



Silhouette ROMANCE® 1449

May

HER SISTER'S CHILD

Lilian Darcy

Celebrate
20
YEARS



Lilian Darcy
Her Sister's Child

«HarperCollins»

Darcy L.

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THE MOST PRECIOUS GIFT...Still reeling from learning her late sister had borne a child, lawyer Meg Jonas prepared to confront her niece's father with a custody suit. But Adam Callahan had a bombshell, too—news even more shocking than Meg's own inexplicable attraction to the dashing doctor she'd meant to despise....Adam had no intention of losing his beloved daughter to anyone—or anything. Desperate to save little Amy, he turned to the one woman who could help. Adam realized it might be dangerous to let Meg into his and Amy's lives—yet it was far more dangerous not to....

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Meg wanted to lean into Adam's warm body and take its heat like nourishment.

She wanted to run her hand down his back and learn the shape of his muscles and sinews and bones. She wanted to talk to him like a lover, tell him everything would be all right, Amy would be all right because she, Meg, was here with him and they'd each give the other the strength needed to get through anything that lay ahead, no matter how hard.

But that's impossible, she thought. We're not lovers, and we never will be. We're Amy's aunt and Amy's father, and the only thing we truly have in common is that we care about her.

And caring for a child could make a man ruthless....

Dear Reader,



“Happy Birthday to us...” Exactly twenty years ago this May, Silhouette Romance was born. Since then, we've grown as a company, and as a series that continues to offer the very best in contemporary category romance fiction. The icing on the cake is this month's amazing lineup:

International bestselling author Diana Palmer reprises her SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE miniseries with Mercenary's Woman. Sorely missed, Rita Rainville returns to Romance with the delightful story of a Too Hard To Handle rancher who turns out to be anything but...Elizabeth August delivers the dramatic finale to ROYALLY WED. In A Royal Mission, rescuing kidnapped missing princess Victoria Rockford was easy for Lance Grayson. But falling in love wasn't part of the plan.

Marie Ferrarella charms us with a Tall, Strong & Cool Under Fire hero whose world turns topsy-turvy when an adorable moppet and her enticing mom venture into his fire station...Julianna Morris's BRIDAL FEVER! rages on when Hannah Gets a Husband—her childhood friend who is a new dad. And in Her Sister's Child, a woman allies with her enemy. Don't miss this pulse-pounding romance by Lilian Darcy!

In June, we're featuring Dixie Browning and Phyllis Halldorson, and in coming months look for new miniseries from many of your favorite authors. It's an exciting year for Silhouette Books, and we invite you to join the celebration!

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary-Theresa Hussey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mary-Theresa Hussey
Senior Editor

Her Sister's Child
Lilian Darcy



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Books by Lilian Darcy

Silhouette Romance

The Baby Bond #1390

Her Sister's Child #1449

LILIAN DARCY

Since her marriage to an irresistible New Yorker over ten years ago, Lilian Darcy has divided her time between various parts of the United States and her native Australia. Her children hold dual citizenship, and in her writing she tries to embody the shared strength of the two cultures—heroism, warmth and down-to-earth values. Although new to Silhouette, she has written over thirty books for the Harlequin Mills & Boon Medical Romance line and is now looking forward to creating strong, passionate stories for a whole new set of readers.

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Chapter One

“I’m not going to lose my daughter!”

Adam Callahan muttered the words aloud and scowled up at the second-floor windows of the building he was headed for. The late April daylight was still strong, and behind the immaculate black-and-gold lettering on the pristine glass, he was certain he saw the vertical blinds move slightly.

Was he being watched? he wondered.

It wouldn’t surprise him. He distrusted lawyers. Had he always distrusted them? Or was it only since last week, when he’d gotten the letter from Ms. Meg Jonas, Attorney at Law, Suite 201, 5608 West Broad-bank Avenue, Philadelphia? It didn’t matter. He distrusted this lawyer, and the people she represented. There was something cagey about her letter, something she was holding back, although the intentions of her clients were all too clear.

Easing his powerful black motorcycle backward so that the rear wheel nudged the curb, he muttered the words again, through clenched teeth this time. “I am not going to lose Amy!”

Now the statement had the force of a threat and the strength of a vow. There was desperation in it, too, when he thought of the other even darker fear that had been stalking him for the past few weeks, before he’d ever heard of Meg Jonas.

There was more than one way to lose a child, he reminded himself, while his heart seemed to lurch sideways in his chest. With Amy’s life itself on the line, he had to play this whole thing right. He needed these people, far more than he would ever have wanted to need the people who were disputing his right to the custody of his own child.

If he hadn’t needed them, he might have been able to dismiss them as he was convinced they deserved. He could have gotten a lawyer of his own to tell them just what they could do with their cruel and groundless custody claim. But as the situation stood now, and no matter how nasty things got later on, they’d all need to work together for the next few weeks with the common goal of Amy’s well-being.

The only person who was out of the loop on the issue, as far as he was concerned, was this lawyer. He didn’t care if he was over-reacting. She was a shark, breaking people’s lives apart in return for her fat fee.

He was already ten minutes late for his meeting with the woman. It wasn’t his choice. He’d been delayed at work and he’d tried hard to make up the time. He’d woven his way smoothly through the side streets and back alleys of Philadelphia on the bike. He’d calculated the likely peak hour traffic snarls in advance and avoided them as much as possible.

But now he rebelled. Let the lawyer woman wait a little longer! She and her clients were not about to get the idea that they had him on the run. They had no grounds for claiming custody of his daughter. None!

Unhurriedly, he pulled black leather gloves from his hands then began to unstrap his metallic black helmet. If Meg Jonas was watching him from her window, he’d give her a performance she wouldn’t forget...

From her window, with a finger hooked around one slat of the blind to shift it two inches out of the way, Meg saw the leather-clad stranger shaking out his thick, dark hair. Although it was tidily cropped at the sides, it was long enough on top to need those lean fingers threading through it, putting the spring back into the waves.

Meg had heard the dying throb of the bike’s engine a couple of minutes ago. Unnerved by the fact that he was late...unnerved by this whole situation, if she was honest...she’d gone over to the window with the deliberate aim of regaining control by getting an impression of Adam Callahan, assessing him before he had the chance to do the same to her.

He certainly wasn't in any hurry. Wasn't this meeting important to him, for heck's sake? It was to her, and to her parents. Painfully important...

He folded the gloves together and wadded them into the helmet, then started to unzip his leather jacket. He left the jacket on, but let it gape loosely to reveal a plain blue shirt that fitted smoothly over his broad chest. When he started on the black leather pants, twisting to reach the side zip and making the leather stretch across his tightly muscled rear end before revealing dark gray trousers beneath, Meg felt an involuntary shiver course the length of her spine.

