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The Bachelor's Baby

LIZ FIELDING

Liz Fielding

The Bachelor's Baby

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The Bachelor's Baby / L. Fielding — «HarperCollins»,

Father in training!For Jake Hallam and Amy Jones it was love at first sight. Amy recognized it–the trouble was, Jake refused to! Only, he couldn't refuse to acknowledge that, after a night of tender lovemaking, Amy was expecting his baby.Jake was horrified…yet fascinated. He couldn't stay away from Amy–or ignore the growing life he'd helped create. But he was a confirmed bachelor wedded to his work. Could he learn to be a husband and father before the baby arrived?

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“Go away, Jake. This has nothing to do with you,” Amy said.

“Are you saying this is not my baby?”

“No, she is your baby. But if it bothers you, go away. Forget you ever met me.”

He stared at her. Was she serious?

“You said you don’t do commitment, Jake. I promise that you’re not committed to me or my baby. Financially or emotionally.”

She crossed to the door and opened it.

Standing on the threshold, his thoughts in turmoil, Jake realized that he didn’t want to go. He just didn’t know how to stay. He headed for the gate. If she was bluffing, well, he was calling her.

The door clicked shut and he swung round, taken by surprise.

She really meant it!

Well, that was just fine. So did he. Now they both knew where they stood.

What happens when you suddenly discover your happy twosome is about to be turned into a… family?

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Do you laugh?

Do you cry?

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When parenthood takes you by surprise!

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by Rebecca Winters

The Bachelor’s Baby
Liz Fielding

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PROLOGUE

JAKE HALLAM couldn't take his eyes off her. She arrived late for the christening, caught in one of the showers that had been chasing across the valley all day, and as she walked towards him a sudden shaft of sunlight lit up in the raindrops that clung to her.

They sparkled against the silver-grey velvet cloak that swirled around her ankles. Sparkled on the spray of flowers she was carrying. Sparkled on long dark lashes that curtained her eyes.

Then she pushed back the wide hood of her cloak and the sun, slanting through the stained glass of the old church, lit up the short, elfin cut of her pale blonde hair.

The baby, nestling in his mother's arms, whimpered restlessly and the newcomer leaned over, touched his cheek. 'Hello, gorgeous,' she cooed softly, in a voice like melted chocolate. The infant's complaint was immediately transformed into a smile.

And then she looked up, straight into his eyes, and repeated the soft, 'Hello'. Even without the 'gorgeous' tag, he felt the same instant desire to grin as she offered him a slender hand. 'I'm Amaryllis Jones.'

'Amaryllis?'

'That's just for formalities,' she said gravely. 'Now we've been introduced you may call me Amy.' He would have done, if he could have caught his breath. 'And you're Jacob Hallam. Willow and Mike have told me all about you.'

'It's Jake,' he said quickly. 'And whatever Willow and Mike have told you—' he bit back the denial as he remembered where he was '—is probably true.'

'Really?' The corners of her mouth tucked into a small, teasing smile as she tilted her head thoughtfully to one side. 'I wonder. So few people live up—or down—to their reputations.'

Even as he struggled to remind himself that he was in church, godfather to the infant about to be baptised and with no business to be thinking the kind of thoughts that were racing through his head, she turned away to kiss Willow, the baby's mother, and apologise for her lateness.

'I noticed the bluebells in the orchard as I was leaving. They're just the colour of Ben's eyes so I stopped to pick some.'

That was all. Normality returned. Amy took baby Ben from his mother. The vicar ushered them towards the font and Jake thought he must have imagined the spark of something hot and sweet that had crossed the space between himself and Amy. An unspoken promise that said… Not now. Later.

As if she'd read his mind Amaryllis Jones lifted her lashes, flickered a sideways glance at him.

Her eyes weren't blue. They were green and ocean-deep and he was suddenly out of his depth and floundering. It was an unfamiliar sensation and every instinct warned him that he should head for the door while he still could. But he was keeping a promise he'd made to stand as godfather to Mike and Willow's first child and escape wasn't an option.

Yet all through the service Jake was distracted by the scent of the flowers she carried. It wove a spell through his mind so that all through the tea that followed, and the champagne and the toasts to baby Ben's health and happiness, he was intensely aware of her presence shimmering on the edge of his consciousness. Once the photographs had been taken, and escape was possible, they had circled the company, keeping the maximum distance between them as if by unspoken agreement, understanding that to be close was to risk instant conflagration.

But when he'd glanced in her direction he'd had the feeling that he'd just missed meeting her gaze. Maybe it was simply his imagination working overtime. Maybe. Yet without a word spoken, without a gesture or so much as a lift of a brow, they arrived at the door at the same time, ready to leave.

'Hold on, Amy, it's raining again,' Mike said, as he walked them to the door. 'You'll get wet on your broomstick. I'll run you home.'

‘Broomstick?’ Jake repeated, turning to risk the heat of those dangerous eyes.

And for the first time since she’d arrived in church Amy met his gaze head-on. ‘Mike thinks I’m a witch.’ She should have been smiling. She wasn’t. ‘Don’t you, Mike?’ she asked, but her eyes continued to hold Jake prisoner.

Mike hesitated, and she tilted her head back and laughed, her throat a perfect white curve that Jake’s hand ached to cradle. Then Willow called from the nursery and Amy said, ‘You’re needed, Mike.’

‘Yes, but…’

‘I’ll take Amy home,’ Jake said.

‘You’re quite sure? It’s out of your way…’

‘Quite sure.’ He’d been going that way ever since Amy had looked at him. Maybe Mike was right. Maybe she was a witch.

‘Oh. Right. Well, thanks… And thank you for today. Both of you. Give us a call when you get back from the States, Jake. Come and stay.’ Then, almost as an afterthought, Mike added, ‘And take care.’

