

TO HAVE THE
DOCTOR'S BABY

TERESA
SOUTHWICK

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Nick Damian, paediatric surgeon extraordinaire, was stunned to see his beloved ex-wife Ryleigh Evans in his office. She thought he'd be the perfect person to father the baby she longed to have and it was the deal of a lifetime for Nick. He'd let Ryleigh slip out of his arms once before. It wasn't a mistake he would make a second time!

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“No, Nick. Really not a good idea.”

“You’re wrong about that. It’s one of the best I’ve come up with in a long time.”

Nick started to lower his mouth to hers again. Ryleigh backed out of his arms, pushing wisps of hair off her forehead with a shaky hand. “We have rules—”

“Screw the rules.”

“We talked about this. We set them up for a reason.” Clouds slid into her eyes as the passion faded and doubt took its place. “As much as I’d like to keep this up, I don’t want to lose you as a friend. If we go down this path, I’m afraid that’s what would happen.”

“It won’t. I promise.”

Ryleigh’s smile was bittersweet. “I know you mean that. You’re the most honorable man I’ve ever met and you’d never deliberately break your word. But if we don’t stick to the basics we established, you might not be able to keep that promise. And I’m not willing to take the chance...”

Dear Reader,

When I first started on my publication journey, the reality of seeing one of my books on a shelf in the store seemed beyond my reach. Day after day, I sat at the computer putting in precious time on a project with no guarantee of success, but the alternative was to never have tried. That was unacceptable.

I tapped into those feelings for the heroine in this book. Ryleigh Evans desperately wants to have a baby before turning thirty and she wants her ex-husband to be the father. Dr Nick Damian is great with his pediatric patients but emotional baggage got in the way of being a good husband. He’s not quite sure how his ex-wife talked him into helping with her dream, but somehow it becomes less about a baby and more about a second chance at love.

Thanks to all of you readers I’m still living my dream. I hope you enjoy reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

All the best!

Teresa Southwick

About the Author

TERESA SOUTHWICK lives with her husband in Las Vegas, the city that reinvents itself every day. An avid fan of romance novels, she is delighted to be living out her dream of writing for Mills & Boon.

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Teresa Southwick**



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This book is dedicated to every woman with a dream.

Never give up!

Chapter One

They were the poster couple for an amicable divorce, but that didn't mean seeing her ex-husband on the first day of a new job wasn't nerve-racking.

Ryleigh Evans was about to test the boundaries of their comfortable friendship and knew it was an exam she could flunk spectacularly. Any minute he would arrive in her office and she was bracing for impact. Trying to, anyway.

At Mercy Medical Center, Nick Damian, M.D., was a legend. But how did one prepare to ask a legend for the biggest favor ever?

Blackmail would be good if she had something on him, but she didn't.

Opening the top button on her blouse and showing a little cleavage might help. The problem was she didn't have much in the way of cleavage and what she did have hadn't impressed him while they were married. Two years later there was no reason to believe that had changed. Against the odds, they now had a warm and supportive friendship that she didn't want to lose.

Ryleigh had just moved back to Las Vegas from Baltimore to take the position of regional coordinator for Children's Medical Charities. The organization raised money and funded kids' projects at the hospital. Nick was a pediatric pulmonologist and it was only a matter of time until their paths crossed. She just didn't want the crossing to be another *Titanic*. Hence this private meeting in her office, the first available time slot in their busy schedules since she'd returned.

There was a knock on her door that seemed as loud as a gunshot and just as startling. Even though she'd been expecting it.

"Too late for cleavage," she whispered before calling out, "Come in."

Her heart was pounding and she didn't actually hear the door open, but it must have because Nick was standing there. In worn jeans and a long-sleeved white cotton shirt, one wouldn't peg him as a doctor, but the stethoscope draped around his neck was a big clue. When not wearing scrubs, this was as professional as he dressed because he'd told her once that kids were intimidated by a suit. And a tie turned into a handy weapon for a pissed-off pediatric patient who'd been poked by needles one too many times and wanted to choke someone.

She stood, walked around her desk and stopped in front of him, then reached up to give him a hug. "Hi, Nick. It's really wonderful to see you."

His arms folded her close and felt warm, strong, familiar. A bittersweet feeling squeezed her heart, but she pushed it away. This wasn't about the past. She was working on her future.

"Ryleigh," he said, against her hair. "Welcome back."

When her heart started to race, she backed several steps away and asked, "How are you?"

"Fine. You?"

"Never better." Her voice was full of forced perkiness, which she hoped he didn't notice. It had been close to two years since they'd seen each other face-to-face. Their contact had been long phone calls, text messages and emails. They talked about everything including politics, books and movies. "You look great."

Understatement of the century.

He studied her with eyes that were an especially intense shade of blue and turned down just a little at the corners. They gave him a sad look, one that made every softhearted female and some who weren't so sensitive want to hug him and make whatever was bothering him better. She wasn't immune, and pushed that feeling away.

"Your hair is shorter," he finally said.

"Yeah."

Automatically she reached up and brushed her palm over the brunette layers that barely touched her shoulders. She was surprised he'd noticed. When they were married, she'd thought about shaving

her head, to see if that would get his attention. But she was afraid he wouldn't even notice something that drastic and it could have destroyed her.

"I like it," he said.

"Thanks." The compliment started a glow inside her, but she refused to give it any traction. Back on task. "In case you're wondering why I asked for this meeting—"

"You figured it would be more private than bumping into me in the hospital cafeteria."

"Yes."

"And here we are. Being more private." He folded his arms over his chest and smiled as if he were a proud mentor. "Look at you. The new regional coordinator for CMC."

"How about that? I wanted to come back—for this job," she clarified. There was another agenda, but she needed to wait to spring that on him.

"Because of the kids," he guessed.

"That's one of the reasons."

"How long has it been? Two years?"

"That sounds about right. Since the divorce," she qualified.

"Longer then, since you moved to Baltimore before that."

"Yeah. I thought you'd come after me." Did she really say that out loud? She hadn't meant to. Something about seeing him deactivated the filter between her brain and mouth.

How naive she'd been then. She hadn't handled things well and took responsibility for the immature behavior. Her only excuse was that she'd been young and hopelessly in love. It had been almost a physical ache when she wasn't with him, which was pretty often since he always went when a patient called. He dropped everything, even her. She hadn't known how to ask for what she wanted then. But she was older, wiser and wouldn't make the same mistake now.

"Ry, if there was—"

"Ancient history," she interrupted. It didn't hurt anymore because she'd made herself fall out of love with him.

Nick was the only one who'd ever called her Ry and the familiarity combined with his regretful expression caught her off guard. It struck a chord inside her that hadn't been plucked since the last time she'd seen him, and the vibration was uncomfortable.

She backed away again, then turned and moved behind her desk to sit in the high-backed black chair. "The thing is, Nick, I'm back. And it's important to me to make sure you and I are okay."

"If we weren't, it would have been pretty easy to ignore your emails, texts and phone calls."

"Still. There's no facial expression with electronic communication."

"Meaning you can tell if I'm lying?" he teased.

"You would never lie." She believed that with every fiber of her being. "But *I* can see if you're okay."

"What you're getting at is whether or not I'm angry that you left. The answer is that I never was. I understood."

