



Silhouette

1828
August

SILHOUETTE
Romance

Nanny and the Beast

DONNA CLAYTON

Donna Clayton

Nanny and the Beast

«HarperCollins»

Clayton D.

Nanny and the Beast / D. Clayton — «HarperCollins»,

Sophia Stanton has worked too hard building a thriving nanny-placement service to risk it and try juggling career and family. But when single dad Michael Taylor fires three of her nannies in quick succession, Sophia decides to confront the Beast (that's what her employees call him) directly by temporarily acting as nanny for his baby girl....-Having been badly burned by his precious daughter's shameless mother, Michael has every Reason to distrust women. But as Sophia enters his home and gently endears herself to his daughter, the walls around his stone heart start to crumble. Awed by her beauty and caring, Michael wonders if his heart can be trusted now to make a wrong right...

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If Sophia made a big deal of being close to him, she'd only succeed in allowing him to see...well, that this was a big deal to her.

He wrapped his arms around her waist, picked her up and twirled her around in a circle. "What was it you said?" Michael's chocolaty eyes lit. "That my parents would be dancing-a-jig happy?"

"I knew they'd be pleased." Sophia hoped the breathlessness she heard in her words was a figment of her freaked-out imagination.

"If you hadn't spoken up," he whispered, "I don't know how long I'd have waited to tell them they had a granddaughter."

"I can see that." She sighed, swiftly getting caught up in the vortex that seemed to spin crazily around them.

"I want you to know how grateful I am."

She was going to utter his name sharply. She was going to plant her hand on his chest. She was going to lean away from him.

But she did none of those things.

Dear Reader,

This month seems to be all about change. Just as our heroines are about to have some fabulous makeovers, Silhouette Romance will be undergoing some changes over the next months that we believe will make this classic line even more relevant to your challenging lives. Of course, you'll still find some of your favorite SR authors and favorite themes, but look for some new names, more international settings and even more emotional reads.

Over the next few months the company is also focusing attention on the new direction and package for Harlequin Romance. We believe that the blend of authors and stories coming in that line will thrill readers and satisfy every emotion.

Just like our heroines, my responsibilities will be changing, as I will be working on Harlequin NEXT. Please know how much I have enjoyed sharing these heartwarming, aspirational reads with you.

With all best wishes,

Ann Leslie Tuttle

Associate Senior Editor

Nanny and the Beast

Donna Clayton



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For Joy with love

To Dad

You have shown me the meaning of joyful and wholehearted dedication to God and family;

You have fostered my faith; And you continue to teach me, by flawless example, how to be a loving and supportive parent.

Thank you.

Books by Donna Clayton

Silhouette Romance

Mountain Laurel #720

Taking Love in Stride #781

Return of the Runaway Bride #999

Wife for a While #1039

Nanny and the Professor #1066

Fortune's Bride #1118

Daddy Down the Aisle #1162

*Miss Maxwell Becomes a Mom #1211

*Nanny in the Nick of Time #1217

*Beauty and the Bachelor Dad #1223

†The Stand-By Significant Other #1284

†Who's the Father of Jenny's Baby? #1302

The Boss and the Beauty #1342

His Ten-Year-Old Secret #1373

Her Dream Come True #1399

Adopted Dad #1417

His Wild Young Bride #1441

**The Nanny Proposal #1477

**The Doctor's Medicine Woman #1483

**Rachel and the M.D. #1489

Who Will Father My Baby? #1507

In Pursuit of a Princess #1582

††The Sheriff's 6-Year-Old Secret #1623

††The Doctor's Pregnant Proposal #1635

††Thunder in the Night #1647

The Nanny's Plan #1701

Because of Baby #1723

Bound by Honor #1797

Nanny and the Beast #1828

Silhouette Books

The Coltons

Close Proximity

Logan's Legacy

Royal Seduction

DONNA CLAYTON

is a bestselling, award-winning author. She and her husband divide their time between homes in northern Delaware and Maryland's Eastern Shore. They have two sons. Donna also writes women's fiction as Donna Fasano.

Please write to Donna care of Silhouette Books. She'd love to hear from you!

Dear Reader,

Nannies (and stories featuring nannies) have always held a place near and dear to my heart. You see, my sister-in-law, Joy, trained and worked as a nanny. From her, I learned that the amazing women (and, I'm sure, a few men) who choose to become nannies have a special love for and devotion to children.

Joy was born and raised in a small town in Kansas. She left Lebo to attend nanny school and earned her certification. Joy then moved to Washington, D.C., where she lived with and worked for a family with two children. She loved her job and was dedicated to those children. After a few years, she met my brother and is currently experiencing her very own "happily ever after."

Joy's experience as a nanny prepared her to become the most nurturing of mothers. Her children are loving and mannerly and kind and smart as can be! She's done an amazing job of raising them, and I hope she knows how very proud I am of the job she has done. I also hope she knows how much I love her and that I'm happy to call her sister. (Thanks for answering all my nanny questions, Joy!)

I hope all of you enjoy reading Sophia's story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

All the best,

Donna Clayton

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Chapter One

“It’s him! It’s him! He just pulled up out front.”

Sophia Stanton refused to let the tension in Karen’s voice rattle her. Her part-time assistant was easily flustered.

“Him?” Sophia asked, placing her pen on the desktop and glancing toward the doorway. “Him who?”

Karen’s eyes widened and her voice lowered to a whisper. “The Beast.” She reached up and plucked at the short, spiky locks behind her ear. Then she craned her neck to look out the front window. “He just took his baby out of the back of his SUV.” She sucked in a tight breath. “And Lily just got out, too. Her face is four shades of red.”

Sophia stifled a groan. She didn’t need more aggravation this morning; two of her girls had called in sick and replacements were yet to be found. But knowing the track record of Mr. Michael Taylor, aka “The Beast,” she steeled herself for the worst.

When it came to providing care for his month-old daughter, the man seemed impossible to please. He’d fired two of Sophia’s nannies in the past three weeks. The young women had come back to the office reporting that he was demanding and inflexible, so much so that everyone at The Nanny Place was certain he must sport horns and a spiked tail. One thing was certain—Mr. Taylor was fast becoming a beastly pain in Sophia’s butt.

“Okay,” Sophia told Karen, inhaling deeply to prepare herself. “Let’s just stay calm. Keep Lily out there with you, and show him in here immediately. And then I need for you to get in touch with Terry. Ask her if she’s able to cover for Isabel today.”

“Terry lives below the canal,” Karen reminded her. “She’ll never reach the city in time for Mrs. Schaffer to get to work on time.”