They paused on the doorstep and there was a moment of silence while Amy, her eyes level with his, regarded him thoughtfully. ‘You’re quite sure?’ she asked after a moment, echoing Mike’s words.

She wasn’t talking about the lift.

Neither was he when he replied, ‘Quite sure.’ Jake led the way to his car, opened the door. Her cloak trailed over the edge and he bent to lift it, tuck it inside. The material was soft, sensual beneath his fingers. Silk velvet. Like a woman’s skin. Maybe that was why his hands were shaking as he slid the key into the ignition. ‘Which way?’ he asked abruptly.

‘Left.’ He glanced at her. ‘I live on the other side of the village. It’s not far.’

Not far, but it was a different world. Mike and Willow’s home was minimalist modern, a labour-saving miracle of architecture designed for busy people and set in a low maintenance courtyard garden with a small paddock beyond that was grazed by a neighbour’s elderly pony.

Amy, in total contrast, lived in a piecrust cottage surrounded by an old-fashioned garden filled with spring flowers that bloomed with wild abandon. They spilled over onto the brick paths, splattering their legs with raindrops as they ran for the door.

Once they’d reached the shelter of the pitch-roofed porch they paused for breath. And to look at one another. Take a moment to consider. Nothing had been said, but they both knew that once he was beyond the front door all the thoughts that were now safely in their heads would spill over into unstoppable action; there would be no stepping back.

It was as if she was saying, You’re quite sure? again. But this time silently. His own silence was all the answer she needed, and she held out her key to him. It hung there between them, shimmering dull silver in the stormy light, and at the back of Jake’s mind warning bells began to ring.

‘I don’t do commitment,’ he said roughly. Almost hoping that she would tell him to go. Leave. Get out.

She didn’t say any of those things. She said nothing, her green eyes holding his, demanding that he make his own decision about whether to go or stay. The warning bells clanged with a desperate urgency but all afternoon her eyes had silently promised him everything he had ever wanted from a woman. Promised that she would fulfil his every dream.

She was wasting her time. He had no dreams. He was a hollow man, rich in the stuff that money could buy, but without a heart, incapable of love.

Most of the time he lived with it, scarcely noticing the emptiness. Today, wrapped in the warmth of friends whose love for each other, whose happiness had reached new heights with the birth of their baby son, he had been painfully aware of his own shortcomings.

Amy Jones was offering him a chance to forget, lose himself for a few hours, and without a word he gathered in key and woman in one movement. For a moment he simply held her, breathed in the scent of rain-washed earth and wallflowers and bluebells. For a moment anything seemed possible.

Fantasy, he knew, but his mouth came down on hers with a deep hunger, a longing to be proved wrong.

CHAPTER ONE

FIRST MONTH. Your pregnancy will not have been confirmed yet. Many women, however, feel pregnant without knowing quite why.

AMY didn't need the test to confirm what her body was already telling her. What, in her mind, she already knew, had known from the moment when the early-morning sun had turned the world gold in a moment of pure magic.

Even before that.

She'd known how it would be in that first second when Jake had turned and watched her walk towards him. Known that this was the man she'd been waiting for. That this was the moment.

Afterwards Jake had held her, and although he'd said nothing she'd known that he, too, had felt something way beyond his expectations of a casual encounter with a woman he'd made it clear he was making no promises to see again. But she'd looked into his velvet-brown eyes and seen something beyond the moment. She'd seen fear, too.

He was afraid of this. Not just of giving, but of receiving love.

She smiled as she waited, remembering. He'd given generously. Far more than he'd intended. Now, maybe, she'd have to convince him that it was enough. Which might be more difficult. For both of them.

She glanced impatiently at her watch. Despite her certainty, she'd left her assistant to close up the shop and rushed home, impatient for chemical proof, to be reassured that hope and imagination weren't simply working overtime.

And now it was taking all her will-power not to stare at the little plastic wand, willing the blue line to appear and make it official.

The time waiting for the result of the test seemed far longer than the two weeks since Jake had left her bed. Said goodbye with a kiss that had somehow lingered and, in that golden dawn, had deepened and erupted into something else entirely before he'd dragged himself back to reality and raced away to catch a plane without so much as an 'I'll call you' or 'I'll see you' to suggest he'd be back. She'd expected nothing else. Not from Jake.

He'd warned her. He didn't pretend.

Lying alone in the warm nest of her bed, listening as he'd moved swiftly through the cottage, snapped the door shut behind him as if to convince himself of the finality of his departure, heard his wheels spin against the gravel of the lane as he'd sped away from her, she had wondered what made him so afraid.

Wondered what had happened in the past to send him racing away from the warmth of a woman's arms, even when he'd plainly longed to stay.

Cross with herself for standing there, waiting for the test to develop, she put the wand down on the edge of the bath. She didn't need it. She had better things to do.

She opened the door to the small front bedroom she'd been using as an office. Her hand briefly touched her waist. She'd be working from home more in the future; she'd need her little office.

The other spare room was stacked with stock from her shop. Boxes of handmade soaps, scented candles, essential oils. She'd have to rent more space from Mike, she decided as she looked about her, run her mail-order business from the craft centre.

She'd have to totally reorganise the shop, too. It was time to promote Vicki, give her more responsibility, take on someone else part-time. She was going to need help. A lot more help. A sudden tremor of doubt shivered through her. Suppose she couldn't cope on her own?

For a moment her hand touched her waist. No, not on her own. Never again. Her baby might be no bigger than a match-head, there might be nothing yet for the world to see, but inside her something amazing was happening. Already her baby had a backbone, a primitive heart…

The low afternoon sun was shining in through a window that overlooked the rear garden. Yes, this would make a perfect nursery. She could see it already…had the colours picked out in her mind…

And she stopped being cool and serious and totally in control and rushed back to the bathroom.

Yes!