Her sister Cherie had wanted this man, she remembered. Had apparently loved him enough to have a child with him. It seemed totally out of character for Cherie, but if Meg had put the dates together right, the two of them must have been involved for over a year before the inevitable split. That would have to be a record. Cherie had never been able to stick to anything for very long. Not a man, not a plan, not an address.

Which was why Meg and her father had lost touch with Cherie all during those crucial months of her pregnancy. It was why they hadn't even known about Cherie's child until Adam Callahan's letter to Dad in California had arrived out of the blue two weeks ago. But Cherie herself was dead...

Meg swallowed around the sudden lump in her throat. Through no fault of her own, she had never really known her sister. They had gone for months or even years at a time with no contact. And for the past six months it had been too late to change that. Cherie was gone. But now, incredibly, they'd found that Cherie had a baby daughter, living with a ratbag low-life of a father, and this gave all of them a second chance.

"A chance for Dad and me to do something for Cherie's daughter that we could never do for Cherie herself..." Meg murmured aloud, and it was almost a prayer. A prayer for it all to work out.

How would Adam Callahan take the idea? Would it come as a relief to him to give his baby over to a pair of loving grandparents? Or did Meg and her father and her new stepmom, Patty, have a battle brewing? Patty, in particular, had set her heart on this so much.

For a moment, with his leathers now bundled and locked in a black box attached near the back of the motorcycle, Adam Callahan didn't look quite so dark and menacing. His helmet was tucked innocently under his arm. His blue shirt and dark pants were conservative and well-fitting. But then he looked up at her window, almost as if he could see into her eyes, and there was such steel-hard anger and determination in his cleanly chiselled face that, for the second time, Meg shivered.

She'd suspected all along that this man must be dangerous. He'd been a danger to Cherie. He'd apparently involved her in a near-fatal motorcycle accident with his reckless driving, and that wasn't all.

What kind of a threat is he going to be to me? she wondered with an intuitive sense of dread.

"Get a grip, Meg!" she scolded herself aloud. "This is a business meeting, not a confrontation. Not yet, anyway. I'm a lawyer, acting for clients. Just because one of those clients happens to be my father... Oh, but maybe I should have listened to my very first instinct and not let Dad talk me into taking it on. I'm too close, too personally involved."

Searching for an emotional anchor, she looked around the office she was so proud of. She'd been in practice for just about seven months, since passing the Pennsylvania bar exam back in early September, but her client load was building steadily and already she'd tackled a couple of cases that were really satisfying. Nothing high-profile, no fat corporate fees or sensational court appearances, just wills and real estate closings and one fairly painless divorce.

But it was the work she had wanted to do, helping ordinary people with ordinary legal issues. She knew her clients were satisfied and several of them had said so. Word was getting around.

"But can I satisfy Dad and Patty? Can I satisfy myself? I wasn't ever planning to handle custody disputes. A case like this is completely different from what I know, and with my personal involvement..."

She heard footsteps on the stairs and knew it was Adam Callahan. Her receptionist in the outer office, Linda, had gone home half an hour ago. Maybe she shouldn't have suggested a meeting so late in the day, but she'd wanted to give it time, and she was committed to the confrontation now.

I'm not going to mess this up with what I feel, Meg vowed silently.

Smoothing the skirt of her teal-blue suit, she went to open the door.

Not what I expected.

That was Adam's first thought as he and the lawyer woman, Meg Jonas, shook hands and introduced themselves. Her fingers were warm and dry and fine, and her grip was like *al dente* spaghetti—firm without being brittle, just as a handshake should be. She offered him coffee, and her voice held a tiny thread of huskiness. Accepting automatically, although he didn't have the slightest desire for coffee—straight scotch might have suited his mood better—Adam found himself wondering if that husky note was always there or if it was just there today, now. He felt like his own voice might come out husky, too.

Because she was definitely not what he'd expected! He quickly tallied all the points of difference. Mid-twenties, when he'd assumed forties. Soft pink mouth and soft gray eyes, when he'd imagined a hard, bored face, glazed over with a well-fitting veneer of professional competence and good manners.

And pretty. He absolutely hadn't expected her to be so pretty. Lawyers just didn't come in packages like this, with heart-shaped faces and long dark lashes and dark hair, the color of some richly glinting rain-forest timber, waving softly around their shoulders. They weren't neat and petite in pretty blue suits and clinging white blouses, either. And they definitely didn't have full, bow-shaped lips perfectly painted in a subtle cinnamon-pink gloss.

Actually, her lips reminded him of someone. Someone important.

They were set firmly now, after her initial murmured greeting, but not as if the firmness came naturally. She was having to make an effort to stay calm, and he wondered why. He heard her clear her throat, saw those fine fingers tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. A moment later, the coffee was splashing untidily into the two cups she'd set out on the credenza, as if her hand wasn't quite steady.

And for the first time in weeks he didn't feel quite so hunted, or so despairing. There was something about this woman, something that soothed his suspicions and his bristling pain, something he instinctively wanted to respond to and trust. It was insane. It made no sense at all. But for the moment, feeling that he might actually have the upper hand, he went with that powerful gut instinct and let himself relax.

She had reached for the carton of cream now, her fine-boned hands still fluttering and distracted.

"No cream, thanks," he told her, but she'd already splashed some into her own cup and automatically moved the carton to hover over his.

He could almost hear her thoughts churning. From inside her own head, they must be deafening because she obviously hadn't heard what he'd said about the cream. He repeated it, and closed his hand lightly over hers just in time to stop the liquid from spilling over the tilted lip of the carton.

The moment of contact was strangely intimate. Her head whirled around to look up at him and he felt her start like a frightened animal. The feeling ran across into his own body like an electric current, and he took his hand away quickly, before something burst into flames. What was happening here?

"No cream?" she echoed, as if she'd never heard that coffee could be enjoyed that way.

"Or sugar," he told her patiently, hiding what he'd felt as their hands touched.

"Or sugar. Right. Neither do I."

"I guess I'm starting to understand why you became a lawyer," he drawled. Keep it light, Adam. Keep that upper hand.

She looked at him, even more startled this time. She'd moved away from him after their electric moment of physical contact and picked up a spoon. Now she plunged it into the hot black liquid and began to stir. She stammered, "Why? I mean..."

"Because you couldn't cut it as a waitress." He gave a half grin, waited for a fraction of a second and got his reward.

She laughed, a delighted, delightful sound. "You got it," she said. "It's my secret tragedy. I can't serve coffee."

"And I can tell it's blighted your whole life. Here, give it to me before the cup goes into orbit."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Most people don't consider that black, sugarless coffee needs to be stirred quite that fast, or for quite that long."

