end.

And that means I'm definitely dreaming, she realized, as part of the dream. Because I've never seen this before.

The glass pearl was pretty, and she imagined a dark-haired young woman with a wide, mobile mouth and friendly eyes, standing in front of a mirror and reaching her hands up behind her head as she used the hat pin to fasten a broad-brimmed creation of straw and chiffon into place on her thick pile of hair.

"This is a very nice dream," she told the woman. "If only that little baby would stop crying."

"Nick will go to him and soothe him back to sleep," the woman said. Her smile at once began to calm Celie's concern.

And a few seconds later, the baby stopped crying, so the woman pinning her hat must have been right. Nick had picked him up. Of course he had! Celie could see him with that little dark head settled on his broad shoulder and brushing against his clean-shaven cheek. His shirttail had escaped from his waistband again, but he was too absorbed in the baby to notice. Everything was fine.

Celie tucked herself back into bed with a smile on her face.

In the morning, however, the hat pin still lay there on her windowsill, and that was distinctly strange.

Dressed in her blue-striped flannel pajamas and only just out of bed, she picked it up and twirled its metal stem in her fingers as if the glass pearl was a little flower. So pretty, the way it caught the morning light. It made her think of Victorian lace, hand-stitched fabrics, elaborate hats and porcelain figurines. Despite its spiky point, it felt feminine.

When she thought about it, there was a perfectly rational explanation for its presence on her windowsill, too.

No, okay, not perfectly rational.

She wished she could find a better one.

But it was plausible, if you were prepared to stretch. The attic apartment directly above this one was in the process of renovation. The construction team had really torn into the place, pulling up floorboards and ripping ancient plaster off the walls. The hat pin must have gotten lost a hundred years ago, fallen through a crack in the floorboards and—

Well, here it was on the windowsill, so something like that had obviously happened, even if Celie couldn't quite picture the physics of it, right now.

And the baby—Nick's baby, protected in his strong arms—had been purely a dream.

For some reason, Celie didn't want to risk losing the wandering hat pin again, so she put it in the little zippered compartment on the side of her purse. After her usual light breakfast, she went to the mall.

"Sorry I'm late," Celie said breathlessly, as she entered Nick's office.

He looked at his watch.

She was right.

She was late.

By a whole two minutes.

And she looked a little different. Fresh, energetic, happy and well-rested, for a start, although he felt there was more to it than that. Her hair looked extra silky, and the clips had to be new. He didn't think she usually wore clips decorated with little flowers. They went some way toward undercutting the severe styling of her skirt, he thought, as did the pastel top she wore.

She definitely looked different.

This fact niggled at him a little, although he didn't have time to work out why. They had a lot to get through this afternoon. He allocated only a few seconds to the topic, and told her sincerely, "You look very nice."

She nodded, and said, "Thanks," and he knew she wouldn't expect him to pursue the question any further than that.

"Let's get right to those regional figures," he told her.

With various interruptions, the regional figures took most of the afternoon, and didn't leave Celie much time to contemplate her slightly disturbing morning at the mall. In the few moments she did have in which to think about it, she felt churned up inside. On the one hand, fluttery in the stomach, like a child going to a birthday party, but on the other, ill at ease.

At the mall, she'd kept thinking about her dream last night and about the hat pin. She'd even gotten it out of her purse a couple of times, to prove to herself that it was real...although she might have felt more reassured if it hadn't been. She'd been twirling it in her hand when the hairstylist had asked her, "Just a trim?"

And she'd felt the strongest temptation to answer, "No, I'd like to try something completely new."

She'd resisted it in the end. There was a good reason she always kept her hair up and out of the way. With the hairstylist waiting, and the hat pin still twirling in her fingers, Celie had needed several seconds to remember what the reason was—that it wasn't very efficient to have hair in her face when she was focused on work—but it did come to her in the end, and she opted for the usual trim.

She and Nick got through the regional figures by the anticipated time, and her boss was happy. When Celie got home that night and opened the closet to hang up two of the new, more softly styled tops she'd bought this morning to pair with her skirts—she'd worn the third top to work—the closet seemed to approve.

Several hours later, the bed wasn't so friendly. Tonight's dreams clattered into her mind with more violence, and the images were harder to put together. A figure lay on the floor of the kitchen. Her kitchen? The room looked familiar, and so did the figure itself, but then her dream lurched off into a different direction, she heard the sound of tearing fabric, and lost the image of the figure in the kitchen before she could decide exactly who it was, and what was going on.

The baby started crying, and she sat up in bed, alert at once, but the woman by the mirror told her again, "It's all right. Nick will go to him. Nick will care for him."

"I hope so," Celie answered. "But what about the woman on the floor?"

"Call her in the morning."

"Okay. Yes, that's what I'll do. Of course." The suggestion made so much sense that it soothed her back into sleep...or out of her dream...and it didn't occur to her that she didn't know who she was supposed to call.