Her hand was shaking as she snatched up the tester. A blue line. Did that mean it was a boy? No, no. Stupid. Of course it wasn't a boy. She was going to have a girl. She and Jake were going to have a baby girl.

Her legs went suddenly wobbly and she clutched at the sink and lowered herself onto the edge of the bath.

She was pregnant.

It wasn't just a feeling any more; it wasn't just something she 'knew'. It was fact. Not just some airy notion that couldn't, shouldn't be true. Jake wasn't a man to take risks. But that last time something extraordinary had happened and neither of them had thought of anything but a deep and desperate need to be held, to be loved. Without limitation, reservation, conditions attached.

And now there was a baby, his baby, their baby, growing inside her. A life begun. It was totally, seriously true.

A smile forced its way across her face, erupting into a disbelieving laugh that faded as quickly as it came.

Falling in love with Jake Hallam had not been a good move. Head-over-heels-at-first-sight falling in love was never a good idea, especially not with a man who'd made a point of explaining his attitude to commitment before he'd stepped over her threshold.

But it had been too late then.

She'd tried. She'd known it was pointless, but she'd made an effort and really tried. After that first moment, when their hands had touched and their gazes had locked and all kinds of incredible sensations had made concentration on anything else very, very difficult, she'd kept her distance. Kept the length of the room between them. She'd sensed that he was doing the same thing, unnerved by the certainty that their fates were inextricably linked.

Yet they had both arrived at the door at the same time, ready to leave. If they'd planned it, it couldn't have been better timed.

The only comfort was that he didn't know she was in love with him. Men distrusted that kind of emotional stuff. Not that he'd have believed her anyway. If she'd used the 'L' word, Jake would have panicked, certain that she'd cling. If she wasn't very careful, he'd see the baby as an attempt to entrap him.

Amy laid the flat of her palm against her stomach. No. He must never feel that. If he came back it must be because he wanted to. Because nothing could stop him.

She knew he'd try to stay away.

He'd found it too difficult to leave her not to recognise the danger. He'd driven away from her cottage as if the hounds of hell were on his back. Which was, she decided, promising. It suggested a certain unease, a fear that saying he 'didn't do commitment' wouldn't be enough.

He was mistaken. It would be. If he wanted it that way. His decision.

She'd have to tell him about the baby, though. Before he heard it from someone else. She had three or maybe four months' grace, but after that it would be difficult to hide the fact that she was pregnant, and Mike had seen them leave together, had been aware of the tension between them.

His parting 'Take care' had been loaded with apprehension…As if he would have protected each of them from the other, but had sensed the attempt was futile.

But once Mike knew about the baby it wouldn't put a strain on his powers of deduction to put two and two together and come up with the date of Ben's christening.

The phone began to ring and she let the thought go. She had plenty of time before she had to worry about Jake's reaction to fatherhood. He was in America, would be gone for weeks. He'd

stressed that. As if he needed to reinforce the message. So, she had ages to work out the best way to break the news to him.

Just for the moment it was her secret, and she planned to keep it that way.

Then, as she headed for the door, she realised she was still holding the little plastic spill. Even as her hand moved towards the wastebin she discovered she was totally incapable of throwing away the precious evidence of her baby's existence. Instead she popped it into a little glass jar standing on the bathroom windowsill and went to deal with her call.

'Jake? Are you happy with that?'

Jake had been miles away. Thousands of miles away. His body might be sitting in a boardroom in downtown New York, but his mind was on the other side of the Atlantic. Suddenly, he couldn't get Amaryllis Jones out of his mind.

He'd done a pretty good job of it during the last month. He wasn't quite sure why, but he sensed it would be a wise move to forget all about her.

Okay, so he hadn't been able to totally eradicate the searing memory of the way they'd been together. But working hard on setting up a partnership with an American telecommunications company whose CEO had been determined to give him the VIP treatment had made it relatively easy —or, if not easy, at least possible—to push her right to the back of his mind.

But now, sitting with their massed lawyers hammering out the final details, nailing down any loose ends, all he could think of was the scent of bluebells and rain on warm English soil, a woman's touch that had seemed to reach down into his soul.

What on earth had possessed him? They'd been at a christening, for heaven's sake! He was the baby's godfather!

Was that it? An atavistic yearning for fatherhood sending him over the edge? No way! He enjoyed being godfather to Ben but that was as close to fatherhood as he ever intended to get.

It was why he was so careful to choose his partners with a detachment that bordered on coldness. He didn't walk, he ran from any possibility of emotional entanglements. He kept his relationships uncomplicated, the kind he could walk away from without a backward glance.

Love was too easy to say, too difficult to mean. He'd learned that the hard way.

The only person in the world who'd ever been there for him had been his foster mother. Aunt Lucy was a great lady and he owed her a lot, would be grateful to her until his dying day, but he still knew, deep down, that it wasn't him she cared for.

She opened her heart to any needy child, or puppy, or kitten who hadn't got anywhere else to go. He had been just one of dozens through the years. She was kind, warm-hearted, totally honest. It was in her nature to take in the heartsore strays, put them back on their feet, head them in the right direction and despatch them into the world. She'd done it for him, saved him from the kind of trouble a hurting youth could all too easily succumb to, but he wasn't fooling himself. It hadn't been personal.

And observing Aunt Lucy had taught him the wisdom of keeping a certain protective distance between himself and the risk of pain. Only someone you loved could hurt you.

With Amy Jones alarm bells had rung right on cue, every instinct warning him to stay away. And he had. Kept his distance. But they'd still arrived at the door together as if they'd planned it. Maybe she had. Maybe Mike was right. Maybe Amy had looked at him with those wide green eyes and bewitched him. Nothing else could account for the way he was feeling. Nothing else could account for the fact he couldn't get her out of his mind.

'Jake? Do we have a deal?'