"Oh. Right. I'm sorry. Should I start over?"

"Stirring doesn't actually ruin it, however."

"No..." She smiled, then sighed, and he saw the hunted look come back into her gray eyes again.

No, hunted wasn't the word. That was how he had felt lately. Hunted, and maybe already caught. Her eyes were more haunted. Sad. Grieving. Was she grappling with some difficult loss in her private life?

Adam, this is not your concern! he lectured himself. There's nothing about this woman's personal life you need to know or care about, and if she's nervous on top of whatever else is bothering her, so much the better. Use it!

Suddenly, all his wariness and latent hostility returned in full force, swamping that weird, intuitive chemistry between them and drowning it out completely.

"Where are the Fontaines?" he growled. He ignored the green leather chair she had ushered him toward, in her private office. "Shouldn't they be here, too? And what about Cherie? Where is she? What is this? I need some answers Ms. Jonas, and I intend to get them."

Mistake.

Why had he lost his cool like that, within a few minutes of their greeting? Well, he knew, of course. His throat tightened as if an iron hand had gripped it. His baby. Amy was only fourteen months old, and already this was the fourth—count it, the fourth!—time he'd had to face the prospect of losing her. He had every reason in the world to blow his control, but unfortunately he couldn't plan to win this fight on a sympathy vote. He had to keep a clear head.

The lawyer woman slid into the neat little sage-toned office chair behind her walnut desk and he placed his coffee carefully on a coaster, then leaned his splayed hands on the smooth wood of the desk for a moment, still standing.

He looked down at her. He wasn't sorry that he appeared to tower over her from this position. He added quietly before she could reply to his initial tirade, "Your letter was very brief. And pretty short on facts. All I know is that you're acting for Cherie's parents, and they're claiming custody of my daughter. I'd like to know more."

He stepped back and sat down, forcing himself to take it slowly, and to think rather than simply act and feel. Feelings could be deceptive. Witness that uncanny electricity a few moments ago when their hands had touched.

Ms. Jonas had evidently decided to take things slowly, too, although he could tell that this was still far harder and more emotional for her than it should be.

"First," she said, then stopped, buying time with a sip of coffee. Her sensitive, sensual top lip looked fuller as it closed over the white china. "Do you have any legal representation of your own in this matter?"

Short answer. No. But should he bluff and say he did?

Adam decided on the simple truth. "Not yet. I'm hoping we can resolve this amicably, since I'm confident of my own claim to Amy and I have other priorities than this custody issue, when it

comes to her well-being. I would have preferred if the Fontaines had written to me personally rather than bringing a lawyer in to mess with the situation before each of us even knows where the other is coming from.”

Meg Jonas allowed herself a little smile, and he saw a glint of pearly white between those pretty pink lips. Lips that he was finding it hard to look away from. “You don’t like lawyers?” she said.

“I didn’t say that,” he growled, bristling like a big cat.

“You didn’t have to,” she pointed out dryly, then took a deep, steadying breath. “Look, as you’ve said, I should clarify a few things first. For a start, my clients are not named Fontaine. It was a natural assumption on your part, since they’re her parents, but Fontaine was Cherie’s professional name, which she began using in child beauty pageants at the age of five. You need to know that I’m acting on behalf of Burt Jonas and his wife Patricia.” She waited silently for a moment, correctly anticipating his reaction.

“Jonas?” he echoed. “But that’s your—!”

“Yes,” she nodded. “Burt Jonas is my father, Patty is my stepmother and Cherie is...Oh, damn...was...my younger sister.”

“What do you mean ‘was’?” Adam demanded hoarsely, his heart beginning to thud with sickening heaviness in his chest. Were those tears she was blinking back?

This was coming from way out in left field. Another tragedy, and, impossibly, yet another threat to Amy. Aside from any other issues of grief and loss, if something had happened to Amy’s closest blood relative, what did that do to her own chance of living?

“I’m sorry,” Meg Jonas said, and it was clearly an effort for her. The words were jerking from her mouth. “We could tell from the wording of your letter to Dad, asking him to put you in touch with her, that you didn’t know. Cherie was killed about six months ago, while on a modeling assignment in the Caribbean. A light plane crash. Another model, the photographer and the pilot all lost their lives. It was very difficult for Dad. It still is. For over a year, he hadn’t known where she was, what she was doing, how to reach her...”

“That sounds like Cherie,” Adam agreed shakily. “I had the same problem with her more than once.”

“She was...erratic,” Meg agreed. “We all know that. But then, within weeks of her getting in touch again and letting us know, at last, that she was doing fine and getting her modeling career back on track, came her death.”

Adam swore softly. “It must have been—I mean, dammit, even for me it’s—”

Meg Jonas nodded silently, and they both sat for what must have been several minutes, wrapped in difficult thoughts. She was the one to speak first. “Mr. Callahan, I—”

“Doctor,” he corrected automatically, staring into the distance.

“Dr. Callahan? You’re a doctor? A practising medical doctor?”

“Yes.” He looked up. “A third-year resident in pediatrics. Why? Is that a surprise?” he demanded. She was leaning forward, examining him with unnerving intensity.

“Yes,” she admitted bluntly. “I—A couple of things Cherie said about you...”

“Cherie told you about me?” Now he was surprised. Their involvement had only lasted about two months. Just a fleeting blip on Cherie’s emotional radar screen.

“Not much,” Meg Jonas said.

“But nothing about Amy?”

“No. Until Dad got your letter two weeks ago, we had no idea she had had a baby. Absolutely no idea. She never said a word. Another shock.” The faint, tired smile didn’t reach those pretty eyes.

“Too many of them,” Adam agreed. His thoughts swirled in his brain like bats in a cave, and he knew that for Cherie’s sister, perhaps the biggest shock was still to come...when he judged the time was right to deliver it.

“Far too many,” Meg said. “I never felt I knew Cherie very well.” She was speaking slowly, staring down at her desk so that he couldn’t see her gray eyes, just her thick creamy lids edged by those dark lashes.

“Mom and Dad split up when I was eight and Cherie was three,” she went on.

Adam listened, amazed. Lawyers didn’t bare their souls like this, to someone on the opposite side of the legal fence from their own client. But it was obvious by now that this wasn’t a situation this particular lawyer had been in before. And as for Adam himself...

“They agreed they’d each take one of us. I went with Dad,” she said, “while Cherie stayed with Mom. I’ve always felt guilty about that.”

“Guilty?”

“I got the better deal. I don’t know if she told you much about her childhood...”

“Bits,” Adam replied. “Like jigsaw puzzle pieces. Snatches of color and tone that I couldn’t ever put together as well as I wanted, because she never gave me the whole picture.”

