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Make Room for Mommy

SUZANNE MCMINN

Suzanne McMinn

Make Room For Mommy

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MAGGIE WELLS WAS A "GREAT GAL."So how come she couldn't get a date? She was getting really tired of spending her weekends in front of the television. So she decided to volunteer at the community center. That's when she met little Brandy.BRANDY CONNER WAS A GREAT KID.She loved her new grown-up friend, Maggie. And Brandy thought Maggie would make an even neater friend for her dad, Ryan.RYAN CONNER WAS A GREAT…HUNK.Life as a single dad was no bed of roses, but he wasn't interested in finding a new wife–no way, no how. Not even one as beguiling as Maggie Wells….Could they convince him to make room for Maggie?

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"Just a kiss? You're this upset about a kiss?"

Maggie's best friend, Emma, questioned.

"It's not just that," Maggie countered. "I don't know. He was opening up to me and then, boom, down came the shutters."

"You're in love with him," she stated.

Maggie laughed sharply. "Right," she said sarcastically.

"And he's falling in love with you, too," Emma continued.

"Now I know you're completely over the edge," she replied.

"I want you to be happy, that's all. I'm just mad I can't claim any responsibility for this. I wanted to be the one to introduce you to your future husband."

"Future husband?" Maggie cried. "If I ever did decide to get married, it sure wouldn't be to Ryan Conner!"

Emma just smiled with a self-satisfied air.

Dear Reader,

In Arlene James's *Desperately Seeking Daddy,* a harried, single working mom of three feels like Cinderella at the ball when Jack Tyler comes into her life. He wins over her kids, charms her mother and sets straight her grumpy boss. He's the FABULOUS FATHER of her kids' dreams—and the husband of hers!

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Suzanne McMinn makes her debut with *Make Room for Mommy,* in which a single woman with motherhood and marriage on her mind falls for a single dad who isn't at all interested in saying "I do"…or so he thinks!

From classic love stories, to romantic comedies to emotional heart tuggers, Silhouette Romance offers six wonderful new novels each month by six talented authors. I hope you enjoy all six books this month—and every month.

Regards,

Melissa Senate,

Senior Editor

Please address questions and book requests to:

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Make Room for Mommy
Suzanne McMinn

www.millsandboon.co.uk

For my big sister, Celeste—if it hadn't been for all those times you locked me in the kitchen pantry as a child, I probably never would have developed my imagination!

SUZANNE McMINN

lives by the lake in a small Texas town. She knew she wanted to be a writer by age five and set her sights on romance novels when she was twelve. She fulfills her dream of writing while enjoying her wonderful husband, young children and assorted dogs and cats. She loves to hear from readers and can be reached at P.O. Box 12, Granbury, TX 76048.

The Facts of Life According to Brandy Conner, Age Six

I know not everybody can have a mom. And I'm real lucky, 'cause I've got the world's best dad. But he's so grumpy sometimes—'specially when Maggie Wells comes over. She's my grown-up friend from the community center. She is *so* neat.

One of my friends says that boys act dumb sometimes when they like you. So I was thinking, what if Daddy likes Maggie? It would be so great if Maggie could live with us, like a real mom. Daddy says it's "complicated"—which means I should stop asking questions. But now *Maggie* is acting grumpy. Do you think this is a good sign?

Chapter One

"What happened to his wife?"

The social worker, Mrs. Fletcher, shifted in her cushioned swivel chair as she stared across her cluttered desk at Maggie Wells. She looked unsure of the answer she should give. The busy shuffle of activity in the community center filtered in through the open door of her cramped office.

"Does she live around here?" Maggie continued, her curiosity piqued. She watched as Mrs. Fletcher ran thick fingers through her short metallic-gray hair and sighed heavily.

"Actually," Mrs. Fletcher began in a tired tone, "we don't know that much about Mr. Conner's former wife. He's a very private person."

"Oh." Maggie thought for a moment. "But you got so much information about my background before allowing me to enter the outreach program. I guess I just assumed you knew as much about the children and their families."

The women's outreach program, organized by the Charleston community center, matched adult volunteers with young girls to provide friendship and role modeling. It was especially geared toward girls who'd lost their mothers, through death or divorce.

"I don't mean to be nosy," Maggie said hurriedly when Mrs. Fletcher didn't respond. "I just wondered. I mean, to help Brandy as much as possible, I thought it would be best if I knew something about her besides the fact that she likes dolls and roller skating."

"Yes," the social worker agreed. "I understand your interest, of course." She sat silently for a few seconds. Maggie leaned forward encouragingly and Mrs. Fletcher began to speak again. "It's simply not necessary for us to make such inquiries into personal affairs. The facts behind Mr. Conner's divorce are not our business. All we need to know is that he wishes to place his daughter in the program."

"Of course," Maggie said, straightening up in her chair, suddenly feeling as if she'd been caught trying to peep into someone's back window. "I understand entirely."

"Well, he'll be here any minute and you can meet him for yourself," Mrs. Fletcher said, breaking off and staring at the doorway of her office. Maggie turned quickly, following the social worker's gaze.

A young girl scampered eagerly into the office, a large doll clutched to her chest. But Maggie's attention was seized immediately by the dark presence that followed her, overpowering the small office with his height and brooding appearance. Her eyes moved up his torso to broad shoulders topped by a strongly angular face that held, even in January, the hint of summer's heat. Carelessly combed chestnut waves contrasted with his stern visage.

The rich luster of his hair and the smoothness of his skin, only lightly crinkled around brilliant sapphire eyes, suggested a man of no more than thirty years. But the cool glint in those blue depths intimated at a hardness inside that his age belied.

Maggie opened her mouth to greet him, but found nothing coming out.

This is so embarrassing, she thought quickly. *He'll think I'm a fool.*

Piercing blue eyes met hers for a long second, then dismissed her and passed on to Mrs. Fletcher.

Mrs. Fletcher rose and reached across her desk to extend a pudgy hand to the man who strode with an effortless assurance across the small office. Maggie, pulling herself together at last, rose also. She was graced with a cursory handshake that, despite its lack of warmth, left her hand feeling weak and crushed.

"Ryan Conner, Brandy, this is Maggie Wells," Mrs. Fletcher introduced in a businesslike monotone. Ryan Conner sat down in the chair across from Maggie, as directed by Mrs. Fletcher. His daughter perched on his knee and smiled.brightly at Maggie.