“I’ll call and explain.” Sophia gathered up the paperwork on her desk and set it to one side. The Beast would be here any second. “And I’ll find someone to fill in for Paula, too. Just as soon as I take care of this problem.”

Karen tugged at her hair again, the pen curled between her fingers nearly poking her chin. “They’re here.” Trepidation rippled through her whisper. “Good luck,” she added, before disappearing from the doorway.

Sophia stood, smoothed her hand over the skirt of her dark suit and then paused long enough to take one more deep breath, the kind she’d learned in her yoga class. Her instructor swore yoga could help in every aspect of her life and right now she was willing to take all the help she could get.

Michael Taylor didn’t just walk in to her office, he stormed in, closing the door firmly behind him. Anger honed his handsome features and seemed out of sync with the awkward gentleness with which he cradled his baby girl.

His most striking feature was his gaze. Those deep brown eyes flashed with extreme intensity—irritation, yes, but something else, too, some powerful force emanating from within. He had the kind of good looks and trim, athletic body that made a sensible woman think thoughts she shouldn’t, and consider doing things she normally wouldn’t. Sophia wouldn’t have been the least surprised to learn that females who passed him on the street routinely broke out into appreciative wolf whistles.

“Good morning, Mr. Taylor,” Sophia greeted, infusing a bright friendliness into her voice while completely ignoring the palpable ire radiating off the man.

“There’s not much good about it, I’m afraid.” Annoyance sharpened every word.

Oh, yeah, women might whistle for his attention, but all they’d get for their trouble was a rumbling growl.

“I fired Lily this morning,” he told her.

Sophia wanted to swear, but held her tongue. He was a client and she had to do her best to please him. Her mind raced. Did she even have anyone else willing to work for the man?

“We need to fix the problem I’ve been having with the nannies you’re sending me, Ms. Stanton, and we need to fix it now.”

A sigh of frustration gathered in Sophia’s chest, but she didn’t allow it to escape with any kind of real force. “Of course we do. And we will, I assure you.” Then she asked, “What did Lily do?”

“It’s what she didn’t do. She didn’t follow the rules. It’s not as if my needs are difficult to meet. But I do insist that any nanny working for me will follow the damn rules.”

The Damn Rules was an apt description, Sophia thought. Apparently, there were literally pages of them, and they covered every conceivable notion when it came to his daughter’s care. There was even a dress code for the nannies. It wasn’t enough that the young women she’d sent him were highly trained in childcare. Michael Taylor wanted them to look and dress and act a certain way. To better focus on the childcare, is what she’d heard. Demanding such a thing was his prerogative, she guessed. However, no woman wanted to be told she couldn’t wear nail polish or eye shadow or dangly earrings, or that her skirt had to hang below her knees, or that her hair had to be pulled back in a bun. A bun! Buns went out with pixie bobs, for goodness sake. What was he running? A Catholic grade school? It was ridiculous.

“First off,” he continued, “I take exception to the fact that the nannies you’re sending me are barely out of their teens. How can girls—” the emphasis he placed on the word made Sophia want to cringe “—with so little life experience make sound, common-sense judgments in day-to-day circumstances, let alone emergency situations? I’m supposed to trust them with my daughter?”

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Taylor.” Although she understood his fears—he was a new father—she felt she had to stand up for her employees. “Both of them—” Lily flashed into Sophia’s mind, and she instantly corrected herself. “All three of the nannies you’ve fired this month have been thoroughly trained. They have earned a childcare diploma from an accredited nanny school as well as a medical safety certificate. That’s the only way they qualify to register at The Nanny Place. I complete the background checks myself. Your daughter has been in capable hands—”

“I manage people for a living,” he interrupted. “I have seen, firsthand, that training isn’t always enough. A healthy dose of life experience goes a long way in helping people make sensible decisions when they’re faced with even the most mundane choices. I’ll take a forty-year-old with firm common sense over a green Gen-Xer any day of the week. The girls you’ve sent me need just that—a healthy dose of life experience. I don’t want them acquiring it at the sake of Hailey’s well-being.”

“But—”

“No,” he interrupted. “No buts. I want you to send me someone older. Someone wiser. Lily has worked for me for three days. She knows the daily schedule we keep. Yet she stepped into the shower just five minutes before I was supposed to leave for work. I want you to send me someone who can follow a simple schedule.”

Sophia silently groaned. Lily was going to get an earful from her.

“I want someone with professionalism,” he continued, “and experience. Someone who’s lived long enough to have gained some practical knowledge of what it takes to care for an infant. A motherly type. Better yet, a grandmotherly type.”

“Sounds like you want a Mrs. Doubtfire.” The joking sarcasm rolled off her tongue before she’d had a chance to stop it.

He went dead silent for a moment, staring at her. Then the harsh angles of his face softened and he chuckled. He actually laughed. The sexy, delicious rumble was completely unexpected. Some sort of strange electricity shot through her body, scrambling her thoughts. This was a side of The Beast she’d never experienced. She blinked a couple of times in quick succession, and then gathered her wits as quickly as she could. Fostering the lighthearted moment seemed a good idea.

“Um, Mr. Taylor, you do know that, although she was great with children, she was a middle-aged man in drag? A fictional character created by some Hollywood screenwriter.”

“Of course, I do.”

His amusement was gone as quickly as it had come. But the humming current he’d cause to flutter through her lingered with irritating tenacity.

“I think I’ve made my needs quite clear,” he told her. “If you’re unable to provide what I’m asking, then that can only mean that your business motto is a sham. I don’t mind telling you that I’m not happy, and I seriously think we ought to consider parting ways. I’ll have to find a nanny on my own.”

“Hold on just a second,” Sophia said. Her mind raced. “Backing out of our contract is a little extreme, isn’t it?”

She’d read that a satisfied customer might express his or her opinion about a company to approximately fifty friends, relatives and casual acquaintances, whereas a disgruntled one could be expected to complain to many times that.

“I don’t think so. You’ve had three chances to send a nanny that would meet my approval. You’ve failed three times.”

He sure didn’t have a problem speaking his mind, now, did he?

She hadn’t faced this kind of fiasco since opening the doors of The Nanny Place. No one had ever called her a failure before. To the contrary, Delaware Today magazine had awarded her business the title of “Best childcare in the city of Wilmington” for the last two years running.

“What you don’t seem to understand,” Sophia stressed, putting every effort into coming up with a swift recovery, “is that when women reach that ‘older, wiser’ stage you’ve described, they’re either ready to settle down and have children of their own—”

She shook her head, unable to believe the words tumbling out of her mouth. They had a jarring, sexist ring to them, but that couldn’t be helped. She needed an argument. Any argument.