So not what she wanted to hear. If he'd said he hated her guts, she could live with that, proof of sorts that she'd been more important to him than a lamp shade. She wasn't proud of the fact that, on some level, leaving had been about getting an emotional reaction from him, just the tiniest clue that he'd cared even a little. She'd been looking for a sliver of hope that he could fit time in his schedule for her—for them.

She'd told him about the job offer on the East Coast and spun her own personal fantasy that he would pull out all the stops to talk her out of going. The truth was closer to him not even realizing she'd gone. None of that slipped out because it *was* ancient history. She'd moved on and had different aspirations.

But seeing him in the flesh reminded her why he was an important component of achieving her goal. He was just as handsome as the first time she'd seen him. His thick, dark hair with the

waves barely slicked into submission still made her want to run her fingers through it. His cheeks and jaw were shadowed with scruff, just like she remembered. In the beginning of the separation, she'd actually missed the "beard burn" and wondered if she needed therapy.

He still looked good. Better than she remembered. Hotter than she'd hoped.

"We're fine, Ry," he said, meeting her gaze. "I was happy to hear you were the one hired for this job."

"You were?"

"Yeah. You'll be a good fit."

"Okay. I'm glad you think so." She smiled. One hurdle down. That cleared the way for the ultimate friendship test. "It's really wonderful to see you."

"Same here." The grin he flashed was hot enough to melt the polar ice cap.

Once upon a time it might have fed her fascination for him, but all this time away had worked magic. The dynamic between them was different. She could see him as an attractive man and not be sucked in by the charisma.

"I like this. Friendship is the new norm." Although she had other friends and none of them made her skin tingle with just a look. It would pass. "So, my friend, can we talk business?"

Nick rested a hip on the corner of her desk. "What kind of business?"

"Money," she said. "It's my job to raise it and I get to have a good deal of input on how to spend it."

"So, I need to be nice to you?" One of his dark eyebrows went up.

"It can't hurt." She was only half joking. Getting professional was a stall until she'd worked up the nerve to discuss what was really on her mind. "I'm meeting with all the doctors who specialize in pediatric medical disciplines to find out what the most pressing needs are. I'd like your wish list for how to use the money we raise."

Without hesitation he said, "ECMO."

"Would you care to translate for those of us who don't speak doctor?"

"Extra corporeal membrane oxygenation."

"That makes it much clearer," she said dryly. "Is it a machine or a process?"

"Both." Intensity shone in his eyes. "It works on the same principle as a heart-lung machine for babies with IRDS." When he saw her look, he added, "Infant respiratory distress syndrome."

"I need more information."

He thought for several moments, probably figuring out how to dumb it down for her. "When an infant's lungs get stiff, a respirator won't do the job. ECMO takes blood outside the body, channels it through a membrane to oxygenate it, then back in. This process is literally the difference between life and death."

"Then why doesn't the hospital have it now?" She had to ask even though she already suspected the answer.

"Cost prohibitive. The powers that be don't think it's a moneymaker."

Ryleigh knew that though the hospital was nonprofit, expenses still had to be met, revenue recovered through insurance payments and invoice collection, which was all channeled back into the facility. "What happens to the babies at risk now?"

"They get transferred to Phoenix or St. George, Utah. They're the closest hospitals that have the personnel and equipment. But getting them there takes a lot of time and that's the one thing these babies don't have."

"I see."

His gaze narrowed, a clue that he didn't believe she really got the severity of the need and was preparing to do battle. "ECMO is expensive."

"How much?"

"A million. Maybe more." He stood and put his palms flat on her desk, closing the space between them. "But the cost in terms of lives saved can't be calculated. Not only would kids here at Mercy Medical Center be helped, but other hospitals in the Vegas Valley could transfer critically ill babies here, too. In some cases adults could also be helped."

There was the intensity that had first captivated her, that passion to save lives she'd found so compelling. A passion she'd experienced on a personal level. A passion he carefully controlled. She'd eventually learned the sad lesson that professional dedication was a single-minded mistress and didn't share well with others.

"Look, Nick—"

"I know it's a long shot, Ry. But can you put a price tag on hope?"

How easily he'd slipped back into the familiar with her. That was both good and bad. "Get me the numbers."

"What?"

"I need to know what the actual cost is, and then we can talk."

He stared at her as if she had two heads. "Really?"

"Yes."

He grinned again. "Should have known you couldn't say no to a baby."

Baby.

One small word that tapped into her bottomless well of longing. She loved kids, all kids. The money this organization raised would go a long way to helping the sick ones get better, which was why she'd applied for this job. She'd taken it because more than anything she wanted a child of her own. This time around she and Nick were friends, and she knew how to ask for what she wanted.

Absently he picked up the nameplate from her desk and looked at it and then her. "Ryleigh Evans. I didn't know you'd gone back to your maiden name."

"It wasn't information that I felt was text message worthy. Are you surprised?"

"Only that you haven't found a guy. Married. Started a family."

"It's not that easy." Not one man she'd dated had measured up to Nick. And he'd just given her the opening she was waiting for. "But you're right. I very much want to have a child."

"That was something we probably should have discussed before we got married."

By the time she'd brought up the subject, the marriage was already in trouble. Their relationship counselors agreed that bringing a baby into the mix would only accelerate the downward spiral.

"Yeah," she said. "But everything with us happened so fast."

She'd been so swept away by the dashing Dr. Damian. Nothing and no one could have convinced her that a man who fought so hard for a child's life wouldn't want children of his own. Then she'd brought up the subject.

She couldn't call that discussion an argument. Nick never argued. He was either called away for a patient or simply left. The last time he'd put her off, she did the leaving.

"It was my fault, Ryleigh. I just—It wasn't—" He shook his head in frustration—a doer, not a talker. "You'll find someone and get married, have children."

"One doesn't actually have to be married to have a baby. In all this time, I haven't met anyone who made me want to take the plunge again."

"It'll happen."

"What if it takes years and my eggs turn into raisins? Advancing age and fertility are not compatible." She folded her hands and rested them on the desk. "My parents tried for years to have a baby and it didn't happen."

"Technically, that's not accurate because you're here."

"Yeah. But by the time they did, Mom was in her forties. She called me her miracle child." Dark memories came flooding back, losing first her father and a couple years later her mom. "Some miracle."

"It really was. Do you know the odds of a woman conceiving in her forties—"

"Please don't quote statistics. They were my parents and they died before I was out of high school. There was so little time with them, I used to wonder why they'd bothered. Now I understand the passion my mom felt, the yearning to have a baby because I feel it, too. But I also want to be young while my child is. More important, I want to actually be there while my child grows up."

"Don't sweat it. You're young—"

"Not that young." She stared at him. "I'm twenty-eight and a half. My biological clock is ticking and the prospects for marriage aren't looking good."

"Give it time," he said.

"I did that. And I'm finished holding my breath, Nick." The bar had been set really high and that was his fault. "I'm through with waiting."

"Do you have another choice?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. I can be a single mom."

"It's a big decision," he said.

"One I haven't come to lightly. I'm well aware of the difficulties. But I simply can't imagine my life without a child in it. I want to feel a baby grow and move inside me. More than anything, I want to hold my baby and raise him or her."

"But, Ryleigh, doing it alone—"

She held up a hand to stop him. "You're not going to talk me out of this."

"Someone has to make you see reason."