Again, Meg gave that faint, weary smile. “That’s Cherie. Mom was the same. Constantly in search of some new dream, but never slowing down long enough to explain to anyone quite what it was. It took her all over the country, with Cherie in tow, moving once, even twice a year. Dad got frantic at first. He never knew, when he called, if the phone would be disconnected. He never knew if his plans to see Cherie during school vacations would get cancelled at the last minute because they’d moved on again and hadn’t given us the new address. At some point, I think, he gave up.” She stopped.

“Gave up?” Adam prompted. He was learning an incredible amount about this complex, sensitive woman just from the way she was telling the story. He could feel his attitude and his emotions changing every minute. Right now, he was too caught up in Meg’s words to think about what that really meant.

“Kind of encased his love for Cherie in a thick layer of cement so it couldn’t do him damage. Like nuclear waste, or something.” She spread her fine hands helplessly, as if asking him to indulge the clumsy comparison.

“I think I understand.”

“It just hurt too much,” she went on. “He’s an organized, sensible man, while my Mom—she died several years ago—was...” She looked up again, and this time her smile was wider, though just as complicated. The wisdom in what she said belonged to someone much older. “Well, let’s just say, don’t let anyone tell you that opposites attract!”

“No?” Adam was thinking of Cherie. Cherie and himself and that first, chance meeting of theirs in a Philadelphia shopping mall. A disastrous quirk of fate in so many ways, yet how could he wish it had never happened? He couldn’t.

“Well, okay, maybe they do attract,” Meg conceded. “In the beginning. That was the case with Mom and Dad, at first, and they were as opposite as it comes. But opposites can’t make it last, when it comes to a relationship.”

“That, I agree with.”

“So I grew up not knowing my sister, and hardly knowing my mom. It was...incredible to find out that Cherie had a child. How did you track Dad down? We were confused, at first, because you’d gotten the name wrong, and all.”

My turn to bare my soul, Adam thought.

But some instinct told him not to, just yet, not fully. For a start, he definitely wasn’t going to talk about Amy’s illness yet, and what she needed. There was time for that, and it was too important to get it wrong. He distrusted this lawyer, he reminded himself firmly. Despite the endearing fact that she couldn’t serve coffee and that she could speak to a stranger like him from the heart.

Scratch the surface, and she was probably cut from the same cloth as his former college roommate, Garry, who seduced my girlfriend behind my back and then laughed when I found out and told me to “join the real world,” he remembered.

The guy was a celebrity defense lawyer now. “The guiltier my clients, the happier I’ll be,” he used to say. “They’ll pay more that way.”

For this woman, did it come down to money, too?

“I needed to get in touch with Cherie,” he said, deliberately avoiding detail. “But I didn’t know how. I tried her old modeling agency, but they hadn’t kept any records and they didn’t want to know. They weren’t exactly a top-flight establishment. They only had a few staff members to handle all their clients and their wannabes. And I think they’d written Cherie off.”

“Perhaps a few of us had,” she came in quietly. “You, too?”

“I...didn’t think to try a bigger, better agency, no,” Adam admitted. “After Amy was born... or even before... Cherie seemed like she was headed on the opposite trajectory. Down, not up.”

“I know,” Meg nodded. “That was the one thing that made her death easier for Dad. That she’d turned her life around. That she died doing what she had wanted to do, and was on the edge of real success.”

“So I was just about to put the whole thing in the hands of a private investigator. I even wondered if she might be living on the streets.”

“I know,” Meg nodded again. “We’ve had those fears, too, in the past.”

“Then I was flipping through an old notepad by my phone and I caught sight of her handwriting, and there it was. Just a scribble. It had to be well over a year old, and I could hardly read it. ‘Dad in ’Frisco after November 1st.’ Something like that, followed by his address. She hadn’t mentioned him often. I didn’t know if she was still in touch with him. But it seemed like the best lead I had, so I tried it. I just addressed it to ‘Mr. Fontaine.’ I never knew Fontaine was only Cherie’s professional name.”

“Her legal one, too, for most of her life. Mom had it changed officially when she was seven. It was meant to help Cherie’s modeling career, as well.”

“Part of Amy’s name, too. Amy Fontaine Callahan.” He said the “Callahan” part with deliberate emphasis, claiming his child. Amy was a Callahan, and she would stay a Callahan. His.

Was the pretty lawyer, Cherie’s sister, trying to soften him up? Of course she was! He distrusted her. He must not lose sight of that fact. He’d trusted Cherie at first, too, believing that she was as bright and sincere and in control of her life as she’d then seemed.

They didn’t look alike, the two sisters. They had the same mouth, that was all. Cherie had been model-perfect, with a lifetime of training in how to be beautiful, thanks to the roll call of pageants her mother had pushed her through for years. By twenty, when he’d met her—although initially she’d lied and told him she was twenty-four—she had a model’s tall, lean build, wide sultry eyes, carefully graceful movements and gorgeous, pouting mouth.

Yes, Meg definitely had the same mouth. The rest of her was different, though. She wasn’t blond. She wasn’t as tall, and she wasn’t as lean. Her blue suit covered some very feminine curves. And you couldn’t really say she was beautiful. These days, beauty wasn’t an innocent quality, and in Meg Jonas’s unstudied prettiness, there was an unmistakable innocence.

Hey...

Adam pulled himself up short. What was happening to him? Who was he kidding, here? This woman? Innocent? She was a lawyer! She practised a profession that could draw the cynics and hard-hearts and opportunists of this world like blood drew sharks. She was Cherie’s sister, under her very different skin. And she was trying to win his daughter away from him.

So he’d better keep that fact firmly in the center of his mind. She was no innocent.

Okay, so maybe everything Meg had said so far was true. All that feeling spilled from her pretty lips and that suffering in her big gray eyes. But it was still a game, part of a strategy and a plan. Her dad wanted custody, and she was acting for him.

Adam understood a little more now about how Burt Jonas must feel. A chance to regain his lost daughter through her child. Yes, Adam understood the power of that hope. But had Meg Jonas deliberately tried to foster this empathy in him in order to strengthen the Jonases’ claim?

I'm the one that endured those weeks in the hospital after Amy's premature birth, when her doctors thought that she might not make it, he reminded himself, while his hands tightened into fists.

I'm the one who endured it when Cherie took her for nearly three months and disappeared. I'm the one Cherie left her with when she disappeared again, leaving only that scribbled note in Amy's diaper bag. "Adam, you take her. I can't deal with her anymore."

I'm the one who's had her for the nine months since Cherie abandoned her: caring for her, loving her, watching her learn and grow.