“Or they’re ready to retire, do some traveling, take a cruise, enjoy their golden years. Or their own grandchildren. I only have two women over the age of twenty-five registered at The Nanny Place. Both are grandmothers in their mid-to-late fifties and they’re on long-term assignments with families in Wilmington.”

He glanced down at his sleeping daughter, and then leveled his gaze at Sophia. Calmly, he said, “So you’re telling me the bottom line is I’m going to remain an unsatisfied client?”

Discontent crackled in the air as he waited for her response and Sophia fought the urge to squirm. Damn it! The man wasn’t going to best her.

“I intend to make sure you are very satisfied, Mr. Taylor,” she blurted out. Heat suffused her face when she realized what she’d said and how those words could very easily be misconstrued. Ignoring the embarrassment she felt, she plowed full steam ahead. “Even if I’m the one who has to come do the job,” she heard herself say.

His brows arched the slightest bit and he absently smoothed his fingers down the short length of his daughter’s milky arm. “Now there’s a good idea.” He nodded slowly, evidently liking the notion more with each passing second.

Her comment had been merely meant to assure him she honestly intended to find him the perfect nanny, and she wouldn’t stop trying until she’d succeeded. Apparently, he hadn’t taken it that way. Not at all. A sense of panic washed over her. “Mr. Taylor—”

“You’re certainly older than twenty-five,” he mused, his fingers toying with the edge of the baby blanket.

She bristled. He made her sound downright matronly.

“And the fact that you’re running your own business tells me that you’ve got intellect and common sense. Two important characteristics for the person I want caring for my daughter.”

He was clearly warming up to this surprising turn of events. She opened her mouth to speak.

“If you spend a few weeks getting to know Hailey,” he said, not giving her a chance to restate what she’d actually intended, “getting to know me, getting to know our situation and our needs, you’d be better equipped to find the kind of nanny I’m looking for.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say “but...but,” to backpedal herself out of the tight space she’d inadvertently talked herself into. She couldn’t do this! She had a business to run. She wasn’t a nanny. She was the administrator.

Oh, she’d had all the proper training and she even took over childcare duties once in a while when the rare problem or an emergency cropped up, so she was fully capable of—

“I usually take dead silence to have negative meaning,” he said, studying her intently. “Should I assume you aren’t going to honor your guarantee? And that your motto of ‘no client left unsatisfied’ is simply a string of meaningless words?” He lifted a shoulder. “If that’s the case, then I have no choice but to cancel our contract as of this moment.”

“Wait. I’m not saying any of that,” she sputtered. “I’m also not saying I won’t do it. I’m just thinking things through. Working out the logistics.”

Her mind whirled; other than scheduling appointments with prospective clients and handling a few glitches that arose, there wasn’t a whole lot Sophia couldn’t take care of with her cell phone. And her assistant, Karen, had been asking—no, begging—to go full-time since coming to work for her, but up until now Sophia had only needed help in the office during the busy morning hours.

“I hope you’re thinking fast,” he persisted, “because I don’t have all day.” He tenderly shifted his daughter to his other arm and checked his watch. “In fact, I have to be at the office in forty-five minutes.”

Darn! He wasn’t going to give her an inch. She gritted her teeth. All he was worried about was himself. What about her business? What about the people depending on her?

But how else was she going to make Michael Taylor happy, at this point, other than to take over as his daughter’s nanny for the few weeks, as he was demanding?

Keeping him happy would mean keeping her pristine business reputation. That was very important to her. She prided herself on the fact that not one client, past or present, had a single grievance against her or The Nanny Place. Oh, there were small insignificant matters that surfaced from time to time between the nannies and their employers, but there hadn’t been even one instance where Sophia hadn’t been able to straighten everything out, and make everyone concerned content and happy. She refused to allow this man to mar her perfect record.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll do it. If you’ll let me sort a few things out here, I can be at your place in forty-five minutes.”

“Excellent. Less than forty-five minutes, actually. I’ll head home and wait for you.” He turned toward the door.

“Hold it,” she said, an idea popping into her head. “Why don’t you just leave Hailey with me now? I can use your carseat to get her back to your place. That way you won’t be late for work, and I can take my time getting things settled here.”

Seemed like a perfectly good plan to her, but evidently he didn’t think so.

“Won’t work.” His tone brooked no argument. “We still have to go over the rules and Hailey’s schedule. They’re at my place. Typed out in black and white. I’d also feel more comfortable if I had the chance to show you around. Make you acquainted with where things are.”

That did make sense, she thought.

“You have my address?” he asked.

“Yes, of course.” She hurried around him and opened the door. This was happening much too fast. She followed him out to the reception area where she noticed that Lily stood stewing near Karen’s desk. Her hair was still damp from that ill-fated shower she’d taken this morning. Karen looked as if she expected something horrible to happen at any moment. Sophia quickly added, “I’ll have my assistant download driving directions to your home from the ‘Net, Mr. Taylor. No problem.”

As soon as Sophia spoke the words, Karen's head dipped and her fingers flew over her computer keyboard.

His back was to Sophia as he walked across the room and headed for the door. His pin-striped dress shirt accentuated his broad shoulders, and his navy trousers cuddled a firm butt. He paused and turned to face Sophia, and her gaze darted up to where it belonged—his face.

Again, he checked his watch. "I'll see you soon, Ms. Stanton."

She nodded once, and then he was out the door. She continued to stare as he stepped off the curb, her gaze inadvertently traveling down the full length of him.

Her spine straightened and she blinked. She was going to have to hustle to get everything done here at the office. She made a quick mental list; a short talk with Lily, then give Karen instructions, a couple of phone calls, a quick stop in the powder room and she'd be out the door.

"Lily said he fired her." Karen's eyes were wide.

"It was so unfair," Lily chimed in.

Karen shifted in her chair. "Who are you going to send this time, Sophia? Do we have anyone left who isn't afraid of that guy?"

"We most certainly do," Sophia murmured, her gaze continuing to linger on Michael Taylor. The morning sunlight burnished his tawny hair. Why she was standing here wasting time baffled her, yet there was something about the man that made it hard to tear her eyes away.

"Well, who?"

Ignoring her assistant's question, Sophia turned her attention to Lily. "What happened this morning? How could you get yourself fired after only three days?"

Lily's chin tipped upward.

Sophia lifted her hands in frustration. "He said you showered late. That you couldn't keep to the schedule."

"This had nothing to do with his precious schedule," Lily spat out. "This was about that stupid robe rule. I wasn't wearing mine this morning."

"He has a rule about wearing a robe?" Karen asked. "That's a new one, isn't it?"

"He added it the second day I worked for him. He has rules for everything," Lily complained. "Rules for when his daughter eats, when she sleeps. What music is played in the house. What books are read and when. There are pages and pages of rules. And he keeps adding to them."