He dragged himself back to the air-conditioned chill of the boardroom, looked around the table at the men waiting for his decision and realised that he hadn't heard a word anyone had said for the last ten minutes. Not a great way to do business. Not the way he did business.

Standing up, he closed the folder in front of him and said, 'Thanks for your time, gentlemen. I'll let you know.'

Before anyone had registered that the meeting was over, he was out of the room and using his cellphone to book himself on the next flight back to London.

Amy was working in the garden when she heard footsteps coming round the cottage. She looked up and smiled as she saw Willow Armstrong pushing Ben along the path in his new, all-terrain buggy.

'Wow! Fancy wheels, Ben!'

'A present from a doting grandpa,' Willow said, with a grin.

A grandpa. Her baby wouldn't have a grandpa. Or a grandma. Not even an aunt to call her own. 'Lucky Ben,' she said softly.

'Am I interrupting something vital?' Willow asked, looking at the half-dug trench. 'Only I haven't seen you since the christening.' She paused, as if waiting for Amy to offer some exciting reason for her lack of sociability.

'Is it that long?' she hedged. As if she hadn't counted every hour, every day of four long weeks, waiting for Jake to return—the last two searching for the perfect words to break the news of his impending fatherhood.

'The garden seems to take up every spare minute at this time of year.'

'Yes, well, I'm here to interrupt you. It's such a lovely evening I thought I'd give the buggy a test run on the common while Mike gets the dinner. Catch up with the gossip and with luck get a cup of tea into the bargain?'

Amy jabbed her spade into the soft earth and joined her visitors on the path. The baby was lying beneath the canopy shading him from the sun, a little tuft of fair hair sticking up on his forehead. He was gorgeous. Perfect. Without thinking her hand flew to her waist where her own baby was growing, unseen, unknown.

'It's lovely to see you,' she said, snatching off her gardening gloves before Willow had a chance to register the giveaway gesture, hoping that the flash of heat in her cheeks would be put down to nothing more than exertion. She wasn't ready to share her news yet. Not even with Willow. Not until she'd told Jake. 'I've been meaning to drop by,' she said quickly, 'but I've been reorganising the shop, and if I don't get my beans in now…' Leaving a summer bereft of the delights of home-grown runner beans to her friend's imagination, she took the handle of the buggy and began to push it towards the door. 'But I'm ready for a break. Come inside so I can wash my hands and give this little angel a cuddle.'

Ben began to fidget and his face crumpled as he began to grizzle. Willow bent over him and picked him up. 'Er, I think I'd better change him before you get too close, Amy.'

'Do you need a hand?' Had she sounded too eager? Too keen? 'Not that I know one end of a baby from the other,' she added quickly.

'It's a sharp learning curve, believe me,' Willow said, wrinkling her nose. 'Maybe you should start with something less demanding.'

'Maybe you're right. Maybe I should just go and put the kettle on. You know where the bathroom is. Help yourself.'

'Jake! What a surprise. Come on in.' Mike watched as Jake paid off the taxi and then said, 'I thought you were still in the US.'

'I was. Until last night.' His bag was at his feet and he was holding a small carrier. 'I bought this for Ben.'

'And you've come straight from the airport? It must be something pretty special.' Mike took the carrier, glanced at the contents and then looked up. 'A teddy?'

'It's an American teddy.' Jake realised that as a reason for his dash from the airport it was pretty feeble. He couldn't think what had possessed him to buy it. Except he'd seen it sitting there, in the airport shop, while he'd been waiting for his flight to be called and he'd thought… 'Press its paw and it plays Yankee Doodle.'

He couldn't remember why it had seemed like a good idea at the time. He didn't do fluffy toys. He didn't see the point in them. He was the down-to-earth, practical man who'd given his new godson blue chip stock for his christening present. After all, what use was a silver mug? It would just make work and collect dust.

Mike took out the bear, regarded the stars-and-stripes bow tie and waistcoat and grinned. 'It was a great idea if it brought you down to see us.' The welcome was warm, and if he wasn't totally convinced by the reason for the visit he kept his thoughts to himself. 'Willow will love him.'

'Great.' Jake practically cringed with embarrassment. What on earth was he doing?

'Well, don't stand on the doorstep, man. If you've just flown back from the States you must be fit to drop.'

'No, I'm intruding. I should have rung first…' Jake stopped, suddenly unsure of himself. He didn't do stuff like this, drop in unannounced, buy toys. Let his attention wander in meetings.

'Nonsense. Willow's taken Ben for a walk, but she won't be long and she'll be thrilled to bits to see you. And since she'll insist you stay, you might as well take your bag upstairs right now. You know the way.'

Jake dragged a hand over his face. 'You're quite sure?' He frowned as the words echoed in his head, as if someone had just said them a moment before. 'I don't know why I came. I should have gone straight home—'

Again Mike's look suggested he was fooling himself. Again he tactfully kept his thoughts to himself. 'Jake, you're a friend, you're welcome any time. Why don't you grab a shower while I put some coffee on? Are you hungry? Or can you wait for dinner?'

'A shower and coffee sound perfect.'

'Ten minutes?'

'Mike—' Mike, heading for the kitchen, paused and looked back. On the point of asking about Amy, asking how she was, Jake stopped himself. 'Nothing. Just thanks.'

'Sure. Take your time.'

He picked up his bag, carried it up to the guest room and wasted no time getting under the shower. He should be tired. Instead he felt fired up, excited, eager as a puppy fresh from a nap. He switched the shower to cold and stood there while he counted to a hundred. Slowly. It made no difference.

He wandered back into the bedroom, towelling his hair as he gazed out over the fields at the back of the house. From the window he could see Willow hurrying along the footpath, pushing Ben in his buggy, eager to be home.