"We here at the center are hoping Maggie and Brandy will be an excellent match," Mrs. Fletcher said. "You've read the materials I sent you, I assume." She looked narrowly at Ryan Conner, then went on without waiting for a response. "So you know all about Ms. Wells. She has agreed to commit to the program for at least a year, spending time with Brandy at least twice a month."

Maggie looked at Ryan, noting that he seemed impatient with the social worker's explanations. She caught his eye and smiled sympathetically, then frowned as he looked quickly away.

Mrs. Fletcher stopped, and Maggie turned her attention gladly to the child on Ryan's lap.

"Hi, Brandy," Maggie said. The six-year-old was an elflike miniature of her father in girlish form. Brown braids in the same shade as her father's hair swung against her blue woolen coat. Loose white lace tights wrinkled about her ankles as she kicked her feet against the legs of the chair.

"Hi," Brandy returned. She fidgeted on her father's knee. He put a restraining arm around her, but she pushed him back and jumped down instead. She walked over to Maggie and reached a hesitant finger out to touch an auburn curl that nestled softly against Maggie's shoulder.

"You have red hair!" she said, and giggled. Maggie laughed with her, enchanted with the little girl's honest spontaneity.

She glanced at the child's father and found him watching with a disapproving frown.

"Don't be rude, Brandy," he scolded, his voice softly Southern yet still commanding. Brandy backed away from Maggie, grinning mischievously.

"Oh, that's okay. But I do prefer to call it auburn," Maggie said to Brandy, ignoring Ryan Conner's cool expression.

But she couldn't resist looking at him again a moment later and smiling. His face remained impassive.

Really, Maggie thought, *what is his problem? We've just met! He can't dislike me already.*

"Mr. Conner—" she began.

"Ryan," he corrected. "Only my students call me Mr. Conner."

"Okay, if you'll call me Maggie," she agreed cheerfully. "You're a teacher?" she prompted, smiling at him encouragingly.

"High school English," he responded briefly.

Maggie raised an expectant brow, hoping he would elaborate yet knowing somehow that he wouldn't.

The ice has to break soon, she told herself, *or this match will never work.*

It was almost as if he had placed a wall between them before they had even met, she suddenly thought. She eyed him stubbornly.

"I'm very happy to meet you and your daughter, Mr.—Ryan, I mean," she said.

"Yes," he replied.

Yes, what? Maggie wondered, her silly streak rising to the challenge of the conversation. *Yes, it's nice for anyone to get to meet you? Yes, it's nice to meet me, too? No, no,* she decided, *he doesn't think it's nice to meet me. He looks like he wants to throw me off a cliff. Forget that I'm offering to do him a favor.*

She turned away from his uneasy survey and looked to Mrs. Fletcher for help in the silence that lay heavy in its suddenness.

The social worker took a satisfied breath and rose.

"Well," Mrs. Fletcher said, "now that everybody's introduced themselves, I'll give you a few moments to get acquainted."

She lumbered out from behind her desk and disappeared into the outer office.

Maggie felt sure she didn't breathe for at least thirty seconds. She looked across at Ryan Conner and smiled with soldierly resolve, her inner tirade forgotten in her panic at the social worker's unexpected departure. He stared back at her, head cocked slightly to the side, as if waiting for her to make the first move.

She took the easy way out and turned to Brandy.

"Brandy," Maggie began uncomfortably, "tell me about your doll. She's beautiful."

Brandy proudly held the life-size doll straight out in front of herself to show Maggie.

"Her name is Penny," Brandy said. "And she's my favorite doll, isn't she, Daddy?" She glanced up at her father and he nodded almost imperceptibly. Maggie noticed how the firm lines of his face softened slightly as he looked at his daughter.

Brandy turned the doll back toward herself and tugged Penny's rumpled red dress down. When she was satisfied, she flipped the doll back around for Maggie's further admiration.

"She's very pretty," Maggie said, showing the proper appreciation for Brandy's prize doll. "I had a doll a lot like her when I was about your age," she added, surprising herself by voicing the sudden childhood memory. The happy memory, before her father's bankruptcy, before…

Maggie blinked quickly, pushing back the painful memories that rushed in on her at the thought of her father. She was annoyed with herself for allowing the hurtful past to intrude. She took a quick, determined breath.

"Who gave Penny to you?" Maggie asked with false brightness, back in control, with the hurt neatly tucked away in long-practiced fashion.

Ryan Conner moved slightly in his chair as Brandy answered, "Mommy gave her to me. Do you still have your doll? What's her name?" Brandy asked, impatient and clearly not to be sidetracked from her own line of thought.

Maggie noticed Ryan's discomfiture, and was torn between curiosity and relief that Brandy didn't elaborate on her mother.

"Her name is Sarah," Maggie told her, carefully guarding herself from thinking beyond the doll itself. "I still have her. She's getting rather old now."

"Do you still play with her?" Brandy asked, her blue eyes bright.

Maggie grinned. "I haven't played with Sarah in a long time. I used to like to have tea parties with her, though. Do you ever have tea parties with Penny?"

Brandy nodded eagerly. "Daddy plays with me," she said.

Maggie looked directly at Ryan for the first time since Mrs. Fletcher had left the room. She tried to imagine him playing tea party with his little daughter and her doll, but couldn't quite manage it.

"If you'd like, and if it's all right with your father—" Maggie glanced at Ryan. His impenetrable azure gaze answered nothing. And asked…? She wasn't sure what. "Maybe when it warms up we can have a little tea party together, for Penny and Sarah. And Romeo, of course. He likes tea."

"Who's Romeo?" Brandy asked, moving a little farther from her father, a little closer to Maggie.

"Romeo's my cat. He's a big, fat, white cat. He just has one little patch of orange between his eyes."

"And he drinks tea?" Brandy squealed. She turned to her father and laughed, clapping her hand over her mouth in childlike glee. "Isn't that funny, Daddy?"

Ryan nodded, his lips curving slightly upward in response to his daughter's exuberance. He stretched out one long arm and, with a broad, strong hand, ruffled her dark head, so like his own, and pulled her back toward him.

Maggie's breath caught in her throat as she watched him smile.

Ryan Conner looked…human! The smile was gentle and loving, softening the squareness of his jaw into something no longer intimidating. Into something downright appealing.

Something that started a funny little tremble in her stomach. Not nerves.