Sophia had heard it all before from the other nannies who had cared for Michael Taylor's daughter.

"And the ones dictating our dress code are the worst. I wanted to flip on the bitch-switch several times, Sophia. But I controlled myself." Lily turned her eyes to Karen. "And even though it cost me that job, I refused to say I was sorry this morning. Heck, I was just being me."

Obvious rebellion tinged Lily's voice. Sophia crossed her arms. "And what exactly does that mean?"

Sucking in a long-suffering breath, Lily explained, "The baby had been up most of last night. I knew she wasn't going to wake up anytime soon. I needed a shower so I could feel human, okay? I was tired. I forgot my robe. Why should it matter, anyway, when my room was right across the hall from the bathroom?"

Sophia's patience thinned. "Okay, so you weren't wearing a robe. What were you wearing?"

There was mutiny in Lily's silence.

Karen softly sang, "Can you say scanty panties from Victoria's Secret?"

Picturing the barely clad models in the famous lingerie catalog, astonishment made Sophia's jaw go slack. "Lily! You didn't. How could you? Why would you? You know he's asked all the nannies to be covered from neck to knee. Why would you prance around halfnaked in front of the man?"

Lily pursed her lips, her expression a mixture of anger and insult. “I wasn’t prancing. And I was wearing a nightie.” Then she muttered, “The least he could have done was notice. I swear the man has ice water running through his veins.”

Only a nineteen-year-old would feel offended when her employer hadn’t seemed to notice her shapely figure even though he’d specifically asked not to see it.

“So you did it on purpose.” Sophia let her hands fall to her sides.

“Of course I didn’t do it on purpose,” Lily said. “I told you. I’d been up half the night with Hailey. I was exhausted. What I wear to bed is my business.”

Sophia rubbed at the dull ache thumping behind her temple. “Being caught in the hallway wearing skimpy pj’s shouldn’t warrant being fired.”

Chagrin made Lily balk. “It wasn’t the first time.” She grimaced, reluctantly admitting, “Or the second.”

Karen snickered, and Sophia silenced her with a sharp glance. She’d heard enough of Lily’s predicament.

“What you’re saying is that he had good reason for implementing a robe rule.” Remembering the ticking clock, Sophia’s irritation simmered over. “I don’t have time for this. Lily, if you can’t be more considerate of the people paying your salary, maybe you don’t deserve to work here.”

“But I need this job!”

“I know you do. That’s why I’m not letting you go. But I am putting you on probation. If you show me you’ve learned something from this experience—”

“Yeah.” Karen smirked. “Like maybe buying some flannel nightgowns and white cotton granny panties.”

“Hush, Karen.” Sophia had had all she could take. She looked at Lily. “You can fill in for Paula for today and Karen will work on getting you another full-time position.”

“I will?” Karen asked, clearly surprised. “But that’s not usually in my job description.”

“Your job description is changing as of right now.” The wake Sophia created as she breezed past Karen’s desk on her way to the powder room made several papers flutter. “You’ve been asking to go full-time, haven’t you?”

“You know I have.” Karen went very still and serious.

Sophia flipped on the powder room light. “Well, now’s your chance. You’ll be running the office for the next two weeks. It’s a big job. Can you handle the responsibility?” She glanced into the mirror over the sink.

Gathering her thick hair in her fingers, Sophia twisted it into a knot and secured it with a clip. She knew Mr. Taylor liked his nannies to keep their hair out of their eyes.

“Are you kidding me? You know I can handle it. That reminds me, Terry’s on her way to the Schaffers to cover for Isabel. I’ve already called Mrs. Schaffer to let her know Terry would be late. But what’s going on? Where will you be?”

“Yeah, Sophia,” Lily chimed in. “You going to tell us what’s up? You never said which lucky nanny gets to go work for The Beast.”

While Lily talked, Sophia turned on the faucet and scrubbed the makeup from her face. Then she patted her forehead, cheeks and chin dry. “He likes his nannies plain, right?”

Slowly but surely, both Karen and Lily figured out the plan. “You?” they asked in unison.

“That’s right.” Sophia smoothed her hand over the lapel of her jacket and then tugged at its hem. “I’m saving the spotless reputation of The Nanny Place. If Mr. Michael Taylor wants a sedate, older nanny, I’m going to give him just that,” she declared, adjusting her Mrs. Doubtfire bun.

“But you’ve never gone out on an assignment for more than a couple hours, a day at most. Why would you—”

“Because he’s left me no choice, Karen. That man fired three perfectly acceptable nannies.”

“Damn right, he did,” Lily grumbled.

Karen smirked. “Lily, you might be perfectly qualified to take care of a baby, but I have to point out that you did break the robe rule.”

Lily made a face at Karen.

Sophia ignored the ruckus. “I need to get over there myself and see exactly what the problem is. Obviously, there’s something going on with that man. I need to figure this out before I start losing clients.” She absently fingered the buttons at each cuff. “I just have to remember my ultimate goal.”

“You have a goal?” Karen asked.

“Oh, yes. I’ve got two actually.” A slow smile spread across her lips and she forced her tense shoulder muscles to relax. “I’m going to preserve my pristine business reputation by making Michael Taylor happy.”

The mischievous sparkle in Sophia’s eyes had Lily prompting, “Yes? And?”

There was determination in every syllable when Sophia declared, “Whatever it takes, I’m going to tame the flippin’ Beast.”

Chapter Two

The Palisades condominiums were the place to live in Wilmington. The great slabs of white Carrara marble that encased the twenty-five-story building glistened in the morning sun. Bands of glossy black stone shot skyward at each corner, the sharp angles of the architecture imparting a distinctly contemporary feel. Sophia had heard real estate commercials for the condos on the radio. The extensive complex boasted both indoor and outdoor swimming pools, various sports courts, several workout facilities and a professionally landscaped walking path, not to mention the two-, three- and four-bedroom luxury residences that were available. The place was a lush oasis smack in the middle of the bustling city.

Sophia parked her car, got out and squinted up at the tall building, knowing she'd never earn the kind of money it took to buy a home in this au courant high-rise.

The lofty ceiling of the lobby was crowned with a huge abstract light fixture made of individual swirls of gemhued blown glass, a gorgeous splash of vibrant color against the otherwise stark black-and-white surroundings.

The elevator doors slid open on a whisper. Sophia stepped out into the hallway of the top floor, and when the doors closed behind her, the soft jazz she'd enjoyed during the swift, short ride was silenced. The well-lit corridor had been painted a tasteful shade of taupe. Conceptualistic paintings hung at regular intervals on the walls, and with each step she took, Sophia's heels sunk into the plush henna-colored carpet. There wasn't a single detail here that wasn't impressively lavish. She stopped in front of the solid mahogany door of Michael Taylor's condo and pressed the buzzer.