"Logic doesn't stand a chance against this longing to be a mother. Let me put it to you this way." She'd thought long and hard about what to say to him. "The need I have for a baby is as powerful as yours is for sex. Could you be talked out of it?"

"Point made." There was an uneasy expression on his face, a crack in the facade. "But how are you going to make it happen? In vitro? Potluck from a sperm bank?"

"I'd prefer not to do that." She met his gaze. "The hormone shots. The higher risk of it not being successful. Expense. Not to mention that the old-fashioned way is the first, best, most effective method."

"Then what?"

"Here's the thing, Nick. When we got married I was young and idealistic. All I needed to be happy was you, spending time with you. I'm older now and understand that you're a doctor and the kids need you. You're a gifted physician. You're also a good man, the best man I know. You have wonderful qualities and I've never met anyone more brilliant or dedicated. And it has to be said that you're not hard on the eyes."

"I hear a but."

"Only that I understand you couldn't give me what I needed. Not then, anyway."

"Here's the but," he said.

She nodded. "You can give me what I want now. And I want a baby."

When what she was asking for finally sank in, he looked like he'd swallowed his stethoscope. "That's a joke, right?"

"I've never been more serious."

"That's crazy." Nick stood and started to pace. "Do you realize what you're asking? A child would tie us together forever."

"It wouldn't have to."

He stopped and stared at her. "You expect me to father a child, then disappear?"

"We got married and you did that," she pointed out. "Not blaming you. Just saying... Look, I'm sorry to spring this on you, but there was really no good way to bring it up. And frankly, I'm glad it's out there. Take some time to think it over—"

"Done," he snapped. "And the answer is no."

“Just like that?”

“Yeah. You can’t be serious. And when you come to your senses, we’ll laugh about this.”

Disappointment shuddered through her as hopes and dreams went on life support. “You know, when we were married, I actually thought about going off birth control. An ‘accidental’ pregnancy. An oops-the-condom-must-have-broken conversation.”

“Why didn’t you?” Surprise slid into his eyes as he stared down at her.

“It just wasn’t right. I couldn’t do it. Maybe this idea is insane, but at least it’s straightforward and honest.”

“I’m sorry, Ryleigh. I just can’t go along with it.”

“I had to ask.” She worked hard at keeping the profound and emotional regret out of her voice. “I had a feeling you’d say no. So now it’s on to plan B.”

His gaze narrowed. “What’s that?”

“I go to the second name on my list.”

“That’s not funny.”

Bluffs never were. There was no list. This was about keeping her spunk factor in one piece. “I’ve never been more serious in my life.”

Nick stood at the third-floor nurse’s station in the PICU—Pediatric Intensive Care Unit—and finished charting. The job could be done sitting down, but he might fall asleep. After Ryleigh dropped the baby bombshell on him yesterday, getting to sleep last night had been a challenge he couldn’t overcome. He was grateful for the emergency call that had kept him too busy to think. Fortunately the asthmatic kid was doing fine now. Him? Not so much.

He put the chart back, then walked down the hall and turned right toward the elevators. The familiar sound of Ryleigh’s laughter drifted to him. At first he thought it was a hallucination due to sleep deprivation, until he saw her standing in front of the newborn nursery. There was a man with her. Carlton Gallagher. The doctor Nick was currently evaluating as a partner in his medical practice. The guy was smiling down at her. Was he the next name on her list?

The primal anger that blasted through Nick was shocking in its intensity.

Ryleigh had told him that she was completely serious about getting pregnant. It hadn’t taken her long to move forward with plan B.

Nick’s long stride quickly chewed up the length of the hall until he stopped beside them. “What’s going on?”

He’d meant the question to be casual, but his tone had fallen far short of friendly to just this side of a hostile growl.

Ryleigh’s puzzled expression was proof of that. “Hello, Nick. Dr. Gallagher just introduced himself. I’m glad you finally found someone to share the patient load in your practice.”

“It’s not a done deal,” he said. “We’re testing the water to see how we work together.”

Carlton’s gaze was challenging as he slid his hands into the pockets of his slacks. “A probationary period seemed wise, before we go to the trouble and expense of lawyers and contracts.”

Nick had only evaluated this guy in a professional way. Gallagher had gone to one of the finest medical schools and graduated at the top of his class. He’d trained in Dallas at one of the best children’s hospitals in the country and came highly recommended. After a couple months here at Mercy Medical he was getting high marks from the staff, too. Who were primarily of the female persuasion, so the poll results could be skewed.

The other doctor was about Nick’s height, a little over six feet tall. His dark hair had some gray at the temples which probably made him look distinguished as opposed to old. Yeah, double standard. His eyes were brown. He was tan. And women would most likely think he wasn’t bad looking. But was he brilliant? A good man? Not the best, because Ryleigh had first asked him, Nick, to father her baby. And the primal anger pushed through him again when his gaze dropped to Gallagher’s naked left ring finger. His reaction must have showed because the other doctor tensed.

"It's getting late," he said. "I have to go."

Not exactly *gosh look at the time*, but close, and Nick felt a sense of satisfaction.

Ryleigh smiled up at him. "It was nice to meet you, Dr. Gallagher. And about the upcoming fundraiser, can I count on you to buy a table for the Children's Medical Charities Fundraiser Gala?"

"That's a question for the boss. Later, Nick." The other man met his gaze, frowned, then walked away.

Nick's work there was done and he started to say goodbye. Then he saw Ryleigh looking at the babies in isolettes in the newborn nursery on the other side of the glass. There were only a couple of infants since the majority of new mothers kept their babies in the room with them. Ryleigh would be one of those, judging by the tender yearning so plain on her face.

"So, are you settling in okay?" It was a lame question, but he didn't know what else to say. The favor she'd asked was like the elephant in the room, and he wanted out of there in the worst way. But he couldn't leave her looking like that. "Ryleigh?"

"You were kind of rude to Dr. Gallagher." She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Did you think I was hitting on your partner?"

"He's not my partner yet, and that wasn't rude. You know better than anyone that I have a limited capacity for people skills and it's reserved for the kids in peds."

"I thought about asking him to father my baby." There was teasing in her brown eyes when she turned and looked up at him. "But I decided that was a conversation better suited to a second meeting."

"Good idea." Not.

"Actually Spencer Stone crossed my mind," she said thoughtfully.

"My best friend?" A really bad idea just got worse.

"He's charming. Nice looking. A doctor, so he's smart." She was looking at the babies again. "Definitely on the list."

Nick hadn't believed she was serious about that. Now he wondered. "He's also shallow. Self-centered. And arrogant."

"I can live with that."

"Even though he breaks hearts on a regular basis?"

"He's a cardiologist," she protested.

"So?"

"I'm not looking for deep feelings. It's just sex with no strings attached. If Spencer is as shallow as you say, he's perfect. Walking away won't be a problem. And don't be using the double standard on me. Guys do it all the time."

Nick turned his back on the nursery window. If she were a guy, he wouldn't be tied in knots right now. Thoughts of her—specifically, thoughts of her naked—had kept him awake last night. Maintaining their friendship after the divorce had been an extraordinarily pleasant surprise. He liked talking to her, keeping in touch without having to see her and not be able to touch. It was comfortable and he didn't want to lose that. So he'd forced himself to think about her platonically.