Attraction.

Maggie swallowed hard, pushing back the thought, stifling the feeling. It was truly insane, and had to be squelched immediately.

Ryan lifted his gaze to Maggie then, and for a second—a heart-touching pitter-patter in time—she spied warmth and softness and…pain? Then, without warning, the mask of coolness shifted back into place.

"I want you to go find Mrs. Fletcher and tell her we're through here, Brandy," he instructed his daughter softly, his eyes turning down to meet hers. She wrinkled her nose up at him obstinately, but he set his mouth firmly and she hurried off obediently to the door, still hanging on tightly to Penny.

Maggie recrossed her legs and looked at Ryan. Having glimpsed a gentler side of the man, she felt even more uncomfortable. He'd be easier to deal with if she could decide he was an all-around jerk.

"You have a very bright daughter," she commented, trying to fill the void left by Brandy's exit.

Ryan stared narrowly at Maggie, ignoring her compliment.

"Why do you want to spend your spare time with a six-year-old girl whom you don't know and who isn't even related to you?" he asked brusquely.

Maggie's mouth dropped open in surprise at his blunt question.

"Well, you know from the information Mrs. Fletcher gave you that I'm single. I don't have any children of my own," Maggie explained. *So much for his soft side,* she thought dryly.

"I don't want to know what's on the form," Ryan cut in. "I want to know why you think you want to become a part of my daughter's life."

Maggie noticed the lightly sarcastic emphasis he placed on the word *think,* as if he didn't believe she was really serious about it.

"As Mrs. Fletcher said, I've agreed to the specifications on time that I'm willing to commit to the program," Maggie said coolly, struggling not to squirm under his unflinching gaze.

"Look," she continued, "I'm not really sure what you're trying to get at. You seem to have a problem with me."

There. It was out in the open.

He seemed unfazed.

Maggie shook her head.

"Well, it's up to you and Brandy whether I'll be assigned to work with her or not," she said. "I don't know what you want to hear, but the bottom line is just that I feel I have something to give and no one to give it to. I don't think I can be more frank than that."

"You work at a computer company, I believe," Ryan stated, completely ignoring Maggie's honest admissions.

"Yes," Maggie answered, feeling herself shrink under his tight scrutiny. She was a little rattled by his rapid change of topic. "I'm the assistant director of the local sales division." She felt better as she told him that, pride in her accomplishments shoring up her flagging confidence.

"I'm sure your job is very important to you."

"Yes, of course," Maggie agreed. "But I have plenty of time to give to Brandy, as well. I'm fully prepared to keep my commitment to her, as I've said."

Several times already, she added silently.

"I see," Ryan said quietly. "Perhaps I need to tell you why I entered Brandy in this program."

"That would be helpful, yes," Maggie agreed politely, forcing a smile to her lips. Brandy was such an appealing child. She would be a joy to work with. Getting through this strange conversation with her father would be worth it, Maggie reminded herself.

"Brandy's mother is very busy with her career," Ryan said. "She doesn't live here in Charleston. In fact, she doesn't even live in South Carolina. She's in Atlanta," he explained, his face expressionless. "I entered Brandy in the women's outreach program because she hardly ever sees her mother. But I don't want her put in the same position with you that she's in with her mother."

"I don't think that would be a problem, as I've already tried to explain," Maggie broke in. "I think Brandy and I could get along quite well, and I promise I'll be there for her."

Ryan appeared thoughtful, then fixed his gaze on Maggie in an assessing manner.

"I wonder whether you work a great deal of overtime," he suggested. "I don't want someone who'll be canceling out on Brandy every time a crisis comes up at the office. She already has that."

Maggie stared back at Ryan, carefully holding her gaze steady.

"I've already assured you that won't happen," she said sharply. She sighed and rose. Then, with an ease that came from years of practice pretending an assurance that she didn't always feel, she flipped back the curls that fell forward across her shoulders.

She wondered if that glimpse of softness she'd witnessed a few moments earlier had existed only in her imagination.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Conner. I see that I'm just not what you're looking for," Maggie continued, enunciating each word with a cool precision that she hoped hid the nervous roiling of her stomach. "I think you decided that before you got here today." As she reached the door, she couldn't resist looking back and adding a challenge. "Too bad. You'll never know now, will you?"

Turning away, she almost bumped into Brandy and Mrs. Fletcher. She said goodbye without stopping and escaped the community center quickly. Reaching the parking lot, she inhaled the sweet, fresh odor of South Carolina winter pine and tried to stanch the rushing tide of pent-up nerves.

"I made such a fool of myself, Emma," Maggie moaned. She buried her face in her hands and leaned back into the couch in the living room of her suburban Charleston home. "I handled it all wrong. The man detested me. That was obvious from the start. And there I was, practically begging him to let me help him with his daughter. It was ridiculous."

"Oh, Mag, it couldn't have been that bad, could it?" Emma Mathison asked, laughing. "You make this man sound like an ogre."

Maggie lifted her head and stared at Emma, brows raised.

"Okay, he does sound a bit primitive," Emma conceded, hazel eyes twinkling in a narrow face framed by short, dark, salon-created waves. "I'll give you that. But didn't you say he was good-looking?"

Maggie had to smile at that. Emma had been trying to set her up with a man and marry her off since their third year of college when Emma quit school and married a dentist. A house, a dog and two small children later, Emma never let an opportunity slip to try to bring Maggie into the ranks of wedded women.

"Don't even start, Em," Maggie said. "Believe me, this man is not a possibility. For starters, he hates me. And even if he didn't, I definitely don't like him. I'm not even attracted to him." That was a lie, but it felt good to say it. "And when did I say he was good-looking, anyway?"

Strong, firm features and mysterious eyes flashed into her mind. She tried to push the image away, but the vague impression of hurt in his blue depths stayed with her.

"Okay," she admitted, determined to ignore the troubling sensations her thoughts evoked. She smiled at Emma playfully. "So he was handsome." Maggie leaned back. "But, so what? I'm telling you, I'm not interested."

"What else is new?" Emma teased in the same familiar tone she always used when Maggie turned aside her attempts to interest her in romance.

"None of this matters, anyway," Maggie reminded her. "He was so rude. I just don't understand it. He doesn't even know me, and he seemed to be assigning all these rotten characteristics to me."