He pulled open the door, and immediately she was once again struck by the simmering intensity he exuded.

"Right on time," he observed, approval brightening his tone. "Did you remember to bring proof of your childcare credentials? I assumed you were qualified when I was at your office, but I'd still like to see the paperwork."

Evidently, he wasn't one to waste time with amiable greetings, but rather got right down to the business at hand. Somehow, that didn't surprise her.

"Of course. Everything you need is right here." Stepping into the foyer, she handed him the manila envelope filled with the usual information her nannies supplied to their employers—a resume complete with education history and work experience, proof of a recent physical, a copy of her current driving record and childcare and emergency safety accreditation.

He was so serious when he took the envelope from her that she could easily see how the young women she'd sent to care for his daughter might be intimidated. Would it hurt the man to smile?

She knew he had it in him. She'd heard him laugh this morning, and the memory alone was enough to make the hairs on her arms stand on end even now. Unwittingly, she smoothed her palms over her upper arms.

The scent of his cologne enveloped her, and she found the warm, woodsy fragrance more than a little pleasing.

No matter how severe his persona, though, she was still amazed by that purring undercurrent of energy radiating from him, around him—around them. It was the same force she'd felt when he was in her office, and it plucked at her with the same dogged insistence now as it had then.

As he looked over her information, Sophia attempted to ignore the invisible static by checking out his home. From where she stood, she could see into the living room to the left, and a bit of the kitchen to the right. The black leather and rich coppery metals in the living room were warm and masculine. All she could see of the kitchen were cabinets made of a deep red cherry wood and bit of black granite countertop.

“Everything looks adequate.” He glanced up from the papers he’d been studying. “Let’s go inside where we can talk.”

Adequate? A smile tickled her lips, but she quelled it as she followed him into the living room. She’d graduated from university with top honors and a double major in child development and business. She’d started her company fresh out of college and had nearly exhausted herself working full-time during the days to establish The Nanny Place, while earning her Delaware childcare certificate in the evenings just for emergencies like this one when she had to step in and take over at the grassroots level. She would describe herself as a confident, successful businesswoman, educated in both the physical and emotional aspects of childrearing. And he thought her credentials only adequate. Sophia wondered what a woman would have to do to impress the man.

“On the coffee table there,” he said, “is a detailed inventory of what I expect.”

Ah, Sophia thought, as she picked up the list with interest and eased herself down onto the couch. So these were the infamous rules. Just as Lily and the other fired nannies had described, there were pages of them.

“Hailey fell asleep on the ride back home so I put her back in her crib. She hasn’t had her bath or her breakfast.” He paced to the chair and sat down. “The schedule for today is completely shot. Again.”

“Well, maybe it’s a good thing that the baby’s having a morning nap.” Sophia kept her tone casual, hoping to ease his irritation. “I talked with Lily after you left and she said that Hailey was awake most of the night.”

His handsome face went tight. “She wouldn’t be up in the night if the nannies would just do as I instruct them. Keeping to the schedule is everything.”

Sophia’s first instinct was to defend the young women who had come here to care for Hailey, to let him know that schedules and babies didn’t always mesh well, but she bit her tongue. Arguing with him about his rigid expectations before she’d had time to assess the rules—to assess him—wasn’t a good idea. She needed time to take it all in and then she would worry about arguing.

Her best course of action, she decided, was to refrain from kick-starting any antagonism between them. Instead, she needed to remain calm and professional so she could become familiar with the situation. Smoothing his ruffled feathers should be priority number one, she reasoned silently. Surely his daughter would awaken soon and babies were notorious for sensing the stresses and anxieties in others. Sophia didn’t need a fussy infant on her hands at the same time she was dealing with Michael.

“And that’s all I ask you to do,” he continued. “Follow the rules. They’re simple enough. Keep to the schedule. How hard can that be?”

Apparently, he was still agitated from his confrontation with Lily and the need for having to drive to The Nanny Place.

“I understand that you’re annoyed that you had to fire Lily this morning. Especially since you warned her about walking around in her nightgown—”

“I wouldn’t call what she was wearing a nightgown. Short, lacy and completely transparent.”

“What?” Sophia couldn’t believe her ears.

“The girl was nearly naked.”

Sophia’s jaw went slack. “You’re kidding?”

“I’m not,” he said. “And if you’re looking for the whole truth of the matter, it wasn’t an accident.”

“But she said—”

His square jaw dipped low. “Trust me on this. She wanted me to see her body, and she left nothing to the imagination.”

Sophia frowned and murmured an apology on Lily’s behalf. That girl was in for it, that was for certain.

He shrugged. “Young people act rashly. They don’t think about consequences. I see it every day.”

No wonder he’d stormed into her office like a roaring lion. In this day and age of sexual harassment in the workplace, he’d had every right to be furious. Heck, he’d had every right to fire her.

Sophia told him, “That should never have happened.”

Awkwardness tightened the air. Finally, she said, “I promise you that I’ll do everything in my power while I’m here to follow your guidelines to the letter.”

As she made the pledge, she knew she was clinging to the age-old business adage that the client was always right. She was determined to do whatever it took to save her good business reputation. However, if she discovered that his rules were really as restrictive as she’d heard, she had every intention of somehow turning things around, of making him see that his agenda was way too rigid for the mere mortals who were caring for Hailey, not to mention a one-month-old infant.

“I appreciate that,” he told her. But his tension didn’t seem to lessen.

“I want you to know,” he continued, “that your only job is to care for Hailey. I don’t want you doing any housework or cooking or anything else while you’re here. Your focus should be on my daughter.”

That was a relief. One of the biggest complaints she heard from the nannies she placed was that parents kept adding responsibilities that had nothing whatsoever to do with childcare; running errands, performing household chores and such. One nanny was asked to attend a parent teacher conference at her charge’s school. The young woman had felt awkward about approaching the parents, so Sophia had stepped in and clearly outlined everyone’s proper role in the business relationship.

He went quiet for a moment, and Sophia finally had a chance to glance over the schedule he’d prepared.

“Were you in the military?” she asked, her eyebrows arching a fraction. She really had been aiming to play it cool and not cause problems, but she reacted before she could stop herself.

Her question seemed to confuse him, so she explained. “The schedule you’ve set for Hailey is so...regimented. Up by seven, fed by seven-thirty, bathed and dressed by eight. Diaper change at nine, another at ten. Snack at ten thirty. Diaper change at eleven.”