Then she had to go and ask him to be the father of her baby and he couldn't stop thinking about every last inch of her body, from the sexy column of her neck to the rogue freckle on the back of her knee. Did he want to sleep with her? Hell, yes. But a baby?

He'd screwed up their marriage, and the best thing he'd been able to say was that no kids were involved. It was his fault they hadn't worked. From the outside he looked like a workaholic, but the truth was he had never been "all in" with his feelings. The way his father had fallen apart after his mother walked out was like watching the Rock of Gibraltar crumble into dust. Nick would never let himself lose control like that.

But that line in the sand meant he couldn't meet Ryleigh's needs and their marriage had been a casualty. As he recognized the longing in her eyes while looking at the babies, the guilt and

responsibility of marrying when he knew he'd never be able to give her enough, weighed heavily on him. He'd really hurt her.

"I don't expect you to understand, Nick." Her voice wobbled. "I may never have a baby, but I have to stop the hurt inside whenever I see one. The only way to do that is to try. I don't want to make the same mistake I did with our marriage."

"You didn't do anything," he said.

"You're wrong. I didn't try as hard as I could have." She looked up at him, tears swimming in her eyes. "Don't be alarmed, but I think I'm going to cry. So I'll just be going now."

Something cracked and crumbled inside him as he reluctantly reached out and pulled her into his arms. No matter how hard he tried, he hadn't been able to dismiss what she'd said about a man's need for sex rivaling a woman's yearning for a baby. It convinced him as nothing else could have that she was determined to move this plan forward, with or without him.

He hadn't been able to give her what she needed when they were married. But now he could give her what she wanted and maybe cancel out at least one of the black marks on his soul.

"So you're sure about this baby thing," he said.

"Absolutely." Conviction rang in her voice in spite of the tears.

Good for her. Nick was only sure about one thing. He couldn't stand by and watch. He had no idea what form hell would take, but for sure he was going there because he couldn't stand the thought of Ryleigh with another man. The very idea made him angrier than it should have and more pissed off than he'd ever been in his life.

"Okay," he said. "Count me in."

Chapter Two

Ryleigh walked through the parking lot of Peretti's Italian Restaurant with Nick's hand at the small of her back. It wasn't the touch alone that had memories crashing in on her, although the way his fingers had her nerves tingling was annoying. But the déjà vu-ish feeling was more about this being their favorite restaurant. Their *place*. In another life.

He'd brought her here on their first date and swore she'd love it as much as he did. She'd barely eaten anything. Too nervous. Too love struck. Too anxious to sleep with him, be with him, which had happened maybe thirty minutes after they'd left that night. They couldn't keep their hands off each other or be in each other's arms fast enough.

A few months later Nick had asked her to marry him in the corner booth at the back of this restaurant.

"Dr. Nick. Mrs. Nick." Vito Peretti's slightly accented voice just kept the nostalgia hits coming. A handsome Italian man in his fifties, he smiled as they stepped inside the door.

"Hi, Vito."

He'd taken a shine to a young couple in love. "It has been a long time since I see you together. Dr. Nick alone is wrong. I am so happy that two of my favorite people are back together."

"No. We're not together. I mean, we're together right now. This moment." Ryleigh slid her hands into the pockets of her black slacks. "We just came in to eat. Things to discuss."

"Excellent. First you talk." Vito nodded at Nick. "Clear the air. Fix the problem."

"Just dinner," Nick answered.

"Whatever you say." The restaurant owner winked. "Food first. Then romance."

Not this time, Ryleigh thought. She was over Nick Damian. That's what made her plan workable. Through the dimly lighted restaurant they were led to the back and she knew what was coming.

"Your table," Vito said.

Every memory cell inside her vibrated in protest, but protesting for real would just raise more questions. When Vito pulled the white-cloth-covered table out for them to slide into the rounded booth, she did so without uttering a word. And, equally silent, Nick sat next to her. But the muscle in his jaw moved.

"I will bring your favorite wine," he said.

Cabernet, she remembered. Some French name that never stuck in her head. Before she could tell him not to bother because she needed her wits intact, the man disappeared.

Nick rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. His eyes seemed to turn down at the corners more than usual, a clear indication that he was tired. He'd changed out of the scrubs she'd seen him wearing earlier that day outside the newborn nursery, when he agreed to her plan.

Now he had on worn jeans, a long-sleeved white cotton shirt and battered brown leather jacket. It was October and the brutal summer heat was gone, making the days pleasant but the nights chilly. One of the things she'd missed most was his warmth in bed. Then again, half the time he hadn't been there. Why had it been so damn hard to get over what she hardly ever had?

"Sorry about Vito," he said.

"No. I'm sorry. If my place wasn't such a disaster from moving across the country, I'd have invited you over."

"Still, I didn't think it through. I guess it was a muscle-memory thing. With you in the car, it sort of just steered its way over here."

Part of her hoped that meant he hadn't brought another woman here. The other part recognized that feeling was stupid and foolish.

"No big deal. I'm just so grateful you agreed to help me out. We have things to discuss and the least I can do is buy you dinner."

"I'll arm wrestle you when the check comes." One dark eyebrow lifted. "Although you might want to rethink that offer. A budget is your friend when having a baby."

"You are having a baby?" Vito stopped at their table and heard the last couple words. "There is no fooling me. I can spot lovers, no?" Then he frowned. "But a pregnant lady should not consume alcohol. Perhaps instead of a bottle just a glass for Dr. Nick. And sparkling cider for Mrs. Nick?"

She wasn't Mrs. Nick anymore. And after all this, Ryleigh was prepared to tackle Vito if he tried to leave without pouring her at least one glass out of that bottle of cabernet.

"I'm not pregnant," she said.

"No worry." Vito shrugged. "So you are here to set a mood as you try."

She started to say no and realized that was only half true. They weren't here to get their mood on as much as talk about getting pregnant. But she had a feeling if she talked about talking, Vito would remind her that verbal communication was not the way to get the job done.

"We'd appreciate it if you'd open the bottle," Nick said.

"With pleasure. And your Caesar salad will be served shortly."

"But—"

The man held up his hand, then poured a glass of wine for each of them. "I remember your favorites. A salad to share. Bread sticks with marinara and alfredo sauces for dipping. Then Vito's world famous lasagna, also to share. And tiramisu for dessert." He winked. "You share everything."

More memories crashed over her. He was right about all of it.

"You have to give him credit. Nothing wrong with his powers of recall." Nick grinned and held up his wine. "To Vito."

She clinked her glass to his. "Gotta love him."

"So, you're not settled yet?" He rested his forearm on the table.

"I'm renting a two-bedroom hospital-subsidized apartment until I can find something more permanent. I have a lot of stuff in storage."

"Anything I can do to help?"

Only with the baby. She hoped he hadn't changed his mind about that. But there was something else she remembered about Nick. Once he'd given his word, he wouldn't go back on it. "That's why we're here."

"The baby."

"Yeah," she agreed. "Or, more specifically, the rules of engagement."

"Okay. Go."

She thought for a moment. "First of all, I need to say that I don't want to lose your friendship. So, if that's going to be a problem, speak now—"

"Agreed." But his blue eyes turned a little dark and broody.

"We need to keep it simple and uncomplicated. Although Vito will be disappointed about no romance. But that's the best way to mess up a wonderful friendship."

"That works for me."