And I'm the one who had to face those test results four-and-a-half weeks ago, telling me my baby girl is seriously ill...

Chapter Two

Meg hadn't missed the steel in Adam Callahan's voice when he said his daughter's full name, and she knew that Dad and Patty were kidding themselves if they thought this man would give his little girl up without a fight.

Hell, she'd been kidding herself in the exact same way a week and a half ago when she'd drafted the legal letter she'd sent to him, after what seemed like hours of phone calls between herself here in Philly and Dad and Patty in San Francisco, talking about what they wanted. They'd still been reeling from the revelation that Cherie had had a child.

She wasn't kidding herself anymore.

The trouble was, Adam Callahan was nothing at all like what she had imagined. Nothing at all like Cherie had described, one of only two times they'd spoken about him together, nearly two years ago. The phone call from her sister was carved into her memory. It had come out of the blue after the usual months of silence, made from some gas station phone booth in a midwestern town whose name Meg couldn't even remember. Maybe Cherie hadn't been that specific. Somewhere in Indiana?

She'd sounded wild that night. Giggly. Happy. In love. Out of control. Some guy on a motorcycle who sounded dangerous and bad. She'd called him by some in-your-face nickname. Slash?

"He's in trouble with the law, but I don't care. He takes me places, Meg, heights I didn't know existed. He makes me quiver. My modeling? That's meaningless. I just want to be with him, travelling, forever, on the back of his bike, feeling the air. I don't care about anything else. And neither does he..."

The second time Cherie had talked about him was over a year later, and this time she'd made more sense, seemed more grounded. The guy had turned out to be "bad news." He'd "nearly killed" her in a motorcycle smash, then walked away. A lot had happened...Baby Amy, for one thing, although typically Cherie hadn't mentioned that. Who could fathom her motives there? She'd just claimed vaguely that Meg didn't need the details...But finally, "I realized he wasn't going to change." She had signed with a new, much better agency and she was getting back into modeling. The guy was history.

None of that sounded like the man who sat in Meg's office right now. Oh, Adam Callahan looked like a man who could make a woman quiver, all right. No problem there. And he rode that big black motorcycle.

But the rest of it didn't gel. He was a doctor, and he wasn't just some guy who fathered a child with a woman then shrugged off the responsibility and moved on. It was already very apparent that he was passionate about keeping his little girl. Look at the suppressed tension in him now! The power of it mocked the carefully chosen decor of Meg's office.

She was proud of the restful, creative touches she'd given to her work environment. The shelf of knickknacks, mainly hand-carved Inuit animals in wood and stone. The botanical prints with their earthy, natural colors. The soft, comfortable leather of the sage-green chairs.

But the strength of what Adam Callahan felt and the strength of who he was as a man made this office suddenly feel like a prison, and Meg couldn't even pretend to herself that she was fully in control anymore. It had begun the moment she saw him, and continued during that disturbing instant when their hands had touched over the coffee. The sense of a connection that went beyond logic and reason.

Now her heart was racing. She had no clue as to how she would report this meeting to Dad and Patty, even though she knew they'd both be hovering by their phone in San Francisco tonight, waiting for her call. And she had a growing suspicion that there was something vital Adam was holding back, the most potent ingredient of all in this sizzling emotional mix.

They'd both been silent now for more than a minute. She sipped her rapidly cooling coffee, just for something to do with her mouth and hands, then saw that he was gulping his for the same reason. His eyes, almost as dark as the bitter black drink, were narrowed and he was thinking, calculating.

Thoughts that were painful, almost desperate, if his expression was any guide. There were lines scored from each corner of his mouth, and tight little balls of muscle at his jaw. Lines of strain around his eyes, too.

And she had the most impossible need, suddenly, to go over to him, kneel in front of him, take his head in her hands and smooth away all that tension with her fingers. Crazy! She was already far too involved emotionally, with her own side of this brewing custody dispute. To feel anything but the strictest professional distance and neutrality about Adam Callahan would be a nightmare!

She forced herself to ignore what she could read in his face. Instead, she took another shaky sip of her coffee, then watched as he brought his own cup to his lips once more. His hands were strong and lean and well-kept as a doctor's had to be. They were folded around the thick white cup as if he needed the heat, yet it wasn't cold in here. In fact, Meg herself felt steamy hot in her suit, and very conscious of the state of her body.

For her own protection, this silence had to be broken, and broken soon!

"How long had you been trying to track Cherie down, then?" she asked quickly, then added, "No wait! Can we go further back? How long since you lost contact with her in the first place? I'm not clear at all about the progression of your relationship."

He laughed harshly. "I don't think there was a progression. Or a relationship. We were only together, truly, for a couple of months."

"A couple of months?" Meg echoed, fighting to keep her voice neutral. This didn't remotely gel with what Cherie had said, but if she'd caught Adam Callahan out in a lie she didn't want him to realize the fact. "Okay..." she added blandly, inviting him to go on.

He did, wrapped up in remembering. She controlled a sigh of relief. He hadn't guessed that she'd spotted his inconsistency, which gave her time to think—frantically, without answers—about what the inconsistency meant.

"She disappeared within a month of us discovering she was pregnant," he said. "Wouldn't consider marriage."

"You wanted to? You did?" Again Meg tried to hide her disbelief.

Not very successfully this time. He looked up. "Yes. For a while. For Amy's sake. Until I saw how impossible it would be. Why? What did Cherie tell you?"

"Nothing." Nothing that meshed with Adam's story, anyway. And she had to remind herself, as she was reminding Adam, "I had no contact with her at that time, remember?" And Cherie was adept at changing her stories as time went by. Maybe it wasn't Adam Callahan who'd got it wrong...

No! Why am I feeling this need to find ways to trust him?

"Then what are you—" he began.

"I'm implying nothing." She fudged quickly. "I guess it doesn't fit the stereotype, that's all. Usually, it's the woman who wants marriage and security for her child, while the man ducks it with every strategy he can think of."

There was a tell-tale beat of silence. "You're a lawyer. I keep forgetting," Adam said with a snort. "Cynical is your middle name." He hadn't thought about Garry in recent years, but even in hindsight, the guy's attitude still stank.

"It's not cynicism." She bristled. "It's statistics. I don't like those statistics any more than you seem to. I'm—well, impressed that you have such a responsible, caring attitude, okay?"

"Okay," he conceded.

And maybe it was okay for him. Meg herself was horrified. She'd practically given him a medal of honor, let him know straight out how much he was rising in her estimation. In other words, she'd just kissed goodbye her last vestige of professionalism.

One of the key arguments in her dad's planned custody claim for his only granddaughter was always going to be that Amy's biological father was unfit to care for a child. Less than an hour ago,

that had seemed quite a reasonable assumption, with the mental picture she and Dad and Patty had built of Adam Callahan, based on Cherie's extravagant, erratic words.