She peered at him over the top edge of the paper. “What if she isn’t hungry at seven-thirty? Or what if she doesn’t need a diaper change at ten?”

His jaw went taut. “What is it with you people?” he asked, exasperation sharpening his tone. “Whose child is this? How I want to parent my child is up to me, isn’t it? You just finished promising me that you’d follow the guidelines.”

“Yes, but I never said I wouldn’t question the logic in them.” Instantly, she realized that had been the wrong thing to say. “Look—” she held up her hand in an attempt to appease him “—all I’m saying is that—”

“I’ve already told you that I believe scheduling is everything,” he interrupted. “She has to learn that meals are served at regular intervals. How else is she supposed to understand the program? How else is my daughter going to learn to fit in to my life?”

“Fit in to your life?” Did he not understand how outrageous his thinking was? “We’re talking about a baby. Not a puppy. Hailey’s brand-new to this world. She hasn’t a clue about rules and schedules. As her father, you have to figure out what Hailey’s schedule is. And although you may not like it, you have to arrange your life around her for a while. New parents are always complaining about feeling exhausted and overwhelmed, but—” she shrugged “—them’s the breaks. You have to suck it up and live by Hailey’s rules. Not vice versa.”

She pointed to the rule regarding diaper changes. “You must be wasting an awful lot of disposable diapers. Hailey can’t possibly need changing every hour.”

“I would think that diaper rash is painful, and I would also think the best way to prevent it is to keep her bottom dry.” He was positively glowering. Clearly, he was not a man who was used to explaining his actions or his motives.

Her gaze darted for an instant to his lips. He had a nice mouth, even when it formed a straight, hard line. When he’d laughed in her office earlier his whole face had changed. His expression relaxed. The muscles of his smooth shaven jaw had contracted and his lips had curled into a smile. A nice smile, she remembered, trying to hold on to the image.

“And besides that,” he continued through gritted teeth, “at some time in the future my daughter has to realize she shouldn’t be wetting her diaper. If her diaper is changed often enough, she might catch on to the concept more quickly.”

The very idea tickled Sophia, and she let out a chuckle. It was only a small one, and she choked it off quickly, but her reaction only heightened his irritation; she could tell by the ire that flashed in his dark eyes.

She reigned herself in automatically, shaking her head as she said, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t laugh. I understand that this is a serious matter.”

Even as she said the words, she had to fight back the humor bubbling up in her chest. Either he didn’t know a thing about babies, or he was one of those overly diligent parents who pushed their children to the brink to achieve. The thought of anyone thinking they could potty train a newborn, though, was downright silly to her.

“Forgive me,” she said, luckily able to keep a straight face, “but I have to let you in on a little secret. It’ll be many months—a couple of years even—before Hailey is ready to ‘catch on’ to the concept of potty training. And changing a dry diaper is like tossing money out the window.”

Michael couldn’t believe his ears...or his eyes. This woman was laughing at him. She attempted to hold it back, but humor was dancing in her deep, blue eyes. Not only that, but she’d questioned the schedule he’d put so much thought and effort into. She wouldn’t rest until she’d criticized each and every rule, too, he was certain.

Had she just told him to suck it up? Had she really just suggested that he let his one month old daughter make her own rules? What kind of craziness was that?

“If you’re not worried about the money,” Sophia continued, “think of the environment. It’s one thing to throw soiled diapers into a landfill, but perfectly clean ones? Come on. That’s harmful for the world and everyone in it.”

Her gaze continued to twinkle. She was obviously a people person; someone who attempted to chastise gently and without insult. A person who had been trained to work with children.

Well, he was no child.

He wasn’t offended by anything she’d said, but he did feel like a total idiot. Would it really be years before Hailey was out of diapers? He’d thought it would be five or six months, maybe, but not too much longer than that.

How could he insist that Sophia change Hailey’s diaper every hour after she’d pointed out that doing so would be harmful to the environment?

Damn, but he hated feeling inadequate and ignorant, and that’s all he’d felt since his daughter had been tossed into his arms when she’d only been a few days old. How was he supposed to know how often a baby made poo?

“May I make a suggestion?” she asked.

He remained silent. He had a strong suspicion that nothing he said would keep this woman from offering her idea.

“How about if I promise to check the baby’s diaper every hour? No, every thirty minutes.” She tilted her cute oval face to one side. “The moment I detect any dampness, I’ll whip that diaper off and clean her little bottom. Cross my heart, I will.”

She made a small x on her chest, just above her left breast. And a nicely rounded breast it was, too. He jerked his gaze to the floor, blinked and silently ordered himself to focus.

As he sat there listening to her revising his guidelines, his attention wavered. This was exactly the type of woman he'd been trying to avoid. She was personable, charming...and manipulative. Not to mention beautiful and sexy. A woman who appealed to a man in every sense of the word.

Oh, she'd shown up at his door looking much different than she had in her office. Then, her thick chestnut hair had curled softly around her shoulders, and shiny lipstick had made her mouth glisten. She'd tied her hair back and washed her face, but her sparkling blue eyes didn't need any more highlighting other than the thick, fanning lashes and the dainty dark eyebrows arching above them.

She was an attractive woman, with or without cosmetics. And she had a body that wouldn't quit. Her knee-length skirt didn't hide her shapely calves and petite ankles. And there were plenty of curves beneath that jacket and blouse; a man didn't have to possess an overabundance of imagination to envision them.

The realization that he'd become keenly aware of her physical attributes scared the hell out of him. He was a business professional who worked with women every day. He was well-acquainted with proper conduct.

"I think we should talk about Hailey's feeding times," Sophia said easily.

Her tone plainly conveyed that she felt the schedule was up for discussion, and that irked Michael.

She lowered the typed pages and rested them on her shapely thighs. "Don't you think she ought to tell us when she's hungry, rather than us telling her when she's going to eat? It's much healthier for her to eat only when the need arises. Don't you think?"

Her tone was amiable and sincere enough, but that final little three-word query had been added on as if it were some sort of conciliation. If there was one thing he hated it was being placated. It smacked of collusion, and he'd been there, done that, and had no intention of repeating the experience, thank you very much.

She crossed her legs then, and the papers slid from her lap. She caught them along with the fabric of her skirt, and she ended up lifting the hem several inches, revealing cute dimpled knees. She quickly smoothed the fabric back into place. The entire incident was over in a fraction of a second, but Michael's mouth went dust dry.

This was the kind of situation that had gotten him into this mess. He'd gotten mixed up with a manipulative woman who used her wiles to get what she wanted. He had to stop this. Now.