Marriage, families. He was a puzzled spectator, unable to understand why it worked for some people. It was as if he had a vital piece missing. As if, somewhere inside him, a light hadn't been switched on.

Amy Jones had switched on something, though. This was new. This eagerness. And the warning bells clanged ever more loudly, warning him that he should have stayed on the other side of the Atlantic until the feeling had passed.

As he turned from the window, pulled on a shirt and a pair of chinos, he heard Willow come in through the back door.

'Mike! I'm home.' Home. The word sliced through him like a knife-blade. He had a penthouse apartment that had cost telephone numbers overlooking the Thames, furnished by someone whose job it was to save him the bother of having to think about it. It was a showpiece. It was a declaration of his status. It was hardly a home. 'Where are you? You won't believe what I've got to tell you.'

He heard her go into the kitchen, her voice dropping as she found Mike. He shouldn't have come. It had been a mistake, he thought, as he let himself out of the bedroom.

'I'm telling you it's true, Mike. There's no mistake.' He paused on the stairs as Willow's voice rose again.

‘Amy’s pregnant.’

It was like stepping off a cliff.

‘Willow…’ Mike’s voice was a sharp warning, but she didn’t appear to notice.

‘Up you come, sweetheart,’ she said, picking up Ben before rattling on. ‘She had that little thing —you know, the little plastic thing from the pregnancy test. I went upstairs to change Ben and it was there…right there in a pot on the windowsill in her bathroom.’ She laughed.

‘I did that, too. You teased me about it but I couldn’t bear to throw it away. I needed to see it every day just to remind myself it was true…’ Jake wasn’t sure how he descended the remainder of the stairs. ‘The blue line was a bit fuzzy but there isn’t any doubt about it.’

‘Did you say anything to her?’

‘No, of course not. She’ll tell me when she’s ready and I’ll act as surprised as anything.’ Jake stood in the kitchen doorway and watched Willow, pink-cheeked with excitement from hurrying home with her news, blow into Ben’s neck, making him giggle. A charming scene of domesticity that he saw, but had no way of understanding. ‘The thing I can’t work out is who the father could be. She’s not a woman to make a mistake, so it must have been planned, but I didn’t know she’d been involved with anyone recently…’ She looked up, as if sensing something. ‘Mike?’

Mike was looking right at him. He didn’t need to guess who the father of Amy’s baby was. He knew.

Willow, suddenly realising they weren’t alone, spun round. ‘Jake! I didn’t see your car. Darling, how lovely to see you. Are you staying?’

‘I…um…’ He couldn’t speak. Couldn’t find his voice to say the words. This couldn’t be happening.

‘Jake’s staying,’ Mike said, helping him out. ‘But I think right now he has something he needs to do. Why don’t we go and put Ben to bed, hmm?’

Her forehead creased as she latched on to the sudden inexplicable tension, her gaze switching between Mike and Jake and then it clicked. For a moment she had trouble keeping her lower lip from hitting the floor until, with a supreme effort at self-control, she said, ‘Good plan.’

Jake pushed open the gate, paused. The garden had moved on while he’d been away. The bluebells had faded and now lilac, thick with blossom, scented the air and a blackbird was singing from a high perch in an apple tree.

A small black cat blinked sleepy yellow eyes at him from a patch of catnip. And from the rear of the cottage he could hear Amy’s voice raised in a lilting song that might have been a lullaby.

He refused to succumb to such seductive enchantment. He wasn’t enchanted. He was mad, mad as hell, and Amy was about to hear all about it. He found her wielding a spade with an easy competence that suggested long practice; her gardening skills were clearly not confined to picking flowers.

She was wearing thick cord trousers and heavy boots that contrasted with the femininity of a broad-brimmed straw hat that shaded her face. And a man’s shirt. What man?

She stopped, rubbed her sleeve across her face, leaving her cheek streaked with dirt, and he forgot about the shirt as anxiety squeezed the breath from his lungs. Should she be working like this? Digging?

‘Should you be doing that?’ he demanded harshly.

‘If I want homegrown beans on my table, then yes,’ she replied easily, no trace of surprise in her voice. ‘But if you’re volunteering, be my guest.’ She pushed the spade into the soil, stepped back and turned to look at him. He needed, wanted to see into her eyes; the hat threw shade across her face, keeping her thoughts hidden. But her voice caught at him, drawing him closer.

Jake’s voice was hard, angry. Amy had heard him open the gate, walk around the cottage, and had recognised footsteps last heard racing away from her.

She’d forced herself to carry on working, leaving him to speak first, even though she longed to leap up, fling herself into his arms and pull him inside the house so that she could show him just

how pleased she was to see him, hoping he was feeling the same hot surge of excitement, desire. She felt raw, unbridled pleasure that he'd returned.

For a moment he took a step closer, as if he felt it too, but then he stopped. The sun was low at his back and his face was shadowed so that she couldn't see his expression. Which was perhaps a good thing, if it matched his voice.

'I thought you were still in America,' she said, when the silence grew too long.

'I was. Now I'm back. Should you be doing that?' he repeated. 'In your condition.'

Her condition? She felt the heat rise to her cheeks. He couldn't know. There was no way on earth he could know. Yet his voice, his repeated question, suggested that somehow he did, and when she didn't answer he turned abruptly and walked towards the rear door of the cottage, pushed it open, ducking under the low lintel as he went inside. Amy abandoned the bean trench for the second time that afternoon and, pulling off her gardening gloves, followed him.

He wasn't in the mud room or the kitchen. 'Jake? Where are you?' she called, dropping her gloves, kicking off her earth-caked boots. A creak from the floor above her betrayed his whereabouts. What on earth…? 'Jake, what are doing? What do you want?'

Upstairs, in the bathroom, Jake gripped the basin. This couldn't be happening to him. It couldn't be true. Fatherhood had no part in his life plan. He didn't want this. No way. Never.