Emma drank the last of her coffee and set the cup down on a coaster on the end table. Rising, she said, "Well, I've got to go pick up the boys from my mom's. Don't brood, Maggie," she warned, shaking one well-manicured finger Maggie's way. "It'll make you wrinkle."

Maggie followed her friend to the door. Shutting it after Emma, she wandered thoughtfully into the kitchen, picking a tub of low-calorie fruit yogurt out of the refrigerator. Then she returned to the functional blue couch in the living room and plopped down again. The package made a soft pop as she tore off the aluminum cover. A large white cat jumped up beside her and mewed.

"Oh, Romeo," Maggie whispered to the cat. "Forget it. I'm not sharing my yogurt." She ruffled the long fur between his ears and pushed him down from the couch.

I can't believe how everything turned out, she thought, her mind turning back to her meeting with Ryan Conner.

She remembered her excitement a month earlier when she'd seen the article in the newspaper about the community center. The section detailing the women's outreach program had caught her eye as she'd been picking at a TV dinner late one night after work. As she read the story describing the community center's program, she was inspired to volunteer. She had Emma—her best friend—and her neighbors and coworkers, but something was missing. She hadn't known just what until she'd read that article.

Maggie felt an empathy born of experience for children growing up with only one parent. She wanted to share her life with a child, to share the innocence and joy that had been cut short in her own childhood.

Through satisfying a child's need in this way she hoped to fill the void—past and future—in her own life. At twenty-eight, she'd begun to think it was a very real possibility that she would never marry and have a child of her own.

Now it looked as if her chances of taking part in the life of sweet, bright Brandy Conner were pretty dim, too. And all because of the child's insufferable father, Maggie thought with irritation.

She swallowed a spoonful of strawberry-banana yogurt. Who was she kidding? she berated herself. She certainly hadn't done her cause any good by walking out on him. If she could have just gotten past the first meeting, she was sure she wouldn't have had to have much to do with him after she was paired up with Brandy. After all, she was supposed to befriend the child, not the father.

And what was all that stuff about his wife? she wondered. He obviously had some ridiculous problem with self-sufficient women. He didn't seem to understand that some women wanted—or needed—to work.

Maggie knew about need, about desperation. The picture of her own mother dragging home late at night after hours of cleaning offices or waiting tables intruded into her thoughts. Later, Maggie, too, learned to wait tables, but only long enough to work her way through college and earn her business degree.

But working and studying had left little time for a social life, and despite Emma's dubious help, Maggie had rarely dated during college. The dates were even fewer and farther between after she began her career. Her job made up for it, she always told herself. Her work made her feel good, and she was good at it. She depended on herself, and no one else.

And Ryan Conner could go jump in a lake if he thought he had a right to criticize her for it, she thought defensively.

Maggie sat up and put the barely touched carton of yogurt down on the coffee table, leaving the cat to stretch up and sniff at it unhindered. Maggie rose and walked down the hall to her bedroom at the back of the house.

In contrast to the modern functional decor of the living room, Maggie's bedroom, her private retreat, was traditional and romantic. A four-poster bed dominated the spacious and utterly feminine room decorated with white lace curtains and a white comforter. Maggie lay down across the cool white spread and tried to clear her mind of Ryan and the disappointing episode at the community center. She tried to force herself to concentrate on work, on the next week's projects.

She closed her eyes and saw Ryan Conner's soft smile.

"Daddy?"

Ryan hesitated, his fingers curved over the switch to his daughter's bedside lamp. The book he had read aloud a chapter from—as per their usual evening ritual—lay closed on his lap. Brandy often fell asleep before he finished reading an entire chapter. Tonight she was awake. Wide-awake.

There was something about the way she spoke that caught his attention and made him freeze. She was worried about something.

"What is it, sweetie?" Ryan asked. Softly his fingers swept along her small, rounded cheekbone.

"Why don't you like Maggie?" Brandy asked, her voice low in the stillness of her bedroom.

Snapping emerald eyes and rich auburn hair flashed into Ryan's thoughts. And that scent that had surrounded her, like peaches ripe in a summer-hot grove, tempting and sweet.

He knew the answer to Brandy's question. He knew exactly why he didn't like Maggie Wells. He was afraid she might turn out to be too much like Delia, Brandy's mother—who always seemed to have plenty of good intentions, but never the time to carry them out.

He'd approached the community center program with cautious optimism from the start. He knew Brandy could benefit enormously from the opportunity—but he wanted to be very certain that he didn't set his little daughter up for a disappointing experience.

Still, in spite of all his concerns, he'd been attracted to Maggie at an immediate, undeniable, gut level. So attracted, that the careful wall he'd formed after his divorce had very nearly crumbled during their meeting.

"What gave you the idea that I didn't like her?" Ryan asked, sidetracking to another question.

Brandy's blue eyes stared back unwaveringly.

"I don't know," she answered simply. "I just didn't think you did."

Ryan laughed and ruffled his daughter's hair with a careless brush of his hand. He leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

"I'm sure she's a very nice lady," Ryan told her. "You know what? I bet you're going to get to meet lots of nice ladies at the community center, and you'll get to choose one to be your very own special friend."

"I want Maggie to be my special friend." Brandy reached out and took her father's hand. "Please."

Ryan looked down at the small hand in his, then back up to the pleading expression in Brandy's eyes. And he remembered the flash in Maggie's gaze when he'd demanded to know why she wanted to be part of his daughter's life.

She felt she had something to give, she'd said, and no one to give it to. She had no husband, no child of her own.

He couldn't help but wonder why. Had she made work her whole life?

The spark in Maggie's eyes when she'd talked about her job hadn't passed Ryan by. He'd seen that kind of spark before. At the time, it had been walking out the door, leaving him to raise Brandy alone.

"Doesn't Maggie want to be my friend?" Brandy asked. A crack broke through her voice on the last word.

"Oh, sweetheart." Ryan leaned down and hugged his daughter. "I didn't mean that. I just meant that you don't have to make a decision right away. Mrs. Fletcher is going to introduce you to some other nice ladies, too."

"But I don't want anybody else," Brandy persisted. "I want Maggie."

"Why?" Ryan asked, genuinely surprised by Brandy's insistence on Maggie Wells. After all, they'd spent only five minutes together. Ryan had hoped Brandy would forget all about her.

But apparently his daughter was having as much trouble clearing her mind of Maggie as he was. He'd been haunted all day by her heart-shaped face and luscious fall of red curls, and pained by the old memories she stirred, inside him.