"I can see that this isn't going to work out." He shoved himself out of the chair and stalked to the far side of the living room. "What the hell did I say to you this morning that made you think Hailey's schedule is negotiable? Wait. Don't bother answering that. I know I've been nothing but absolutely clear about what I want and expect from you and your business. I can't have this." He raked his fingers through his hair, and in a firmer voice, he said, "I won't have it. I'm sorry, but I have to terminate our contract. You can go. I'll make other arrangements for my daughter."

Surprise widened her eyes. He hated to admit it, but her alluring gaze stirred a lava-like heat down deep in his belly.

He didn't understand it. Normally, he was physically attracted to rawboned blondes. Curvy, dark-haired Sophia was neither. So what was this provocative rousing he was experiencing? Could he be confusing an acute irritation for something else? Something totally inappropriate?

The thought provoked a silent, unwitting nod.

Whether it was simple anger he was feeling, or something else, one thing was certain—he had to get rid of Sophia Stanton. And he had to get rid of her now.

"Hold on a second," she said. "Would you just lighten up? I didn't mean to make you angry. I wasn't negotiating the schedule. I was simply attempting to discuss it. You know, in an exchange of ideas."

“Semantics,” he pointed out.

“It’s all the same thing.”

“It most certainly is not.”

But her gaze veered away from him even as she tucked her arms tightly under her breasts. He couldn’t help but notice how the huffy action lifted the ample mounds, accentuated the roundness of them. He swiped his fingers over his jaw as the errant thought that she might be trying to tempt him flitted through his brain.

He had to stop this kind of thinking. It was unreasonable and bordered on paranoia. Not every woman was as conniving as Ray Anne. Or as rash and immature as Lily. Still, he couldn’t completely shut out his suspicions.

The ringing phone woke Hailey. He glanced down the hallway toward his daughter’s nursery and then toward the telephone in the kitchen.

“Go ahead and answer that.” Sophia got up from the couch and dropped the list of rules onto the coffee table. “I’ll go see to the baby.”

“It’s someone from work. I’m sure of it. I should have been in there already.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “Take the call.” Then she started down the hallway toward the back of the condo.

He watched for a second, impressed that even though he’d just canceled his contract with the woman she hadn’t hesitated to offer her help. He was also impressed with the way her bottom swayed when she walked.

Immediately, he shook the thought from his head and went to answer the phone. Sure enough, his secretary was calling to alert him that a couple of his less experienced employees had questions before they could get started working this morning.

“I’ve got a problem here, Jen,” he said. “Tell all four of the new hires to go into the simulator and answer the investing questions. Be prepared to hear them grumble because they completed the program once already, but going over the course again will be good practice. No one achieved a perfect score when they tested last week. Tell them that anyone scoring one hundred percent has lunch on me.”

“You know how competitive they are,” Jen warned. “You’ll be buying four meals. What’s the problem there? Is Hailey ill?”

“She’s fine. I’ve got nanny problems.”

“You’ve sure had plenty of those,” his secretary commented.

“Tell me about it.”

“The placement service you’re using has a great reputation. Everyone says so. I’m surprised you’re having such trouble.”

“Frankly, so am I. But things will turn around soon. I’ve broken my relationship with the service and plan to hire my own nanny. Things should look up from here on out.”

Having actually formulated a plan and spoken the words aloud, Michael felt once again in control of the situation. He liked to be in charge of things, liked to command his own destiny. He promised Jen he’d arrive at the office by noon before hanging up.

“So I really am fired.”

He turned at the sound of Sophia’s voice. He hadn’t suspected she’d been in the kitchen doorway eavesdropping on his phone conversation.

She shot him a sheepish smile. “I patted Hailey’s bottom and she fell right off back to sleep. And her diaper was dry. I checked.” Then she added, “I wasn’t snooping on you. Honest, I wasn’t. I just happened in at the tail end of your call.”

Sophia took two steps into the kitchen, and he watched her smooth her fingertips over the shiny granite countertop.

"I do wish you'd reconsider," she said. "I've never been fired before. And I know you won't believe it, but I've never had a single dissatisfied client."

"Until now." He moved to the sink, picked up the coffee cup he'd used earlier this morning and put it into the dishwasher. "I understand your position. But you have to understand mine. I expect certain things from the people I employ. And I wasn't getting those things from the nannies you sent."

He restrained himself from commenting that he seriously doubted he'd get them from her, either.

"I think it's best if I hire my own nanny," he said.

"And you think you're going to find one before noon today?"

Something twinkled in her big blue eyes, as if she had a big secret that no one else was privy to. What was it with this woman that she had to question his every move?

He certainly hadn't gotten to where he was by allowing naysayers to influence him. But something about this vivacious woman had him wanting to prove that he knew exactly what he was doing...even though he damn well didn't.

"That's exactly what I intend to do," he told her. "You're not the only nanny placement service in Wilmington."

"Actually, I am. That's why I started my business here. There are several in Philadelphia. But I seriously doubt they'll send their nannies this far south."

Refusing to allow this information to daunt him, he quickly regrouped. "I'll start with temp agencies, then. Surely, they can supply someone to watch Hailey."

There was warning written all over her face. "I doubt that temp agencies do background checks on their employees."

"I'll check the newspaper, then." She made him feel as if he were standing on shaky ground. "Someone has to be in need of a job."

"Yes, but who is that someone?" Sophia asked. "I doubt you want just anyone caring for Hailey. If you contact someone through an ad in the paper, I strongly suggest you do a thorough investigation. You'll need to give the person a letter stating you're offering them a job that requires a background search, and send them to the state police. Troop two in New Castle County is the only place you can get it done in northern Delaware. The police will fingerprint the person, take the necessary information and then you'll be sent a report."

Sophia was offering him some excellent information, suggesting things he hadn't even thought of. In fact, he wished he'd had a pen and paper on hand to jot down notes. Why was he feeling so damn irritated with her when all she was doing was continuing to be helpful?

"Of course," she added, "you'll have to wait ten to fourteen business days to receive the all-clear from the police."

There it was again. That glimmer in her gaze. She seemed to enjoy delivering news that put a damper on his plans. Obviously, she realized there was no way he could wait two weeks before hiring someone to care for Hailey.

He rejoiced when an idea popped into his head. "I can send her to a day care temporarily until I'm able to find someone and get the background check completed."

Sophia shook her head. "I doubt you'll find a day care that's willing to take a baby under six months old, and even if you do, infant spots are always on reserve. You'll have to wait six, eight—" she shrugged "—ten weeks, maybe."

He frowned. "You have an awful lot of doubts."

"I'm only trying to help," she told him.

"For some reason," he murmured, "I have grave doubts about that."

She chuckled, and the clear buoyancy he heard in it sent a strange tremor through his gut.