But the reality was turning out to be so different...

Just get off the subject before it eats this whole case alive. Move on. Knowledge is power, so get some facts, Meg coached herself inwardly. Mentally, she back-tracked, while wondering just why she was finding it so difficult to keep her focus in Adam Callahan's presence. Even now, filled with renewed determination and hostility, she kept noticing the way he tapped his foot rhythmically and silently on the floor, unconsciously drawing attention to the lean, strong length of his legs.

But that wasn't what she was supposed to be thinking about! "So your relationship didn't last long?" she asked, trying to get a handle on the timing, at least. This definitely wasn't what she'd understood from Cherie.

"No," he answered. "Or not as far as I was concerned. Cherie disappeared, then turned up again begging for another chance when she was nearly six months pregnant." Adam was simplifying it a little. Cherie had actually run out on him twice. "I gave it to her," he went on. "I tried. And while she needed me, while her pregnancy was slowing her down and keeping her out of action, it was okay. I was at Amy's birth, which was great...amazing...terrifying."

"Terrifying?"

He met her challenging look. "I guess you don't know that Amy was a couple of months premature. She was in hospital for weeks, and it was touch and go whether she'd be okay."

"No," Meg answered starkly. "You're right. I didn't know."

But she could see in the man's face even now what Amy's difficult start had cost him. How old was he, exactly? Only in his early thirties, surely, yet there were lines of strain etched around his eyes and mouth.

"I spent my whole life at the hospital," he went on. "Between doing my pediatric residency there and being with Amy. Cherie wasn't interested. Anyway, I didn't even know where she was. So I started making plans to raise Amy myself. But the day before she was ready for discharge from the hospital, Cherie just came and took her, and for two and a half months I had no idea what had happened to either of them. Until my brother's wedding day last July. My new sister-in-law found Amy just lying on the bed in my parents' spare room, with her diaper bag all packed. Baby formula. A couple of outfits. And a note from Cherie saying she couldn't handle her anymore and Amy was mine. It was the last I ever heard from her, and Amy never saw her mom again."

"But you waited nine months to try and find Cherie?" Meg asked, deliberately applying the pressure. There had to be an inconsistency here, if not a downright lie, and she was determined to understand it.

"Yes," he nodded, then took a deep, controlled breath. "You see—"

But she didn't let him finish, and attacked openly. "What, because now you 'couldn't handle it' and were hoping it was Cherie's turn? Is this baby of yours like a tennis ball to you, or something? You think it's fine if she just gets batted back and forth?"

Okay, Meg, she coached herself again as she watched Adam and waited for the building explosion. This level of anger and hostility wasn't particularly professional, either, but it was the best she could do. Far better than feeling her heart go out to him as she understood more and more every minute about what he must have been through over the past year and a half, and more.

As she'd expected after her accusations, he was struggling for control. What she hadn't expected was that he would win the struggle. But he did.

"I didn't try to get in touch with Cherie for nine months," he answered her quietly, "because, from experience, I didn't think any input from Cherie in Amy's life would be good for her."

"No? Her own mother?"

"Yes, a mother who disappeared and came back again without warning, and whose plans went from green to red and back again in the space of twenty-four hours. Even if Cherie had gone on to

have the success she deserved and was starting to find as a model, I doubt that aspect of her character would ever have changed,” he argued forcefully. “Kids need continuity. I believe that. Maybe you don’t. Obviously, you don’t, if you’re prepared to—”

He broke off, and Meg didn’t know why he’d suddenly thought better about completing his sentence. She could have completed it for him, and once again had to fight the idea that there was truth in it. Was she prepared to work toward taking a little girl from the only parent she had ever known?

But this is what he wants, the inner legal coach reminded her. Of course he wants to trick you into seeing it all from his point of view! You only have his word on any of this, that any of it happened the way he says it did. People will go to any lengths when it comes to custody, legal or illegal. Lying is par for the course. Some people kidnap their own children and take them out of the country. And where are his facts? How do I know he is who he says he is? Meg Jonas, do not concede one inch to this man yet!

“Anyway,” Adam growled now. “This is all irrelevant.” He laughed, but it didn’t seem like he truly thought that there was anything funny in the situation. It was an almost painful sound, his laughter, straining tightly through his throat.

“What’s irrelevant?” Meg questioned, needing to challenge him further.

“The whole issue of who gets custody of Amy.”

“Irrelevant?” She was right! He did have some devious thing going. She’d sensed all along that he was holding something back.

Suddenly, she felt sick at how close she’d come to trusting him, falling for his lines, even...yes, she could admit it now...thinking that she could be attracted to him. “Irrelevant?” she repeated on a furious squeak, rising from behind the deceptive protection of her desk to pace the office and claim it for herself again. He had dominated the space too much today.

“What on earth are we here for, what has this all been about, if custody of Amy is irrelevant? I can assure you, Dr. Callahan, in the strongest possible terms, that to my father and stepmother the issue of who has the right, the legal right, to raise and care for Amy Fontaine Callahan is the most relevant issue in their lives at this time, and will remain that way until the matter is settled to their satisfaction.”

“You’re wrong about that,” he answered, his deep voice suddenly sounding inexpressibly weary. “But of course you can’t understand it yet.”

“Understand what?” she snapped.

“Look, there’s something I haven’t told you.”

“Really? Then tell me now. If there are facts pertaining to this case that—”

“Yes. Of course. Spare me the legalese, okay?” Still that weariness which dominated and shadowed his voice. “It’s after six, and I don’t want to discuss this in your office. It isn’t a professional matter.”

“It isn’t?” Her mind was whirling now. What game was he playing? He was on his feet now, close enough for her to feel his pull on her senses. He couldn’t be hoping to seduce her into any sort of concession, could he?

“No,” he answered, his dark gaze boring into her eyes. “It’s about as personal as you can get. So can we get out of here? I want to take you to dinner.”

Why am I here? Why on earth did I agree to this?

Adam could see her thinking it as they sat at an intimate corner table in the Italian restaurant she’d nominated, waiting for their drinks to arrive.

She had argued at first, bristling and indignant and trying very hard to stay professional. Dinner? With him? Absolutely not! Without wanting to, he found himself smiling at the memory, and had to cover his mouth with his hand to hide it, pretending to scratch his nose.

She was incredibly...interesting...when she was angry, he decided, deliberately picking the safest word he could think of. She unconsciously stretched straighter to try and make more of her

modest height, so that her neat, rounded breasts thrust forward, vying for prominence with her determined chin. Her eyes shot hot sparks, although cool gray eyes like hers ought not to have any fire in them at all. Her voice rose, and her vocabulary leaned heavily on her years at law school. Outside of the hospital, he hadn't heard so many multisyllabic words in one sentence in a long time.