"I like Maggie," Brandy said softly. She chewed her bottom lip. "Doesn't she like me?"

"Of course she likes you, sweetie," Ryan assured her.

"Will you call Mrs. Fletcher and tell her I want Maggie?"

Ryan hesitated. Seconds passed in silence.

Too bad, Maggie had said to him coolly as she'd left the community center. *You'll never know,* she'd added.

Never know what?

"Please, Daddy."

Chapter Two

Water dripped from Maggie as she hurried from the bathroom to the shrilling brass phone in her bedroom. Damp footprints marked her path across the plush tan rug. She grabbed the receiver as she fumbled to wrap a towel around her wet form.

"Miss Wells?" the familiar gravelly voice inquired.

"Yes. This is Mrs. Fletcher, isn't it?" Maggie asked. She experienced the little sinking feeling that always came to her when she knew someone was going to give her bad news.

"I've spoken with Mr. Conner," Mrs. Fletcher said. "He says Brandy wants you. He'd like to go ahead and sign you up with her. Do you accept?"

Maggie gasped. Had that horrible conversation with Ryan Conner really taken place last week, or was that just a nightmare? What could have changed his mind? For a few seconds she considered whether she should say no. Or tell Mrs. Fletcher she'd have to think about it. After all, how could she work with this man's child? What if he kept acting the same way toward her?

Oh, who cares about him? she decided in a flash. *Brandy is the one who matters.*

"Yes," she agreed quickly before she could change her mind.

"Fine," Mrs. Fletcher said. "Now, it's going to be up to you to set up the days and times to see Brandy. Remember to clear all your plans with her father first. Let me give you his phone number and address. Be sure to tell me when your first outing is scheduled so I can check back with you to see how things are going."

Maggie grabbed a pad and pen from her night table and shakily wrote down Ryan's phone number and address. After saying goodbye to Mrs. Fletcher, she set the phone down and sank onto the bed, heedless of the spreading wet splotch she made as she soaked into the downy white comforter. She stared at the ceiling.

Should she call him now?

She sat up. Yes, she answered herself, she should do it now, before she lost her nerve. She stared numbly at the piece of notepaper that held Ryan Conner's phone number. She picked it up, then set it back down as if the paper had burned her fingers.

She stared at the notepaper again. She could see Ryan Conner's clear, cold stare in her memory. Then she remembered Brandy's earnest blue eyes, gazing hopefully at her.

Maggie picked up her pen and quickly punched in Ryan's phone number.

"Hello."

Maggie swallowed tightly.

"Mr. Conner—I mean, Ryan, this is Maggie Wells."

Good start, she chided herself.

"Yes?"

Maggie fingered the edge of her thick, damp towel.

"I'm calling about seeing Brandy next weekend, if that's all right," she said. "Mrs. Fletcher called me today."

"What time do you want to see her?" Ryan asked. His voice was businesslike and polite, without the animosity he had formerly shown, yet still lacking warmth.

"Well, there's a miniatures exhibit at the civic center this Saturday. I thought Brandy might like to see it," Maggie suggested, gaining confidence. "It starts at ten o'clock."

"Fine."

"Can I talk to—" Maggie began, but stopped short as she realized he had already hung up. She shook her head in frustration.

She put down the receiver and lay back on her soft bed, staring up at the ceiling. She hoped she hadn't just made a terrible mistake.

Maggie pressed slowly on the brake, easing her car to a smooth halt in front of Ryan Conner's house. The long, one-story gray brick house sat back from the road, partially hidden from the street by a stand of pine trees. The house occupied a large lot in a rural area just outside Charleston. From the large bare patch at the side of the house, Maggie could see Ryan was a gardener. This surprised her, and then she wondered why it should.

After all, she didn't really know anything about him. And based on his previous behavior, she had no reason to think that was going to change, she reminded herself.

He'll probably just push Brandy out the door without a word, she thought dryly.

Maggie took a deep breath and stepped out, slamming the door of her shiny silver sports car behind her. Her low heels clicked loudly in the quiet country air as she followed the flagged walkway to the front door. Grabbing the brass knocker, she banged loudly.

The door opened so quickly, she knew someone must have been watching her approach. The knocker fairly flew from Maggie's hand as Brandy yanked the door wide, a broad smile lighting her small face.

"Hi, Maggie!" she cried. "I'm almost ready. I just need my jacket."

Brandy tore off into the inner reaches of the house, leaving Maggie standing on the doorstep. Ryan Conner stepped forward toward the door.

"Maggie," he said, sounding oddly uncomfortable with her name. "Come in. Please."

Maggie forced a smile to her lips.

He's being polite, she thought. *Be polite back.*

"Thank you," she said carefully, and followed his outstretched arm. She was surprised to find how large the house looked once she was inside. The living room was light and spacious with wide windows giving view to a wooded backyard that seemed greatly devoted to Brandy's play. An elaborate swing set dominated a wide-open space between some pines, while a rudimentary tree house sat low in an oak.

"This is a lovely home," Maggie commented.

Ryan didn't ask her to sit down, so she stood and looked about with interest, determined not to let him bother her. She would be out of there in just a few minutes, she reminded herself, with the whole day to spend with Brandy alone.

She tried to concentrate on the view, but her eyes were drawn back to the man standing quietly at her side.

How tall he was. Maggie's slim height came close to that of many men, an asset in the business world, she'd always thought. But as she stood in the living room beside Ryan, she realized he was at least four inches taller than she was.

Ryan started to gesture Maggie to the couch, then stopped himself. He hesitated to take that extra step toward friendliness, afraid in his heart of where it might lead.

Maggie was supposed to be Brandy's friend, not his. And while easing the tension between them might seem to pave the way to a smoother relationship for Brandy and Maggie, Ryan knew that it could set a dangerous precedent.

As much as he feared Maggie might turn out to be like Delia, she appealed to him on an even deeper, more sensual, level. Maintaining the tension preserved the distance.

Ryan turned his back on Maggie and stared out the window at the dry winter day. Hands stuffed in his jeans pockets, he willed his daughter to hurry back with her jacket.

Brandy arrived suddenly in the living room, breathless from a run down the hallway, pulling on her jacket as she came. Ryan swiveled back around at the sound of her approach, grateful to no longer be alone with Maggie.