In the morning, she woke late. Hurrying to prepare for work, she knew her sleep had been cut through by another dream, but didn't have time to try and bring it back to mind.

That happened later.

Sam's personal assistant, Kyla, told her, as they sat waiting for a meeting, "I love your hair like that. Any reason?"

"Oh, I just didn't get a chance to put it up this morning, that's all." She'd tried a couple of times, but for some reason her fingers wouldn't go through the familiar maneuver, and the fold of hair kept slipping sideways. In the end, she'd let it drop around her shoulders, still sheened and slippery from yesterday's salon conditioning treatment.

"You should wear it that way more often," Kyla said.

White-blond Kyla wore lots of jewelry, and lots of black. She was a single mother with a five-year-old daughter, Nettie, and although she came across as a ditz sometimes, she got things done. Sam depended on her more than Kyla herself ever let the man guess.

“I would, only it’s not very practical,” Celie answered.

She had that churned up, self-conscious sensation again. Somehow, she didn’t feel quite safe. She suddenly remembered last night’s dreams, and the reassuring advice of the woman who stood by the mirror.

“I’m supposed to call someone,” she said aloud. “Check on someone.”

She stood up in a panic, and it came to her in a rush. That figure, lying on a kitchen floor, wearing a nightdress and with one leg stuck out strangely...

Mom.

Eleven years ago, Celie’s older sister, Veronica, had already been away at college when their father died, and her mom hadn’t coped with Veronica’s absence or with widowhood and grief too well. Celie herself had gone to college at Ohio State, so that she could remain at home. She’d moved into an apartment of her own several years ago, but still she never wanted to let her mother down. She spent a lot of time at Mom’s, helping her out, and this morning’s call to her seemed urgent, now.

A cluster of senior Delaney’s executives and regional managers entered the room at this moment, carrying briefcases and sheafs of papers. Nick and Sam wouldn’t be far behind.

“If they’re ready to start, Kyla,” she gabbled. “Tell them...uh...that I won’t be long. Or—could you take notes for my Mr. D, if he needs it?”

“Sure. What’s up? You look—”

“Nothing. I’m sure everything’s fine.”

Celie hurried to her private office, adjacent to Nick’s, and keyed in her mother’s phone number, but her mom didn’t pick up, and neither did the machine.

Celie’s mother had had a bone-density scan a few months ago, and the result had come back low. She took risks, too—vague, thoughtless ones that she didn’t even realize were risks until Celie pointed it out. She went down the basement stairs of her little house without turning on the light. She put a step stool on the grass in the yard to reach up and prune a branch.

Celie had the phone number of her mom’s neighbor Mrs. Pascoe in her address book, and she’d called a couple of times in the past to ask Mrs. Pascoe to check next door.

“Sure I’ll go across, honey,” Mrs. Pascoe told her today. “Just don’t you worry, okay?”

But when Mrs. Pascoe called Celie back a few minutes later, her voice sounded very different.

“Thank heaven you called me when you did, Cecilia!”

Her mother had fallen from her step stool two hours ago while trying to change a lightbulb in the kitchen. She’d broken her leg, and she hadn’t been able to get to the phone.

“I’ve already called 911,” Mrs. Pascoe told her. “The ambulance is on its way.”

Celie hung on the line, shaky and hardly able to breathe, and it seemed like an hour before the other woman came back to the phone again to report, “She’s going to be okay, although the paramedics say it looks like a bad break. They’ve just left, and they’re taking her to Riverside. You can probably hear the sirens in the background. She’s in shock, after lying on that cold floor for so long.”

Mrs. Pascoe hung up, but Celie’s fingers were curled tightly around the phone and she couldn’t seem to let it go. Nick appeared in the doorway while the receiver still hung in her hand.

“Kyla said—” Nick stopped, midsentence. “Heck, what’s wrong, Celie? You’ve gone white.”

“My mother’s broken her leg. She had to lie in pain on the kitchen floor for two hours, with no help on its way. I dreamed about it. Which is just so weird.”

“You dreamed your mother broke her leg?”

“Yes. I saw a figure lying on a floor, only I didn’t know who it was. Someone in the dream told me, ‘Call her in the morning.’ I remembered the dream just now, so I did call her, and when I did...” She took a shuddery breath. “Thank heaven I called!”

“Celie, it’s all right. Keep remembering to breathe, okay? Are you going to faint?”

“No.” She’d never fainted in her life, and didn’t intend to start now.

“Help is with her now, right?”

“She’s in the ambulance.”

“So it’s okay. And for heaven’s sake, don’t worry about a little thing like a dream!”

“No. Of course. You’re right.”

Celie felt herself sway. She didn’t think she would have fainted, since she never had before and was so determined not to, but when Nick’s arms came around her for support, strong and warm, she clung on to her boss for dear life and whispered hoarsely, “Don’t let go.”

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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