"No matter what," she added emphatically.

"Do you want me to pinkie swear?" he asked, holding up his little finger.

"If that's a guarantee—yes," she said, crooking hers and curving it around his outstretched finger.

"Okay. What else?"

She dropped her hand into her lap as she thought. "That's the only rule that comes to mind."

He smiled. "Did that feel too easy to you?"

"Give me a minute. I'll think of something to make problems. Oh, right, about why we're here." Between the wine and his teasing, she began to relax. "I need to do some research on the internet about how to conceive a baby."

Nick's eyes sparkled with amusement over the top of the glass as he sipped his wine. "Unless anatomy or the mechanics of procreation have changed since I went to med school, conception is probably achieved in the usual way."

"Funny guy."

Not.

Their shoulders brushed and tingles of awareness danced through her. Her skin was hot, sensitive and she was pretty sure that was about anticipation. Getting naked with Nick was never far from her mind since she'd decided he should father her baby. And it was worse after walking into Peretti's. Like he'd said, muscle memory.

"You used to appreciate my sense of humor," he reminded her.

"I still do." It was one of her favorite things about him. "Let me be more specific. I want to find out the optimum time of the month. To conceive. And anything else that might increase the odds of achieving the desired objective."

"If you'd like, I can talk to Rebecca Hamilton."

Aside from the fact that their agreement wasn't for public consumption, she didn't really want him talking to another woman about her and the baby. "Is that your girlfriend?"

"She's a girl. And she's a friend who's married. Also a doctor. Ob-gyn. Any information you need, I'm sure she'll have."

"Oh." Ryleigh refused to believe the ugly feeling churning through her had anything to do with jealousy. "Maybe. But are you prepared to answer her questions about why you're asking?"

"Not really."

Was his voice just a tiny bit hoarse? His eyes narrowed and more intense than moments ago? The expression reminded her of how he looked when he wanted her. A woman who'd craved even the barest amount of attention from the man she was completely in love with wasn't likely to forget the look on his face when he wanted her.

Ryleigh cleared her throat. "Okay, so how about this. I'll do my research and we'll regroup."

"Just let me know when and where," he said.

"Give me a couple days. My place next time. It's near the hospital so that will be convenient for us both."

"I'll be there."

There might have been eagerness in his tone or it could just be wishful thinking on her part. It had happened before. Once upon a time she'd mistaken his wanting her as a sign that he reciprocated her feelings because she'd so desperately hoped he would. Now she knew better, but knowing better didn't stop the hitch in her breathing, the pumped-up pulse. If just thinking about sex made her feel like this, what would actual sex do?

Make a baby, she hoped.

And that would be the end of it. No strings attached. Love had made everything difficult, but she'd learned her lesson and wasn't going there again. That ship had sailed. But attraction was a different story. She was still attracted to Nick and that was a good thing.

It would help when the time came to get her pregnant.

Several days later, at the appointed time, Nick knocked on Ryleigh's door. Her place was on the second floor located in an apartment complex behind Mercy Medical Center. He'd just finished up evening rounds and his two patients were doing well. Barring complications, he expected to discharge them the next morning.

The anticipation of seeing his ex-wife tonight had hummed through him all day. He hadn't missed her these last two years, not exactly. Every time the idea of it crept in, he shut the feeling down. But now that she was back, well it was safe to say he was in a pretty good mood. More than one person had commented on that today and it was probably not a coincidence that all of them were women.

The door opened, and there was the one woman who'd occupied more of his thoughts than he was comfortable with. "Ryleigh."

"Hi, Nick. Come in." She stepped back and opened the door wider. After he walked in, she shut it behind him. "This place is still a mess. Sorry."

"Don't be. Not on my account."

There were moving boxes stacked around the perimeter of the room and several on the dinette just off the kitchen. He stood in the living room with its charmless beige couch and matching chair. There was a faux-wood coffee table and matching end tables with ugly orange ceramic lamp, times two. "Don't tell me. The place came furnished."

"Pretty hideous, huh?"

"I didn't say that."

"Not in so many words."

But looking at Ryleigh cancelled out the unattractive stuff. In worn jeans that hugged her curves and a pale yellow sweater she was like a slice of sunshine. Her shiny hair was pulled back in a ponytail and gold hoops dangled from her ears. As good as his mood had been, it got better still, just staring at her.

She sighed. "I had delusions of actually cooking, but work and research got in the way. How do you feel about Chinese takeout?"

"I'm easy."

"Good. The food cartons, plates and eating utensils are in the kitchen. Help yourself. I'll get drinks. We'll eat in here."

He walked in the kitchen and saw all his favorite Chinese food on display. Spring rolls. Sweet and sour chicken. Chow mein. A fork and one set of chopsticks. He'd tried to teach her how to use them and smiled at the memory of flying food and her swearing. But that was then and this was now. Ryleigh and Nick, Part Two. Simple, uncomplicated sex. Guys would kill to be in his shoes.

He set his plate down on one of the paper towels on the coffee table. Place mats. How very Ryleigh of her. She brought him a club soda with lime.

"I figured you were on call."

"Yeah." He always was and it left no time for them when they were married.

"I'm not."

She set a glass of white wine beside his drink and settled next to him on the couch. They ate in silence and it wasn't awkward. It was nice. Felt like old times.

"How was your day?" she asked.

"Good. You?"

"I'm settling in. Lots of meetings. Strategizing about new and creative ways to raise money for Children's Medical Charities. It's a challenge in this economy."

"If anyone can talk the people into parting with their money, it's you." Nick should know. She'd somehow convinced him to go along with this baby thing.

When they finished eating she cleared the plates, refilled their drinks, then went down the hall and brought back a bunch of file folders from the second bedroom she used as a home office.

She put the tall stack of paperwork on the coffee table then sat beside him again. "My research."

"No wonder you fed me first. To keep up my strength."

"Having a baby isn't as easy as you might think." Her cocoa-colored eyes danced with laughter.

"And here I thought it was all about biology."

"That. And timing. It's critical." She opened a file. "But there are things that can boost the odds of conceiving."

"Such as?"

"The goal is to fertilize the egg."

“Yeah. I think that was covered in Birds and Bees 101.” He moved closer, glancing at her computer printout, but mostly to feel the warmth of her. Draw in the sweet floral fragrance of her skin. That was something he’d missed and it hadn’t responded to the shut-down-feelings therapy.

“Everyone can use a refresher course. Even you, Doctor.” She looked at her notes. “Ovulation is the key. Besides guessing about when it occurs, there are ovulation predictor kits available at the pharmacy and basal-body-temperature-charts to know when it’s happening.”

“Really?”

All this fell into her territory and he didn’t need to know. But he liked watching her when she talked, the intensity and enthusiasm. The combination made her so damn beautiful he could hardly breathe. Still, this wasn’t about him. The amount of time and effort she’d put into this was a clear indication of how deep her desire to have a baby.

“When you pee on the stick from a kit, it will turn purple the day before ovulation, indicating a surge in...” She stopped and read from the paper. “Luteinizing hormone, which is what causes the ovary to release an egg. The key is to time sex within a day of the LH surge.”

Nick was focused on her mouth and pretty much didn’t hear much of anything until she said “sex.” He didn’t need a predictor kit or a thermometer to know he had a surge of his own *and* a spike in body temp.