"I'm ready," Brandy announced with youthful exuberance for the anticipated treat.

"Great," Maggie said, grinning at her enthusiasm. Turning to Ryan, she added, "As I told you on the phone, we'll be going to the civic center to see the miniatures show.

"There will be all kinds of dolls and dollhouses on display," she continued, looking at Brandy. The little girl's eyes lit up.

"Should I bring Penny?" Brandy asked.

Maggie laughed. "Oh, I don't think so. What if you lost her among all the dolls at the show? I think you'd better leave her here," she advised.

"Okay," Brandy agreed, placing her hand in Maggie's. "Let's go."

Maggie looked down at the small hand in her own, touched by Brandy's warmth and easy acceptance. As they reached the door, Maggie turned back to say goodbye to Ryan and tell him when to expect them back. She was surprised to see him donning a brown suede jacket.

"You're going out?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, looking at her strangely. "I'm going with you."

"You're going with us?" Maggie repeated, her heart skipping a beat. "Why?"

"Do you have a problem with that?" he asked, as if she, rather than he, were the one suggesting something out of place.

"Well, I guess…I mean, I don't think that's the idea, do you?" she asked, fumbling to express herself and realizing she was not doing a very good job of it.

"Have you got a set of rules?" he challenged. Her expression of disbelief amused him as well as intrigued him. Apparently she wasn't any more eager to spend time with him than he was to spend time with her. But in this case, he was determined to insist. He had to make sure that allowing Maggie Wells into Brandy's life had been the correct choice. He couldn't simply let a complete stranger take his six-year-old daughter on an outing.

And since Brandy would be with them on this expedition, there would no worry of his dealing with Maggie alone. He wouldn't have any trouble maintaining the distance between them.

Maggie stiffened as she stared at Brandy's father. She could hardly believe what she was hearing from Ryan Conner. He acted as if he didn't trust her to care for Brandy alone!

Okay, Maggie, take a deep one, she told herself.

She breathed deep and smiled. It felt a little unnatural on her lips, but she was sure it looked all right.

"Well, then, let's go, shall we?" she suggested amicably, taking Brandy along with her out the door. Fighting Ryan on this when they were about to walk out the door would do no good, Maggie decided. Acquiesce, and live to battle another day.

She heard Ryan pulling the door shut as he followed them down the flagstone walk. Maggie hurried down the long path toward the street to her car until Brandy suddenly tugged on her arm. Maggie looked at Brandy, and followed her gaze back toward the house where Ryan stood in the driveway unlocking the door to a dark blue four-door sedan.

Ryan looked up and met her gaze coolly.

Maggie released a sigh and, slipping her car keys into her purse, walked with Brandy to the blue sedan. Brandy jumped in the back, leaving the front to Ryan and Maggie.

Ryan backed out of the driveway wordlessly while Brandy chattered away, leaning forward between the front seats as far as her seat belt would let her to talk to her father and Maggie. Aside from warning Brandy several times to sit back, Ryan listened quietly for the most part, allowing Maggie to talk to his daughter.

Glancing at Ryan from the corner of her eye, Maggie observed how his face softened whenever he spoke to Brandy.

He really adores her, Maggie thought. He appeared a completely different person with his daughter.

What do I do to make him react so harshly? Maggie wondered. He was clearly capable of gentleness.

I'm not even asking for gentleness, she thought, smiling to herself. Mere civility would do.

Her eyes met his and she didn't try to hide her smile.

His brows furrowed in response, and he stared hard at the road.

Ryan found himself oddly irritated by Maggie's seemingly unfaltering cheer. He felt anything but cheerful himself, caught as he was between desire and apprehension.

It was going to take a lot more than her word—or her smile—to convince Ryan that Maggie's dedication to Brandy was genuine and lasting. The women's outreach program might have sounded appealing to her on the face of it, but taking on the responsibility of being part of a child's life could involve sacrifices and commitments that Maggie Wells wasn't expecting.

Not everyone was willing to make those sacrifices and commitments. Especially for someone else's child. More than one promising relationship had ended for Ryan after the women learned he had sole custody of a young child. The experiences had made him all the more protective of Brandy—and of himself. Neither one of them needed any more disappointments.

Maggie chatted with Brandy about the various things they might see at the show as Ryan continued to drive silently. Relief swept over her when they arrived downtown at last. The three of them filed in behind a crowd of exhibitgoers.

We look just like a typical little family, Maggie thought, the notion coming to her from out of the blue. *These people probably look at us and think we're married.*

Now why did she think of that? She shook herself mentally and turned to Brandy, determined to focus on the little girl.

Brandy and Maggie wandered through the large open hall for several hours, stopping at every display table. Brandy peered and gasped with wonder at the intricate miniatures and the fancy dolls. Maggie enjoyed the light in Brandy's eyes every time the little girl saw something that particularly excited her. Ryan followed along behind them slowly, staying just far enough back to make it almost seem as if he weren't there.

"Look!" Brandy cried. "They're real little playing cards! They have numbers and pictures and everything."

Brandy leaned comfortably on Maggie and pressed her nose against the glass display case. Maggie turned around to find Ryan staring at her, his forehead knitted in thought.

She tried smiling at him, but he looked away.

Finally Brandy had seen everything except the children's puppet show that played every half hour. Maggie settled her on the floor near the puppet stage and retreated to the back of the theater area where Ryan waited, arms crossed, a bored expression on his face.

Maggie stood beside him and stared at the puppet show with unseeing eyes, trying to ignore the fact that he was ignoring her. Five minutes later, she knew it was no use. She couldn't stand it. She turned and faced his stern profile.

"Mr. Conner."

He looked at her blandly.

At least he knows I'm alive, she thought.

"Ryan." The word came out of his mouth in a short clip.

"Of course," Maggie said. *He does hate it when I call him Mr. Conner,* she thought. Her lips curved upward slightly. "Sorry," she said.

He turned away again.

"Wait a minute," Maggie said. He looked back at her. "I think we should talk. I don't know why you came here with us today, or what exactly your problem is with me. I just know that you agreed to allow me to work with Brandy. Obviously you decided I could provide something your daughter needs. You might as well let me do it."

The words had tumbled out before she could think them through, but she knew they had to be said. Things couldn't go on this way.

"Why do you disapprove of me?" she demanded when he didn't respond to her outburst.

"Disapprove?" he repeated so softly, she could barely hear him over the laughter of the children.