And he didn't quite know how he'd finally talked her round. Didn't remember what he'd said. He only knew that he'd fought for it with all the tenacity he had because it was crucial...literally a matter of life and death...that he and Meg Jonas get past their mutual hostility over the custody issue so he could tell her about Amy and ask her to look at making a bigger sacrifice for his little girl than she'd probably ever needed to make for anyone before in her life.

Well, he'd carried his point somehow. She'd finally stopped her indignant arguing, searched his face with shimmering, troubled eyes then murmured something about Lorenzo's Trattoria and him following her car on his motorcycle. They'd both been so distracted that she hadn't waited for him to put on his leather gear, and he hadn't even thought of it, and now they were here and his body was still warming up after the chilly five minute ride in the rapidly cooling April evening.

"What is this about, Dr. Callahan?" she burst out as soon as her drink arrived.

He hadn't taken in what she'd ordered, but it was long and cold and the glass was already beading with moisture. The way she held it, her fingers left five neat oval prints on the wetness when she took a sip and put the glass down again.

He took a slug of his beer before he answered her, still playing for time. Gut instinct told him that he had to establish at least a semblance of rapport with her before he answered her question properly.

"Let's eat first," he said.

But she wasn't having that. "No! I've already given you more than enough latitude in this. You claim you've got something to say. Something that changes the whole situation. Well, I want to hear it! Now! And if I don't, then I'm going to walk right out of here." Her index finger stabbed in the direction of the door. "And the next step you'll need to take will be to find yourself a good attorney to handle your side of the case."

"Okay, okay." Unfortunately, he could see that she wasn't bluffing. Why should she? She had nothing to lose by maintaining their antagonism.

Or rather, he amended to himself, she thought she had nothing to lose.

But she was wrong. She had Amy to lose. And that was his greatest asset, he realized, because it meant that even if he did have to tell her the cruel facts now, bluntly, with no lead in, she just might understand.

Their waiter appeared, and Adam waved him away. "Not yet," he said. "Give us a few minutes, okay?"

"No problem."

Adam waited until the man was out of earshot, then just bit the bullet and came out with it as simply as he could. The words, as usual, tasted bitter and painful and impossible in his mouth.

"Amy is ill, Ms. Jonas. She has leukemia."

"Leukemia!"

He saw the shocked widening of her eyes, and went on urgently, "She needs a bone marrow donor, and if we can find someone compatible, then she should...she will...recover completely. But if there's no one...That's why I needed to contact Cherie so urgently. I'm not a good match, and neither is anyone in my family. We all got tested when we heard of her illness, but it just didn't work out. Cherie was our only hope, and even though she wasn't the best mother in the world—hell, we both know that!—I know she would have done it.

"When you told me just now that she'd been killed... You know we weren't involved long enough or deeply enough for me to carry a life-long grief over that, but my little girl...if I lost her..."

"Yes..."

“I thought she’d lost her best chance when you gave me the news, until I thought about the fact that you and Cherie were sisters. Would you be willing to do it? To get tested? And, if you’re compatible, donate your bone marrow to my baby?”

Chapter Three

“Dad, sorry it’s so late. I know you’ve been waiting for me to call,” Meg said into the phone, just moments after she arrived home that night.

Her father had picked up on the first ring. Now he didn’t waste words. “Okay, shoot, Meggie. Did it go well? Was he what we were expecting?”

The two impossible questions she had known he would ask. She had the answers prepared, but her throat suddenly felt dry all the same. Unbearably so. She went into the galley-style kitchen of her one bedroom apartment with the cordless phone pressed between her shoulder and her ear and got some sparkling mineral water from the fridge. She spoke as she went. Carefully.

“No, he wasn’t what we were expecting. I can’t go into any details yet.” She took a big gulp of the mineral water and her parched mouth felt better.

“You’re calling from your office? He can’t still be with you...”

“No, I’m calling from home. I’m alone.”

“Then why can’t you talk?”

“Because I want to be cautious about this, Dad. There’s...more going on than we realized.” A lot more. “It’ll be a few days before I can really be clear about what’s happening.”

There was a clatter in her ear and the sound of Patty’s warm voice. “Meg, I have to know. Your dad’s asking all the wrong questions. Is this Callahan man a total low-life, or not? Did you see Amy?”

Answer the easy one first. “No, I didn’t see her. She was staying with his mother overnight.”

“His mother? Men like that don’t have mothers! Not ones you can safely leave a baby with, anyway.”

“He’s not a ‘man like that,’ Patty,” she had to say. “Or if he is, he’s a darn good liar.”

“Of course he’s a good liar! Men like that are!”

“And he’s not going to give Amy up easily. I don’t even know if—”

“But we can win it, right? Her own grandparents? Financially secure, with me giving up work as soon as she’s with us, so I can care for her full-time? And after everything Cherie said about him? Oh, I’m just aching for that poor little girl, and what she must have to endure!”

“I know.” Meg was aching, too. For different reasons.

She managed to deflect another five minutes of questions and finally put down the phone, exhausted by the effort of holding back what she knew. She wasn’t going to frighten Dad or Patty with the specter of Amy’s leukemia.

Not yet. Not until she’d satisfied herself that this whole thing wasn’t just some sick scam, and that Adam Callahan was really the man he said he was.

She didn’t know why the issue of trusting him was building such conflict inside her. Was it a lawyer’s instinct? A lawyer’s caution? Those things had been drummed into her constantly through three years of law school and she put them into practice daily in her legal work now.

Even a simple real estate closing could turn into a minefield of problems. People lied. Just last month, she’d saved some clients from handing over every penny they’d put away to a man who was trying to sell them a house he didn’t even own. He was a plausible character, too. Attractive and sophisticated.

Yes, there were people out there who deliberately, brazenly, believably lied, and for a dozen different reasons. Financial gain, self-preservation, easy sex... Was it just her lawyer’s instinct to fear that Adam Callahan might be one of them?

Restless, she downed the last inch of her mineral water and wandered into the bathroom to wash hands that felt clammy with tension, then caught sight of her flushed face in the mirror.

She'd resorted to a glass of wine over dinner in an attempt to stay cool and focused as they discussed Amy's illness. It hadn't worked. But she knew it wasn't the wine bringing this color to her face. It was Adam Callahan.

She couldn't remember when any man had had such a powerful, immediate effect on her senses, or on her emotions. It wasn't just his dark, lively good looks. She'd never been instantly susceptible to good-looking men, so it couldn't be that. What was it, then? The apparent strength of his feelings? His determination? His way of listening, with those black-coffee eyes of his fixed on her, liquid and intent, and his well-drawn mouth serious and sensitive?