He said the only thing he could think of, what with the blood flowing south of his belt. “Science is pretty amazing.”

“And fascinating.”

“Anything else I need to know?” Like when and where. Now was okay with him. He took a sip of water and not because he was thirsty.

“There was some information about positions during sex.”

He nearly choked. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Missionary might be more promising, but there aren’t any studies to back it up.”

If Ryleigh was involved, he’d be willing to volunteer for research on the subject. “Okay. I can see where that would be practical.”

“Then I saw something about lying still afterward. Remaining horizontal for fifteen minutes.” She shuffled through the papers, looking embarrassed and pretty damn cute. “Again, there’s no evidence to support the theory that it makes a difference, but it can’t hurt, either.”

So, a woman’s inclination to cuddle afterward might be based in biology and science, not emotion, he thought. “Got it.”

“I found a website with frequently asked questions.”

“Okay, now I’m starting to get performance anxiety.”

She slid to her corner of the couch and tucked her legs up beside her. A flush crept into her cheeks, and she didn’t quite meet his eyes.

She crossed her arms at her waist. “There was some discussion about a woman achieving climax—to increase the chances of conceiving.”

No pressure.

“And?” When she hesitated, he said, “Don’t tell me. There are no studies.”

She laughed. “No. But there’s a belief that the contractions move the guys along toward the target.”

“It makes sense.”

But he could truthfully say that not once when he’d made love to her had his goal been to move the guys. He’d only ever wanted to hold her in his arms, make her happy. And he was pretty sure he’d succeeded in bed. In every other way, he’d failed her, which was why making things up to her now was so important.

She lifted her gaze for a moment. “And last but not least there’s the debate about a.m. or p.m.”

“Morning or night—what?”

“Sex.” She sat cross-legged and leaned forward. “Studies have been done on this one and some indicate that there are more swimmers in the morning. But only a million, give or take. Fairly insignificant.”

“Hey, that’s my guys you’re talking about.”

“I didn’t mean to insinuate.” She smiled, and the way her eyes lit up tied him in knots. “The thing is that when you’re talking eighty-eight million as opposed to eighty-seven million, it sounds like a lot but really isn’t.”

“I actually knew that only one is required.” Was it just him, or was it hot in here?

“Right.”

His gaze slid past hers to the bare walls, stack of boxes and unattractive, serviceable furniture. She was a nester and looked out of place in this cracker box with ugly furniture. It was just wrong. Fixing people was what he did, and the words popped out of his mouth before he’d thought them through.

“Move in with me.”

She blinked and sat up straighter. “What?”

“To achieve your objective, timing is everything. If that predictor stick turns purple, your body temp goes up and nature is good to go, what happens if you’re here and I’m there?” He shrugged. “It’s the classic setup for missed opportunities.”

“There’s some logic to that, but I don’t know, Nick.” She caught her lip between her teeth, the very first time she’d looked indecisive. “Invading your space?”

Her lack of enthusiasm made him want to convince her even more. “It was your space, too.” He’d gotten the house in the divorce. “There’s plenty of room, as you know. And we don’t want to drag out the process, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Like science, nature and biology it’s practical.”

He phrased it the same way she had. Distantly. As if they were talking about another couple being intimate.

Nick remembered all the messy emotions that had nearly brought him down right after she’d left. A guy puts up armor and when a girl gets through it leaves a mark. But this was different. The rules had been discussed and all parties involved agreed. Distanced. Simple. Goal-oriented. She’d get what she wanted. His guilt would be erased. Win/win. Both of them could move on. No feelings, no mess.

“Don’t you want to maximize the chances of conception?” he asked.

“Yes.” She met his gaze and her own was dark with determination. “More than anything in the world I want to have a baby.”

“Well, then?”

“I’ve done the menstrual math. The old-fashioned way,” she added. “By my calculations ovulation is about a week away. Next Monday.”

“So I’ll help you move in Saturday. You don’t want heavy lifting to shock your eggs or anything. Relax the rest of the weekend.”

“You’re sure about this?” she asked skeptically.

“Yeah.” The gate on his feelings opened for a split second and excitement leaked out.

“Okay, then. I’ll move in.”

Nick nodded and again his gaze was drawn to the boxes around the room. She’d said it was a mess and only now did he realize that was a metaphor for his life. He hadn’t really expected her to take him up on his offer to move in, but there was no denying he was far too pleased that she had.

In about a week they were going to do what a man and woman did to make a baby. He was pretty pleased about that, too.

Chapter Three

Ryleigh stopped her compact car behind Nick's silver SUV at the gated entrance to the neighborhood. She watched him lean out the driver's window and speak to the guard, then cock his thumb toward her, obviously explaining that she would be living with him. That there was no need to call out the SWAT team on her account.

When the SUV pulled forward, she followed, then stopped when the guard held up his hand.

She lowered her window. "Hi."

"Miss Evans." This man was different from the one who'd worked the gate when she lived here. He was young, twenty something and wearing a light blue uniform shirt with navy-colored, official-looking emblems. "Doctor Damian explained that you'll be staying with him."

"That's right." But only for well-timed sex.

He handed her a visitor's pass. "Just put this on your dashboard and you're good to go—or stay."

"Thanks."

"Have a nice evening."

"You, too," she said, displaying the cardboard square where he'd directed.

This was the first time she'd been back since they'd broken up, and driving through the community was surreal. Nothing had changed, but everything felt different. The houses were all large, expensive and well-maintained. But it wasn't familiar. She felt distant. And sad. She'd really loved the house and this area.

She pulled into the circular drive, parking behind Nick's car. He was standing beside it. Glancing at the stately, two-story house brought on that surreal feeling again, but really she'd been wearing that hat ever since she'd presented her how-to-conceive-in-a-nanosecond research.

As far as bizarre moments went, that topped the list. But she'd felt it important to mention everything that could possibly expedite the process. She wanted to get pregnant right away for lots of reasons, not the least of which was not to see Nick after mission accomplished. It didn't seem prudent to tempt fate too far what with her attraction to him still going on. The only way she'd managed to get through her sex notes was by keeping the conversation clinical and detached, as if she were talking about someone else.

But it wasn't someone else temporarily moving into Nick's house. It was her, the same woman who'd moved into this place seeing everything by the light of the stars in her eyes and the delusion that they were going to be blissfully happy there for the rest of their lives. She wasn't sure which philosopher said the only thing we could count on was change, but the time came when she'd wanted to choke him. She hated change. It was almost always bad.

Bliss and happiness were elusive and highly overrated. Living in the real world wasn't as much fun, but the highs and lows were smoothed out into straight and steady. She could live with straight and steady.

Blowing out a cleansing breath, she opened her car door and stepped onto the concrete drive separating the house from the landscaping. The dry riverbed running through the length of the yard was still dry and lined with smooth rocks. It was bordered by gold and purple flowering lantana bushes. Everything looked just as it had when she'd left. Nothing had changed but her.

"Why don't I take your things inside?" Nick said.

His deep voice from behind startled her out of the bittersweet reverie. She turned and forced a big smile. "Sounds like a plan."

After she unlocked her trunk and started to pull out her suitcase, he put a hand on hers.

"I'll get it. I'm pretty sure it hasn't gotten any lighter since I put it in there."

"Thanks."