Except that it was. The evidence was apparently there, right there, before his eyes.

His hand was shaking as he reached for the piece of plastic with its telltale line of blue. He gripped it hard, wrapping it in his fist, wanting to break it, smash it, make it go away. Such a small thing. So insignificant. So easy to overlook.

He wouldn't have known what it was but for Willow. If he'd called in to see Amy…

If!

Who did he think he was fooling? He hadn't been able to wait to see her! All the teddies in the world couldn't hide the truth of that. He'd have come here and made hot, sweet love with her, then they'd have shared a shower, and with the evidence right in front of him he still wouldn't have known.

How long would she have waited to tell him? Until it was too late to do anything about it. '… not a woman to make a mistake, so it must have been planned…' was what Willow had said to Mike.

His hands bunched into fists and he banged them down on the white porcelain sink. How much had she planned? All of it? Even that dramatic last-minute entry at the christening?

She'd known he would be there, singled him out, enchanting him with her green eyes and seductive voice. And he didn't doubt for a minute she knew, understood exactly what effect she would have on any susceptible man.

Oh, yes. It had been planned, and, libido rampant, he'd fallen for it. Right down to that last magical embrace when her kiss had trawled him in, tempting him beyond thought…

What a fool! What an idiot!

What on earth had possessed him? He was a man with 'precaution' stamped on his brain. Mike had as good as warned him. 'Take care,' he'd said. He hadn't added, 'She'll bewitch you.' Not that it would have made any difference.

Jake had thought himself invulnerable to even the most meticulously planned guerilla attack on his heart. It had been tried before and his heart was totally immune to sentiments beyond his experience, beyond his understanding. Which was why he'd so cavalierly ignored the danger signals, Mike's warning.

So now what?

Did she believe that he would marry her because she was carrying his child? Had she picked out a millionaire daddy for her baby? Well, she'd picked the wrong man for those games.

'Jake?'

He turned as softly, oh, so softly, her voice caressed him, teased him, stole into every corner of his mind.

Take care.

Mike was right. Even now it was taking every ounce of self-control to stop himself from reaching out for her, from taking her into his arms, telling her that it would be all right.

He knew better.

He wasn't like Mike, who'd grown up in a warm, caring family and had learned to play happy families at his mother's knee. He'd warned Amy, told her that he didn't do commitment, and the sooner she understood that it would take more than a blue line on a stick of plastic to suck him into her tender trap, the better.

'Jake?' she repeated, the soft inflection inviting an explanation.

'Amy?' he responded, his voice lifting in ironic mimicry. And opened his hand so that she would know exactly what he meant. 'Now, I'll ask you again. Should you be digging in your condition?'

'I'm pregnant, Jake,' she said quietly, refusing to respond to the aggression in his voice. 'Not an invalid.'

'And you intend going through with it?' he demanded.

She regarded him steadily, sorrowfully, her eyes all too visible now, all too easy to read, and he dearly wished the words unsaid. Unthought.

'This is my baby, Jake. She might only be this big—' and she held her finger and thumb with scarcely a space between them '—but she's my little girl.' Then she turned and walked out of the bathroom.

Jake frowned, followed her down the stairs. 'You can tell that it's a girl? Already?' he demanded.

She shook her head impatiently. 'Go away, Jake. This is nothing to do with you.'

'Nothing…' His breath caught in his throat. 'Are you saying this is not my baby?' he demanded. If she was, the sick feeling that had been sitting like a stone in his stomach since Willow erupted into the kitchen with her news should have evaporated. It hadn't. It had shifted, changed, deepened. 'Well? Are you?'

'No, Jake, I'm not saying that. She's your baby. Our baby. What I'm saying is that you needn't…'

'What? I needn't what?'

'Worry about us.' Her hand hovered briefly at her waist, so that he would know which 'us' she was referring to, before she let it drop to her side. 'I don't need you to hold my hand. We don't need you. If it bothers you, just go away, forget you ever came here. Forget you ever met me.'

He stared at her. Was she serious? 'That's what you want?' She didn't answer him and he suddenly realised what was going on. She wanted a baby with a daddy rich enough to ensure that it lacked for nothing. She didn't want the trouble of a man about the house. 'I'll be hearing from your lawyers, is that it?' he asked, keeping his own voice flat and expressionless.

'Lawyers?' She shook her head, as if he was slow-witted or something. 'I don't want your money, Jake. I have money. I run a successful business…'

Yeah, sure. He wasn't that slow. 'You can't run a business with a baby on your hip.'

'Watch me.' Then she made the slightest of gestures, apparently dismissing him and his concerns. 'Or not. As you please. You said you don't do commitment, Jake. I heard you, and you can believe me when I promise that you're not committed to me or my baby. Financially or emotionally.' There was a crispness in her voice that suggested she was losing patience. 'And you needn't worry about what Mike and Willow will think. I'll speak to them. They know me; they'll understand.'

'Will they? I'm damned if I do.'

'No? Well, I'm sorry, Jake, I'm afraid I can't put it any plainer.'

And she crossed to the door, opened it as if she was setting free some small frightened creature that she was pushing out into the world for its own good.

Standing on the threshold, his thoughts in a turmoil, he realised that he didn't want to go. He just didn't know how to stay. And if he did stay it would give Amaryllis Jones entirely the wrong idea about his determination not to get caught up in the emotional rollercoaster she had boarded.

Bad idea.

Instead he headed for the gate while he still remembered how, determined not to look back once he'd got there. If she was bluffing, well, he was calling her.

The door clicked shut before he'd gone half a dozen steps and he swung round, taken by surprise.

Dammit, she meant it! She really meant it!

Well, that was just fine. So did he. Now they both knew where they stood.

CHAPTER TWO

SECOND MONTH. The tendency to put on weight begins. Morning sickness may begin to bother you now, although it won't necessarily be in the mornings. It's time to visit your doctor and maybe get a scan.