"Oh, boy, he really did a number on me tonight, didn't he?" she muttered to her reflection. "He probably got exactly what he wanted. I swallowed every word he told me and started treating him like a hero."

She saw that flushed cheeks weren't the only difference in her appearance tonight. Her eyes shone, her breathing was shallower than usual, and even her lips looked fuller. Swollen. As if they'd been kissed. Which they hadn't.

But she'd wanted him to.

Oh, lord, might as well be completely honest about it! By the end of the evening she'd hardly been able to drag her gaze from his mouth as he talked. Then, when they'd said goodnight outside the restaurant, after arranging to meet at the hospital tomorrow for her blood test, she'd actually swayed toward him for one tell-tale second before getting a grip on her physical response to him.

But maybe he hadn't noticed, she prayed now. Maybe he'd been distracted, because I'd finally gotten him to agree to my meeting Amy tomorrow, after the blood test.

He hadn't wanted the meeting, she recalled. Why? That was strange, wasn't it? Suspicious?

"No, I don't trust him!" she told the mirror forcefully aloud. "I really don't!"

Saying it so decisively like that felt like taking control at last, and she sensed her body beginning to unwind from its state of coiled tension. To her surprise, after a mug of hot chocolate and the late TV news, she actually slept soundly.

He was afraid I wouldn't show.

Meg could see this at once. He was waiting for her outside the Pathology department of the hospital where he worked, prowling restlessly. She had seen him just seconds before he looked along the corridor to see her. The relief in him when he did was totally apparent and sincere. His big, hunched shoulders relaxed, his dark eyes opened wider, his mouth softened like summer fruit ripening and he actually smiled.

Cautiously.

"I should have told you where to park," he said, not wasting energy on a hello.

"I'm a big girl," she answered. "I managed."

"And how do you feel about needles?"

"I feel fine about them," she claimed, waving a confident hand, then admitted, "So long as they're going up and down through a piece of fabric."

"So maybe you're not such a big girl, after all?"

They both laughed, though it wasn't a particularly joyous sound. He touched her briefly on the shoulder. She felt the lingering warmth of his hand through the fine knit of her sweater. Their awareness of each other was almost painful. She'd never imagined the possibility of such a complex mix of emotions about one man. Empathy. Distrust. Attraction...

"Through here," he said. "It's just a simple blood test, in your arm. They know what they're doing. It'll bite a little when the needle goes in, but if you look away..."

"I think I can handle it, Dr. Callahan."

"Can we please use first names, at least!"

"Is that wise? Shouldn't we keep—"

He turned to her and gripped her upper arm, chafing it in a rough caress that he wasn't even aware of. She was, though. Why did it feel so good just to be close to him? Was it just that he seemed so solid and strong?

"Look," he said, "If you're referring to the custody issue and the fact that we're on opposite sides of the fence...then don't! I can't deal with that right now! I want my little girl to live. That's the only thing that matters to me, and surely it matters to you, too! She's your niece. Do you ever think of that?" The accusation mounted in his tone.

"Of course it matters! Of course I think of it."

"Then do me a favor. Pretend we're friends. Think about the fact that we're on the same side right now, no matter what happens later on. I need you, Meg. Amy needs you."

"I—I know."

"And if you're a compatible donor then you're going to need me. Or need someone for support, anyway. It's not an easy process to go through."

"I know nothing about it," she admitted. "Last night we only talked about the blood test."

And I wasn't sure, then, that any of this was real, she added inwardly. I'm sure now...

"Maybe that's as far as we should take it for now," he suggested.

"You're scaring me. What exactly is involved?"

"No, sorry." He released her arm at last, but the appeal remained in his face. "That's not what I meant to do. I'm talking to myself, I guess. Telling myself to take it one step at a time. If you're not compatible with Amy..." His voice was husky.

"One step at a time." She nodded slowly. "You're right. We can't think too far ahead. Let's just get this part done."

Drawing the blood took only a minute or two. Taking his advice, she didn't watch, just distracted herself by reading the humorous cartoons and sayings thumb-tacked on the walls.

"I used to take life one day at a time," read one of them, "but lately a whole flock of days have attacked me at once."

Strangely appropriate, somehow. If Adam had been in the room, she would have pointed it out to him, but when he'd asked if she wanted him there for support, it seemed too weak to say yes...or maybe she just hadn't wanted him to hear if she yelled in pain!...so he was waiting outside.

"There, all done now," said the medical technician cheerfully as she gently withdrew the needle. "Results in a week to ten days."

"Okay. Thanks."

A minute later, Meg had a circle of flesh-colored Band-Aid stuck in the crook of her left arm and was out in the waiting area where Adam sat. He had a magazine open in front of him. A fishing magazine. It wasn't hard to tell that he hadn't read a word of it. He flung it back on the pile and said lightly, "I didn't hear any screams."

"I screamed silently. Figured people would be grateful if I spared their hearing."

"Considerate."

"Very," she agreed. "Seriously, though, it was fine. I haven't had a needle in years, and I was expecting it to be a lot worse. She said the results would—"

"I know," he nodded quickly.

"Of course. You're a doctor. I keep forgetting."

"Good. Let's forget all of this, okay?" He was pep-talking himself as much as appealing to her. "Nothing more can happen until we find out the results. So for now I'm taking you to meet Amy."

They both knew it was important, but somehow, by unworded agreement, they tried hard to pretend it wasn't. That it was just an ordinary visit, one they both wanted, rather than one he'd tried hard to postpone. Meg still wondered about his reasons for that.

The glorious spring day helped in the illusion that they were in agreement, that this was a casual event.

“Can we take your car? Then, if you could, drop me back at the hospital later on?” he asked her casually as they left the main building and felt the brilliant strike of the spring sunshine. “My car’s here, and I have to work tonight.”

“Your car? What about the motorcycle?” It came out almost like an accusation, and she realized that she was still clinging to that bad boy image of him, conjured by Cherie’s words months ago. It hadn’t occurred to her that he might drive something so tame and civilized as a car, as well.

He looked at her sharply. “You didn’t notice I didn’t have my helmet with me?”

“Unobservant, I guess.” She shrugged, trying to make light of it.

“I used the motorcycle yesterday because I wanted the quickest way of getting between the hospital and your office in the traffic, since timing was tight, but mostly I don’t use it now.” He added deliberately, “It’s merely a relic of my wild youth.”

And she walked right into the trap. “You had a wild youth?”

He pounced. “You hope so, don’t you? That’s what you’re pinning this whole custody claim on.”

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