His palm was big and strong, his fingers warm. The touch had heat pooling in her belly and flushing her cheeks. Twilight had dropped shadows over the craggy mountains not so far away, and she was pretty sure Nick couldn't see how the brush of his hand affected her.

That was something else that hadn't changed. But attraction without emotion was like a bow without an arrow—no power to wound.

It took several trips to carry suitcases, garment bags and toiletries into the house. He'd suggested she stay here while looking for a permanent place of her own and she'd brought a lot of clothes with her. The apartment was utilitarian and good for storage, but she'd be more comfortable in a house.

Looking around the two-story entry, she wasn't so sure. Memories attacked from every direction. Nick carrying her over the threshold when they bought the place. The huge kitchen with granite countertops was especially bittersweet. He'd made love to her beside the stainless-steel refrigerator because his eyes went smoky, her insides turned liquid and they simply couldn't hold back. In fact, the day they moved in he'd declared his intention to make love to her in every room of the house. They'd nearly met that challenge.

She scanned the family room with its big flat-screen TV and the dark green corner group in front of it. In spite of all her efforts to stop it, a big sigh leaked out.

Nick stopped beside her. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." Afraid he would see the lie, she didn't look at him. "Why?"

"You're awfully quiet."

"Just checking out the old stomping grounds."

He rested his hands on lean hips. His jeans were worn nearly white in the most interesting places. The long sleeves of his navy-blue shirt were rolled up, revealing wide wrists and a dusting of dark hair on his forearms. He always dressed casually, and right now was no exception. It also wasn't an indication of whether or not he was working. He'd told her Carlton Gallagher was on call today, and she wondered if she should feel honored. Maybe tomorrow.

"And?"

"What?" She was a little disturbed by how easily one look at him could annihilate her concentration.

"How does it look? Your old stomping grounds."

"The same," she answered truthfully. "I was just remembering how festive everything was at Christmas."

The corners of his mouth turned up. "You mean with the tree in here instead of the living room?"

"Yeah."

"I stand by what I said then."

"As do I." She could feel the warmth from his body and smell the slightly spicy scent of his skin. Quivers started inside her and rippled everywhere. Bumping up against the bittersweet recollections. "The decorated tree would have been fabulous in the front window as people drove by and looked at the outside decorations."

"But we wouldn't have enjoyed it." He held out his hand and indicated the large room. "Here, we could see it along with a fire in the fireplace, watching TV, or eating dinner."

His insistence was ironic since he'd hardly ever been there for dinner, nights in front of the fire, or watching TV together. But that was water under the bridge.

"You won. We did it your way." She'd given in because making him happy was her goal. Now it was her turn to get what she wanted.

"Other than that, how does it look?" he asked.

"The same. And I'm a little surprised."

"Redecorating isn't my thing." The teasing tone was missing from his voice.

Was he feeling nostalgic, too? Not the Nick she remembered.

"That's not what I meant." She looked up at him. "I'm surprised you didn't sell the house after the divorce."

"I had my reasons."

The dark look in his eyes made her wonder. "Such as?"

"I didn't get around to it, then the housing market tanked. Moving is time-consuming and it really doesn't much matter where I get my mail."

All practical reasons, she thought. If the situation had been reversed, she'd have sold it at a loss simply because it was too painful to share the space with the ghosts of what would never be.

"And I'm hardly ever here," he added.

That wasn't new information. It was time to move forward. Literally.

"So," she said brightly. "Where do you want me?"

A sexy smile turned up the corners of his mouth. "Do I get a vote?"

She didn't have to ask where his thoughts had gone. That made two of them, but she wasn't here for *that* sex. This wasn't personal.

"I meant which bedroom."

"Take your pick," he said. "Although there's not really much of a choice."

She walked upstairs to check it out for herself. The master bedroom was off the landing at the top. She peeked inside at the four-poster bed, matching oak dresser and armoire. A pair of running shoes beside the walk-in closet and a towel carelessly tossed on a corner chair indicated he still slept in here.

Ryleigh moved past the doorway and peeked into the room beside it. "This would make a great nursery."

"That's what you said the first time you saw the house." His voice was husky.

That wasn't something she would have expected him to remember, and the sweetness of it made her chest tight. "It's a good-size room, close to the master. If the baby cried, one of us would have heard."

"So you said."

But it was still empty, a reflection of what her marriage had become. Not at all like her romanticized vision before she'd realized that being in love by herself wasn't working for her.

She quickly checked out the other three bedrooms and realized he was right about not having choices. The room farthest away from Nick's was the only one furnished. She'd wanted a comfortable guest room, just in case they needed it and had started decorating there. In her plan, the others could wait for the babies they were going to have. But plans changed and the family never happened.

"I'll take this one," she finally said.

"I figured."

He went back downstairs for her things and she was glad to be alone. How ironic was that? She'd never felt like that when this was her home. So now she was over the first hurdle, the one she'd dreaded most. Facing down the past. Part of her had wanted to turn down Nick's offer to stay here, but that would have given it importance, adding complication and breaking their cardinal rule.

Now she'd walked down memory lane and somehow felt more whole. Stronger. Unlike the immature girl who'd lived here before, she was a woman going after what she wanted. Until zero hour, she'd be sleeping as far from Nick as she could get. With luck it was far enough to keep any more memories from following.

On the up side—she and Nick never had sex in the guest room.

The night after moving into Nick's place, Ryleigh juggled a pizza box in her hands, then rang the doorbell of her friend's condo. Almost immediately it was opened and Avery O'Neill stood there in jeans and a royal-blue sweater. She had blue eyes, a blond pixie haircut that was incredibly flattering and she barely weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet. At just over five feet, she was shorter than

Ryleigh. Almost no one was shorter than her. This woman was too cute for words, but Ryleigh didn't hold that against her. They were best friends.

"Hey, you."

"Hey you back."

"Get in here." Avery pulled the door open wider and took the pizza. She walked the length of the extensive tiled entryway and into the kitchen. The white cupboards topped with black granite were a big, bold look for her pretty petite friend. After setting down the box, she opened her arms. "Now for a proper welcome-home hug."

Ryleigh squeezed her hard, then held her at arm's length and studied the new look. "Love the hair."

"Thanks."

"It makes you look like a fairy, like you belong in a Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings book."

"Spencer Stone calls me Tinker Bell."

The doctor was the finest cardiologist at Mercy Medical Center and Nick's best friend. Ryleigh still remembered the look on his face when he thought she planned to approach the guy to father her baby. It could have been jealousy. A girl could hope anyway. But probably it was just shock.

Her friend was the hospital controller and handled the day-to-day hospital money issues. They'd met when Ryleigh was executive assistant to the administrator. "Is Doctor Drop-Dead-Gorgeous still giving you a hard time about all the cardio equipment he wants to buy for Mercy Medical Center?"

"Always," her friend said.

"If he was a pediatric cardiologist I might be able to help you out. But he's a big-people doctor."

"Yes, he is. And likes to brag that he fixes broken hearts."

"He does."

"And he's good at it," Avery admitted grudgingly. "If he weren't it would be a lot easier to dislike him."

"But you manage?"

Her friend shrugged. "He hits on women like crash dummies hit windshields."

"And that's a problem?"

"Not for me. I can handle him."

Ryleigh didn't doubt that. She might look small, blonde, fragile and defenseless, but Avery was not an airhead, didn't take any crap and could handle pretty much anything.