Confusion forced him to ask, "What's funny?"

Her expression straightened. “Your joke. You just complained that I had lots of doubts. Then you said you have doubts.” She lifted her shoulders. “It was a cute joke.”

“It wasn’t a joke.”

She blinked. “Oh.”

She stood there, smiling. Then her smile slowly grew to a wide grin.

Michael had never thought of himself as dense. Quite the contrary. To achieve success in the cutthroat investment business, a person had to have intelligence, a quick wit and nerves of steel. However, he was left feeling quite lacking, indeed, when realization slowly dawned.

“Okay, I’ve figured it out.” His jaw tensed as he released a frustrated sigh.

Now he knew why her tone had reflected such self-confidence, even when he’d been in the midst of firing her. Now he knew why humor had sparkled in her eyes, and why she stood there grinning.

“No other nanny placement services in the city.” He began ticking off the list on his fingers. “No proper temp agency employees available. No newspaper ads to help. No background checks for two weeks. No day care that will agree to take my newborn daughter.”

He’d wanted to get rid of her. Not because he didn’t think she could care for Hailey. Oh, no. Not at all. His reasons for wanting her out of his home were far more personal in nature.

He leaned his hip against the cabinet. “You’ve known all along that I’m stuck with you? At least for the time being.”

Mischief skittered across her gaze and tugged at the corners of her luscious mouth. “Well, I’ll admit that I haven’t known all along.” She grinned openly. “But I feel I do have the right to feel pretty smug simply because I figured it out before you.”

Chapter Three

Just as Sophia slipped on her jacket, Michael entered the living room.

“You’re leaving?” He actually looked startled.

“Well, yes,” she told him. “It’s Saturday. I’m off today and tomorrow. I was going to come find you before I left. Tell you that Hailey was only up a couple of times through the night. She should awaken early this morning.” She picked up her purse. “I’m off to check on my cat. Pick up my mail. Check with my assistant that everything’s okay at the office. I have laundry to do, a few errands to run and—”

“Of course. Of course. Everyone deserves time off.”

The trepidation edging his words was unmistakable.

“Michael, you’re not afraid to be alone with Hailey, are you?” Instantly, she realized she’d made a poor choice of words. A dynamic man like Michael didn’t appreciate the inference that he might be fearful—of anything. Some quick rephrasing was certainly in order. “What I meant to say was that you have no reason to be uncomfortable with your daughter.” A tiny furrow bit into her forehead as she pointed out, “The other nannies you’ve employed had weekends off. I’m sure they did.”

He nodded. “And every weekend has been two days of hell.”

Sophia smiled. “Surely you’re exaggerating.”

But he didn’t return her smile. “I honestly believe Hailey and I make each other nervous. She gets cranky. I get edgy.”

“Oh, come on. Hailey’s a good baby. She’s been calm and easygoing for me since I moved in on Thursday. And she’s been great for you in the evenings, too.” Meaning only to inject a little humor, she added, “I could tell you some stories about children who were suspected of being true devil-spawn.” She chuckled, and he did have the grace to smile, albeit fleetingly.

“Besides the fact that your daughter’s so laid-back,” she continued, “you’ve done great with her over the past couple of days. You’ve made great strides. You’ve learned to feed her properly. You’ve bathed her.” She grinned. “And I haven’t had a single diaper fall off her little butt since I showed you how to fit them more snugly.”

Again he nodded. “I know. And you’re right. I’ll be fine. I’m sure.”

He didn’t sound sure.

Just then Hailey’s cry came from down the hall.

“Sounds like Her Majesty is awake,” Sophia quipped.

“I’d better get in there.” He glanced behind him, distracted by the baby. “You have a great weekend.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you bright and early Monday morning.”

Hailey’s cries swiftly elevated to wails, and Michael’s gaze collided with Sophia’s. In an instant, he seemed to be standing on the threshold of panic.

Calmly, she remarked, “Sounds to me like a ‘my-diaper’s-wet-and-I-don’t-like-it’ cry and a ‘feed-me-now’ cry all rolled into one.” She set her purse down. “You change her diaper and I’ll get her bottle ready.”

At first, she thought he might reject her offer of help. But obviously he was too smart for that.

“Okay,” he agreed. “But as soon as she’s settled, you can go. We’ll be all right. I know you have things to do.”

She answered him with an easy nod and they went off in different directions.

As the bottle was warming, Sophia thought back over the time she’d spent in Michael’s home. She’d arrived feeling angry and resentful over his treatment of the women she’d placed in his home to care for Hailey. The nannies had described him as harsh and bossy and superior, and Sophia had bore the brunt of that behavior from him, too. But what those young women hadn’t seemed to

grasp was that there was a logical reason behind The Beast's growling exterior. Sophia suspected his controlling, inflexible conduct regarding his daughter was due more to his feelings of paternal inadequacy than it was his need to flaunt his authority as their employer. Of course, Sophia would never try to delude herself. He was a complicated man whose strong personality could never be completely comprehended—not in just two short days, at least. However, he had proven to her that he was willing to compromise, although she had pushed the issue a time or two. Although his list of rules remained in plain sight so they wouldn't be forgotten, Michael had made concessions on some of the sillier ones. In fact, just last evening the three of them had taken a stroll to the park.

Sophia thought it funny, the many times over the past few days he'd staunchly referred to the information he'd read in the outdated parenting manual he'd been using as a reference. Patiently, she had worked to show him that there was a huge difference in reading instructions printed in a book and in the real, hands-on experience of caring for a newborn. And he'd been an excellent pupil, as eager to learn as any other new father would be.

She placed a drop of the formula on the tender skin of her wrist and, finding the temperature to be perfect, she twisted the top back onto the bottle securely and headed toward the nursery. Michael was just then swaddling a cranky Hailey in her blanket as Sophia entered the room.

"Good morning, Hailey," Sophia called softly, peering around Michael's shoulder. The baby was too busy fussing to give her much notice. "Are you hungry, honey? I've got your breakfast right here."

Michael still looked a little freaked when he took the bottle she held out to him. Tucking his daughter in the crook of his arm, he said, "Let's go out into the living room. As soon as I can get her quiet, you can go."

"I'm in no hurry," she assured him. Any other response would have only added to his anxiety. Besides, she spoke the truth.

He went down the hall, murmuring softly to Hailey. Walking behind him, Sophia couldn't help but notice how he was dressed. He looked good in the business suits he wore during the work week. But today he was dressed very casually. The horizontal hunter-green piping that spanned the upper back of his cream-colored polo shirt emphasized his broad shoulders. The denim fabric of his jeans hugged his muscular thighs. The man had a great body.

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