'YOUR dates suggest you shouldn't plan anything strenuous for the second half of December.' The doctor crossed to the sink to wash her hands.

'You mean I'll have to put the two weeks' skiing in Klosters on hold?' Amy asked, grinning stupidly. First intuition, then chemistry, and now medical science had confirmed that she was pregnant and she was grinning for Britain. Until she realised how snug her waistband had become. 'Uh, should I be putting on weight already, Sally?'

'I'm afraid so. You've had the fun; it's downhill all the way from here.'

'Downhill? I thought I was supposed to glow.'

'You will, my dear. You will. It's nature's compensation for the morning sickness, the heartburn, the loss of visual contact with your feet—'

'Okay, okay,' Amy said quickly. 'That'll do. I get the picture.'

'Do you?' Dr Sally Maitland turned and looked at her thoughtfully. 'Pregnancy is the easy bit. I'd be happier if I thought this wasn't going to be parenthood for one,' she said. 'That your baby's father…' she paused momentarily, but when no name was forthcoming carried on '…is planning on sticking around to see through what he started.'

That was the trouble with having a doctor who'd known you since she'd put you in your mother's arms. She didn't feel the need to be in the least bit tactful. As for the question…

It was a week since Jake had walked out of her cottage, called a cab on his mobile as he'd walked back to Mike and Willow's place and high-tailed it back to London with a face like thunder. She'd had the details from Willow, who'd raced over, full of remorse at her unintentional blunder.

'He's had a bit of shock,' she'd said, in an attempt to excuse his reaction to the news. 'It's all my fault, blurting it out like that to Mike. I am so sorry.'

'Don't worry about it, Willow. He'd have had to know sooner or later.'

'Later might have been better. When you'd had a chance to get to really know Jake. Find out what makes him tick beyond an insatiable capacity for work and a gift for making money.' She shrugged. 'No one else has a clue. Just that this kind of stuff is difficult for him. I believe he had a rough childhood, although he never talks about it. I get the impression that his mother abandoned him and commitment—'

'It's all right, Willow. Really.'

'We're still friends?'

'The best. I would have told you about the baby, but I wanted to tell Jake first. You saved me an awkward moment.'

'I doubt that,' she said. Then, 'Give him time to get his head round it. He'll be back.'

'Maybe.' She wasn't counting on it. Willow hadn't been there. Hadn't heard the way he'd asked if she was 'going through with it.'

'Deep down he's a really caring man, Amy. He still helps out the woman who fostered him with her shop. I mean really helps. He could pay someone to do it, but he goes down there, makes sure she's coping, does her accounts. I've even seen him stacking shelves. Okay, so he lives for his work,' Willow admitted. 'Seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, but he found time to give us a hand when Mike and I were working on a charity project for deprived kids. He's never slow to put his hand in his pocket—'

'I'm not a charity case.'

'No, of course not. Well, give him time.'

But how much time? Amy wondered. He had something less than eight months, which seemed for ever right now, but the clock was running.

'Amy?' She snapped back to the present. To the doctor, who was waiting for some response from her. 'Is the father going to be sticking around?'

'What? Oh. I don't know.' Which was something of a first for her. It was her ability to read people, feel their moods, understand their uncertainties that had made Mike look at her sideways more than once. This time she seemed to have got it all wrong. 'I just don't know.'

'Right. Well, in that case we'd better get down to practicalities.' Sally picked up the phone. 'Let's see how soon we can get a scan…'

Forget you ever met me.

He'd tried. For three weeks he'd been trying. Absolutely determined to wipe Amy Jones from his memory, he'd thrown himself into work. Work had always been the answer to the emptiness, and there was plenty of that to distract him now that the American deal had finally gone through.

Unfortunately, this time it wasn't working.

Amy might have told him to go away, forget about her and her baby, and she'd certainly sounded as if she'd meant it.

But it wasn't that easy. This was his worst nightmare, the kind that brought him awake sweating and shivering in the middle of the night. Forgetting was going to take a lot of effort. Absolute concentration.

For that he needed to wipe away all sense of unfinished business. Of concern. At least the rewards of hard work provided the means to assuage the guilt that was gnawing at him, that would continue to gnaw at him while he worried about how she would cope. Well, he could deal with that.

He regarded the cheque he had written with a certain amount of satisfaction. He might suffer from emotional attachment deficit but he had no doubt that Amy could provide enough emotion for two; he'd had the most vivid experience of her ability to connect, to enfold, to touch. Just the touch of her fingertips on his face had been…

'They're waiting for you in the boardroom, Jake.' His secretary's disembodied voice on the intercom dragged him back from the heat of his memories. He should have known. Anyone who could give that much would always be a threat to his detachment. His peace of mind. And she would expect something in return. All he had was money.

'I'll be right there, Maggie,' he said. And he signed the cheque. Amy could do the warm, emotional stuff and he would pay the bills. Between them, the baby wouldn't lack for anything.

He stuffed the cheque in an envelope, addressed it and tossed it into his out tray. Now he could get on with the one thing he understood—making money—and forget all about Amy Jones.

He'd been in the meeting for less than ten minutes when the envelope lying in his out tray began to niggle at him, distracting him. He should have enclosed a note…he should have said something. That he was sorry. That he—

'Jake?'

No. That would put a crack in his armour, a way in, and he refused to be haunted by this woman. He would end it now. 'Carry on without me,' he said, rising to his feet. 'I have to do something. It'll just take a minute.'

Back in his office he picked up the envelope. Maybe he should take it down there. Maybe he should…

Dear God, what was it about Amy Jones? It was as if she'd invaded his mind, addled his wits. 'Call a courier, Maggie. I want this delivered right away,' he said, dropping it on his secretary's desk. Then he glanced at his watch. 'No, wait.' He'd written the address of the cottage, but she'd be at her shop for the rest of the day. 'Ring Willow Armstrong at the Melchester Chronicle and ask her for Miss Jones's business address. Send it there.'