She pulled two paper plates out of the pantry and scooped a piece of pepperoni pizza onto each one. Then she carried the food into the adjacent family room and set it on the glass-topped table sitting between the green and coral floral sofa and the fireplace with wall-mounted flat-screen TV above.

"Well, I like your new look. It's adorable and becoming. Fresh and new since I last saw you."

"Barely four months ago when I visited you in Baltimore."

"I know that tone." Ryleigh followed her and sat on the couch. "You're annoyed."

"Yes, I am." After filling two glasses with red wine, Avery sat beside her.

"Why?"

"Let me count the ways." Avery held up her index finger. "First, you moved away."

Ryleigh finished chewing a bite of pizza, but it tasted like cardboard. She knew where this conversation was headed. "You know why I had to leave."

"I know you believed it would save your marriage, but I think we can all see how well that turned out."

"Sounds stupid when you say it like that, but distance seemed like a good idea at the time." She sipped her wine, but it didn't dull the memory of how much it had hurt to leave Nick. "I know now that I was hoping he would beg me not to go. Even after I'd started the job, I had a fantasy that he'd come after me, bring me back. It was immature and naive."

"Nope. I completely get it." There was sympathy in her friend's blue eyes. "I just didn't like it."

“That’s why I love you.”

“Really?” The annoyed tone was back. “If that were true, you’d have said something about moving back to Las Vegas. No?”

“No. When you visited, I’d just applied for the job and you know how that goes. Contact followed by weeks of waiting. An interview and more waiting. Another interview, then the field is narrowed to two and you’re on pins and needles while they try to decide, even though we all know they’re probably going to flip a coin. Heads it’s John Doe, tails it’s Ryleigh Evans.”

“I know how it works, but best friends tell each other everything.”

Ryleigh wanted to remind her that there was a big chunk of her life that Avery wouldn’t talk about, but decided not to go there. There must be a damn good reason why she didn’t talk about it, and the best friend bond respected that.

“And sometimes,” Ryleigh said, “a friend tries to spare her best friend pain. I didn’t want to get your hopes up and then have it all fall apart.”

“Okay. Totally understandable. Because my hopes would have gone stratosphere high. And I remember how hard it was to let you go. I still haven’t forgiven you for leaving.”

“You just said you understood.”

“I did and I do. But that’s different from letting you off the hook for abandoning me.”

“Well, I’m back now.”

“Yes, you are and about darn time. But why is that?” Annoyance was gone, replaced by curiosity.

“Because I’m the regional coordinator for Children’s Medical Charities.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s a really good job.”

“Totally,” Avery agreed.

“And very important.”

“You’ll get no argument from me.”

“Doesn’t feel that way,” Ryleigh pointed out. “I’m raising money for programs and equipment to help kids.”

“I know what the charity does. You’ll do a fantastic job because you’re motivated. No one loves kids more than you.” Avery finished her pizza, then tapped her lip thoughtfully. “As I recall, you were determined to have a baby before the big 3-0. How’s that going?”

This is where the best-friend bond got awkward. Confessing everything would result in Avery’s honest opinion. And most of the time Ryleigh valued that. Now? Well, no one wanted to be told they were an idiot. Or worse, crazy.

Ryleigh rolled up her empty paper plate. “Oh, you know.”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t have asked. What’s going on? And don’t tell me nothing. This is me and I know better.”

“Power down, O’Neill. You’re right.” She sighed. “I actively looked for a job in Las Vegas after coming to the realization that Nick is the best man I know and I want him to father my baby.”

Avery blinked and stared, speechless for several moments. “The desert heat has cooked your brain cells.”

“It’s October and not hot. I think you just called me crazy.”

“No. I’d never say that. But, Ryleigh—” She shook her head. “What are you thinking?”

“That my biological clock is ticking. I don’t want to take my chances at a sperm bank, and men who are good father material don’t grow on trees. The ones I was meeting just didn’t measure up and I’m not getting any younger.”

“But Nick is your ex.”

“So? That doesn’t mean he isn’t good looking. Or smart. He’s a doctor and treats kids with breathing problems. Doesn’t get any better than that.”

"He is a tough act to follow, I'll grant you that. But your ex?" Avery said again.

"Not being able to love me isn't a deal-breaking biological flaw."

Avery put her empty paper plate on the coffee table and grabbed her wineglass. "Does Nick know any of this?"

"All of it."

"And after he requested a psych evaluation?"

"Stop calling me crazy." But Ryleigh understood this was coming from a place of sincerity and caring.

"Did I say the 'c' word? It did not come out of my mouth. And don't keep me in suspense. What was his reaction?"

In for a penny, in for a pound. "He asked me to move in with him. To make the logistics more—logistical. During my fertile time." When her friend was quiet, she begged, "Say something, Avery."

"How did you talk him into it? Not the moving-in thing, the fathering thing."

"I think he feels guilty. For his part of what went wrong in our marriage. But there were also tears involved. I just couldn't help it when I saw the babies in the nursery. And he happened to be there."

Ryleigh hadn't faked the emotion and couldn't be sorry it helped convince him. But she'd never forget how good his arms had felt around her. The comfort he'd offered without hesitation. She had no illusion that it came from anywhere besides friendship, but that didn't diminish her appreciation.

Avery nodded thoughtfully, processing everything. There was a gleam in her blue eyes when she asked, "You know that having a baby with Nick will require you to have sex with him?"

"Yes. That's part of the logistics. So when I'm—you know—he'll be...you know."

"Handy?"

"Yeah."

The expression in her friend's eyes turned the tiniest bit wicked. "So you haven't done it yet?"

"No. Not quite the right time in my cycle."

"And I'm going to be Auntie Avery?"

"With a little luck."

"And sex." Her expression turned serious. "This is me and I'm there for you. Whatever you need. Count on it."

"I have no doubt about that." Ryleigh knew there was more. "But?"

"I saw what you went through when you and Nick fell apart. I held you when you cried. What kind of friend would I be if I didn't help you look at this whole thing from every angle?"

"Just spit it out," Ryleigh said.

"Okay. I have to ask. Do you really think you can go through with this and come out unscathed?"

"By 'this,' I'm assuming you mean sex without complications." When her friend nodded she said, "Men do it all the time."

"If God wanted women to be like men, He'd have given us the same equipment. If you have sex with Nick, I'm pretty sure there will be feelings involved. On your part, anyway. I just don't want you to get hurt again."

"I won't."

"Famous last words."

"Don't you see, Avery? From the time I was a little girl, I've wanted to be a mother. I want it more than I can put into words and it's this close." She held up her thumb and index fingers, a fraction of an inch apart. "Please don't rain on my parade."

"That's the last thing I'd do." Avery finished the wine in her glass and set it on the table. She slid closer and leaned in for a hug before saying, "I love the idea of you having a baby, getting what you want. And I'm serious about having aunt status. I just want to make sure you know what you're doing with Nick."

“I appreciate that and if it were you, I’d feel the same way.” Her friend’s eyes darkened for a moment, and she quickly added, “Don’t worry. I’ve thought this through.” Ryleigh met the other woman’s gaze. “I’ve been there, done that. Now I’m over him. Nick can’t hurt me, which makes him the perfect guy.”

And by her calculations, the perfect time in her cycle was tomorrow.

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