"I don't know. Disapprove, or whatever." Maggie shook her head. "Look, you're the one who told Mrs. Fletcher you wanted me to work with Brandy."

"Brandy chose you, not I," he corrected. "I want what's best for Brandy. She doesn't always know what's best for herself. Sometimes I let her make her own decisions, but I don't want to see her get hurt. I want to make sure that allowing her to make this decision was right."

"You have to give me a chance if you're ever going to find that out," Maggie retorted hotly. "You don't need to tag along with us or drive us around in your car."

He cocked his head and, for the first time, Maggie thought she detected the glimmer of a grin on his face.

"I don't find this amusing," she said, surprising herself at the rising anger she felt. "I'm not playing games here."

"Oh, no?" he questioned, all evidence of the grin gone. "You want to play at having a part-time daughter who you can put away and take out whenever you want to."

"That's ridiculous," Maggie answered quickly.

"Really?" he asked. "Why aren't you married, with a family of your own?"

Maggie was speechless for a moment. Who did Ryan Conner think he was, questioning her about her marital status? Her stomach tightened as she stifled the indignant question.

For Brandy's sake, she'd stop before the conversation degenerated into a shouting match.

"You know, I think I'll just wait in one of those chairs by the wall," she said coldly, abruptly leaving Ryan.

Maggie was still fuming when Brandy rushed over, flushed with laughter, dragging her father behind her.

It's going to be a long ride home, Maggie thought.

To Maggie's relief, it was weeks later before she shared the same air space with Ryan in an automobile again. This time it was in her own car.

And she gained a perverse pleasure from the entire episode.

Ryan had not joined Maggie and Brandy on an outing since that first time until Brandy had requested that her two favorite "big people" go to the movies together with her.

Maggie firmly suggested they go in her car and restrained her laughter when Ryan acquiesced to Brandy's request that she be allowed to sit up front with Maggie. He couldn't have realized how small her back seat was when he'd agreed to his daughter's plan, and Maggie felt no compunction to warn him. He hadn't complained about the inconvenience, however, as he sat, knees hunched, in the back seat of Maggie's sports car.

Throughout the afternoon he remained his usual quiet self. The nearly two months since he had met Maggie had made him no less distant than he'd been that day in Mrs. Fletcher's office. With that confrontation in the exhibit hall still replaying itself in Maggie's mind, she hadn't been eager to instigate conversation herself. Fortunately, moviegoing naturally necessitated little talk. And Brandy took care of filling what otherwise might have been silence in the car.

"Can we stop and look at the alligators, Daddy? Please!" Brandy begged on their way home from the movie theater, turning to her father with pleading eyes.

Maggie glanced back and witnessed the harsh planes of Ryan's face softening as he smiled at his daughter. She knew now that it hadn't been her imagination that Ryan Conner had a soft side.

She just couldn't figure out why his daughter was the only one who got the benefit of it.

Ryan nodded his agreement to Brandy's plan, and Maggie pulled her car over onto the dirt just past the narrow two-lane bridge that spanned a swamp. Brandy had shown her the spot and talked her into stopping to look for 'gators several times already since they'd first met.

As the car rolled to a halt, Brandy jumped out, ran to the guardrail at the side of the low bridge and peered over. Maggie held back a smile as Ryan uncurled his muscular length from the back seat.

He rose to his full height, then bent to rub the back of one knee. He straightened and looked up, meeting Maggie's amused gaze.

Serves you right, she thought.

"I hope you weren't too uncomfortable back there," she said aloud in a sweetly solicitous voice.

"Not at all," Ryan replied evenly. Eyeing his daughter, he called out, "Be careful, Brandy. Don't lean over too far."

Ryan had spied the twinkle in Maggie's green eyes that told him she found it highly entertaining that he'd endured a ride in the back seat of her sports car. He knew he should by all rights be irritated with her. But he wasn't.

Instead, he'd spent the afternoon absorbing how wonderful she was with his daughter, what a genuine rapport they'd clearly developed. In the weeks since she'd been matched with Brandy, Maggie had kept to her word about meeting with Brandy every two weeks, and had determinedly sought out activities that the little girl enjoyed.

The bottom line was that Brandy had never seemed happier. Ryan was forced to give the credit for that to Maggie.

Waiting by the car, Ryan watched Brandy. Not immediately spying any alligators, the little girl grabbed Maggie's arm and pulled her across the empty road to try the other side. Ryan followed and stood quietly beside Maggie as Brandy ran up and down the guardrail searching for signs of reptilian life below.

Maggie smiled as she glanced at Ryan standing beside her. The warm early March breeze, carrying a hint of the ocean's salty scent across the inland swamp, softly ruffled his dark hair. *He* is *handsome,* Maggie thought as she watched him, remembering her first conversation with Emma about Ryan. She noted how relaxed Ryan's face appeared, not stern and tense the way she usually saw him.

She found herself noticing little things, such as how long his eyelashes were for a man. Then she observed the tiny laugh crinkles around his eyes that suggested a man of better humor than he had so far displayed to her. He was not as cold as he seemed, Maggie thought. She almost felt guilty for laughing to herself about his being scrunched up in the back seat.

Ryan turned and looked at her. She realized that she was staring—and that she had been caught.

"I'm sorry," Maggie said with a shaky laugh. "I was just thinking."

"About what?" Ryan asked, his eyes strangely gentle as he looked into hers.

Maggie retreated from his uncharacteristic friendliness by transferring her gaze to the murky green water below.

"I love the way the swamp looks different every time I drive by it on the way out to your house," she said, dissembling. She looked back at Ryan. "It's always changing, with each breeze. See, it's moving even now." Maggie pointed to a huge lily pad bordered by tall fur-topped cattails that shifted with the spring wind.

"Yes," Ryan agreed. "That's what I like about it, too." Then, so softly Maggie had to lean toward him slightly to hear it, he added, "It's very peaceful and uncomplicated."

For just a few seconds, she saw the familiar expression that he seemed to normally reserve only for his daughter.

You'd almost think he wanted to be friends, she pondered. *Or at least to start over as something other than enemies.*

"How's school?" Maggie asked suddenly, afraid to let the moment of fragile rapport slip away. She had never heard him talk about his work, but she often chanced upon him grading papers or buried in books when she dropped by on the weekends to pick up Brandy.

"Good," he replied in a noncommittal tone, then, surprisingly, he smiled. A smile that lit his face and sparked an odd tingle in the pit of Maggie's stomach. "It's always a challenge trying to make kids like reading the classics," he continued. "And it allows me to have school holidays and summers to spend with Brandy."

"I can see that means a lot to you," Maggie observed warmly. "It sounds like you really enjoy the work, too. I loved literature in high school myself. I still remember my twelfth-grade English teacher. I admired her so much that for a while I wanted to be an English teacher, too. I even went so far as to minor in English at college," she told him.

Ryan froze inside, suddenly wary. He recalled how he and Delia had studied English together during their college years. He'd entered the teaching profession, and Delia had gone on to law school, launching a lucrative, high-powered career in corporate law. She'd never understood Ryan's dedication to his "little teaching job."

"But you ended up in business," Ryan cut in, retreating protectively. "A real career woman." The realization of how easily he could be swept away into the sultry depths of Maggie's misty green eyes burst over his mind. He looked around for Brandy, resolving to be more careful in the future.

Maggie stared at Ryan, stunned. *Where did that come from?* she wondered, feeling as if he'd just slapped her.

"Brandy, let's go," Ryan called. "I don't think we're going to see any 'gators today."

As he spoke, Maggie noticed a dark shadow gliding through the water beside a thin tree in the middle of the swamp. Its long head, saddled with bulging eye sockets, cut the water in a slim, straight line toward the bridge.

"Look, Brandy!" Maggie called. She grabbed Brandy's hand and pulled her away from her father and back to the edge of the bridge.

Brandy squealed with delight, clutching Maggie's hand tightly. Maggie looked over her shoulder. Ryan stood by her car, his face an expressionless mask.

Whatever had been between them for those few moments had evaporated as quickly as it had appeared, she realized.

The sounds of terror woke Ryan, rousing him from sleep automatically. He knew what was wrong. He'd been through it all before. Too many times.

"Brandy? Sweetheart?" he called as he stumbled down the dark hallway to his daughter's room. He crawled into the bed and hugged Brandy's small, shaking body. "I'm here," he comforted her, holding her tight. "Daddy's here."

"I dreamed—" Brandy cried, sobs choking out the words.

"I know, I know," Ryan whispered, rocking her back and forth.

"You won't ever leave me, will you, Daddy?" Brandy asked, her voice thick with tears.

"No, Brandy. You know I won't ever leave you."

"Mommy did."

Pain pricked along Ryan's nerves. He drew Brandy closer.

"I won't leave you, sweetheart. I promise. Cross my heart."

"And hope to die?"

"And hope to die," Ryan repeated.

He held her tight, knowing by the even rhythm of her breathing when she slept. But sleep eluded him, and he stared up at the ceiling, waiting for the soft rays of morning to light the room.

Would Brandy ever stop having nightmares? he wondered as he lay quietly, his daughter peaceful once more in his arms. He thought back to when the dreams had started, the night Delia had left.

Brandy had been three. So young, so impressionable. So unable to understand that her mother's sudden departure had nothing to do with her, in spite of her father's reassurances.

Brandy usually went for months without having the nightmare. Then it would come back suddenly, as forceful and terrifying as ever. Ryan could only console himself that the frequency of the nightmares was lessening as time went on. Brandy's pediatrician had assured him that eventually the dreams would subside completely.

She hadn't had the nightmare since she'd started seeing Maggie, he realized suddenly. There was usually a trigger to the episodes, he'd learned. Thinking back on the day before, he remembered their time at the movies, and stopping off at the bridge to watch for alligators.

When Maggie had dropped them off at home, Brandy had asked her to help her with her school play. All the kids' mothers were making costumes, Brandy had said. And so she wanted her special friend to help her.

Maggie had eagerly agreed.

Maybe, Ryan considered, Brandy wasn't quite as comfortable as she'd appeared with having Maggie substitute for her mother. Brandy rarely mentioned Delia, and it was difficult for Ryan to know how much hurt she might be hiding.

Pale light streaked through the divided panes of Brandy's bedroom window as Ryan fell asleep. The next thing he was aware of was his daughter poking his shoulder, calling his name.

"Daddy?" Brandy called, her voice close to his ear, her finger prodding insistently into his skin through his pajama top. "Wake up. Maggie's here."

Chapter Three

Ryan sleepily pulled himself up from Brandy's narrow twin bed, automatically reaching to rub the middle of his back with one hand. A night comforting Brandy never failed to leave him with aching muscles.

He yawned, staring at his daughter quizzically. Although he had no idea what time it was, he was sure it was early.

Too early for Maggie to be at his house.

"Come on, Daddy," Brandy said, tugging on his arm. She cocked her head to the side. "Did you forget Maggie said she was coming over this morning to help me with my costume for the play?" she asked.

He *had* forgotten. He glanced down at his blue striped pajamas.

"Tell her I'll be there in a minute," he told her as he stood, his joints rebelling as he stretched to his full height. "And get dressed," he instructed Brandy, noticing that she still wore her lace-edged flannel nightgown, bare toes peeping out below.

After treating his tired muscles to a shower that went by all too fast, and donning jeans and a thick, comfortable sweater, Ryan emerged into the hallway, tempted both by the rich aroma of coffee and the musical sounds of high-pitched laughter.

Turning the corner into the living room, Ryan found Brandy draped with a huge swatch of velvety forest green material while Maggie stood back, studying her, pins clenched between her teeth. A cup of steaming coffee rested on a nearby end table.

"Daddy!" Brandy squealed, spotting her father. "Look at me. I'm going to look like a real flower!"

Maggie turned and smiled tentatively at Ryan. She wasn't sure what to expect from him, especially after discovering that her arrival had woken him up.

"Hi," she said, removing the pins from her mouth. She could see Ryan had only recently emerged from a shower, his dark hair curling damply around the back of his sweater collar. He smelted lightly of musk—appealing and masculine. "I hope you don't mind that I took the liberty of making coffee in your kitchen. I brought doughnuts." She nodded to the dining room table, where a paper carton of glazed doughnuts waited.

"Actually, coffee sounds great right about now," Ryan told her, his voice softly neutral. "It was a long night. Thanks."

Maggie wondered what he was referring to, but hesitated to ask. The last time they'd strayed to a personal topic, she'd gotten her head bitten off. She wasn't in any hurry to repeat the experience.

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