'No problem.'

No. No problem. Not now.

‘Any problems, Vicki?’ Amy dropped her bag on her desk, along with her shopping.

‘Nothing I couldn’t handle. How did it go? Could you see the baby?’ Vicki grinned. ‘And have you bought up the entire stock of that baby boutique in the shopping mall?’ she asked, taking the bags, putting them on the desk and riffling through them.

Amy laughed. ‘Everything’s perfect. The baby is this big,’ she said, holding her thumb and finger half an inch apart. Vicki, still deep in the bags, picked out the tiniest pair of powderpuff-pink baby bootees.

‘Oh, bless!’

‘I know. I just went in to look but you know how it is.’ Vicki emptied the bags, cooing over the precious little things until Amy made an effort to come back down to earth and called a halt, packing them away. That’s when she saw the courier envelope. ‘Vicki, what’s this?’

‘Oh, gosh. I’m sorry. That arrived just before you got back.’

Amy picked up the big square card envelope, looked at the name of the sender and with fingers that were suddenly shaking she tore it open, took out the thick white envelope inside.

She knew what it contained even before she opened it, but it was still a shock. Her joyful mood, the sweet pleasure of buying tiny clothes for the baby growing inside her evaporated like a dawn mist in August and she said a word that made Vicki blink.

‘Bad news?’ she asked. ‘What is it? The VAT man on the warpath? Death-watch beetle in the attic?’

‘Worse. It’s from my baby’s father.’ And she ripped the contents of the envelope in two. It felt so good that she kept on doing it until the cheque was reduced to confetti. Then she picked up a fresh envelope, and after copying the sender’s address from the courier slip, she scooped the shredded cheque into it. She sealed it and stamped it and tossed it in her out tray.

‘Tea,’ Vicki said, slowly. ‘Camomile tea.’ And she handed Amy a small phial of mandarin oil. ‘And, in the meantime, I suggest you should rub a little of this on your pulse points. It’ll make you feel better.’

She didn’t want to feel better. She wanted to scream. She wanted to smash something. How dared he send her a cheque? She wanted it out of her sight. Out of her shop.

‘I’ll be fine, Vicki,’ she said, with controlled venom.

‘Just as soon as that—’ she pointed to the envelope ‘—that thing…is out of my sight. Forget the tea. Take it to the post office now and send it by recorded delivery. I want to be absolutely certain that he got it.’

‘Um, maybe you should wait ten minutes. Think about it. It’s what you always tell me—’

‘No.’ She was trusting her instincts on this one. Calm thought was not the appropriate reaction. The feeling was too strong to bottle up, keep a lid on. She needed Jake to know exactly how she felt. ‘Just do as I ask, Vicki. Please. Straight away.’

‘Look, if you feel that strongly about it I could ask the courier to take it back with him. He was due for his lunchbreak, so I suggested the café across the courtyard.’ And she blushed. ‘I was going to join him if you got back in time.’

‘Oh, Vicki!’

‘We all have our weaknesses,’ she said. ‘Yours is for pink bootees. Mine is for black leather.’

‘I’m not in the mood to encourage young love,’ Amy warned. Then she shook her head. ‘All right. Use the courier. But don’t blame me if he breaks your heart. And it has to be signed for by Jacob Hallam. No one else. If I’m going to spend a fortune making a statement, I want to be sure I’m getting my money’s worth.’

‘You will,’ she said. And grinned. ‘Just you leave it to me.’

Jake frowned at the note his secretary passed to him. ‘Can’t you deal with it?’

‘Sorry. It has to be signed for by the addressee.’

‘Okay. Let’s take five, gentlemen.’ He got up and followed Maggie into Reception, where the courier was waiting. ‘You’ve got something for me?’

‘If you’re Mr Jacob Hallam?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then I’ve got this, if you could sign for it.’ He offered a pen.

Jake took it, signed for an envelope with ‘Amaryllis Jones’ picked out in elegant black and gold lettering on the top left-hand corner. So, she’d got the cheque. He hadn’t expected such a swift response and he held the envelope for a moment; it was thick and soft and contained more than a polite ‘thank you’ note. As he pushed his thumb beneath the flap and ripped it open, he had a very bad feeling about it.

Jake frowned at the contents. Pink and soft. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting. Nothing pink and soft, that was for sure. As he pulled it out, a handful of tiny scraps of paper fluttered about him, settling at his feet. The cheque had been shredded so thoroughly that only when Maggie began to gather up the pieces and he saw part of his signature did he realise what it was.

‘What the devil…?’

Maggie handed him the pieces. ‘One of two things, Jake. It wasn’t enough. Or she doesn’t want your money. Take your pick. But if it’s the latter, I’d say you’re in big trouble.’

‘The question was rhetorical,’ he said coldly.

Maggie had been his secretary for too long to be choked off by a chilly put-down. ‘Sorry, Jake,’ she said, almost kindly. ‘I’m afraid trouble doesn’t come in “rhetorical”. Not this kind.’

‘And what kind is that?’ He was just digging a bigger hole for himself, he knew, but he couldn’t stop himself.

‘The kind involving a woman and a cheque. Especially if she’s pregnant.’

‘Pregnant?’ His face remained impassive, even while his gut was churning. ‘What makes you think she’s pregnant?’

‘Well, the pink bootees are a bit of a giveaway,’ Maggie said. ‘It would seem she’s—you’re—expecting a girl. Congratulations.’

‘Bootees…’ He realised what he was holding. Bootees. Blossom-pink, thistledown-soft. ‘Oh…’ he said. Then, ‘Sugar.’

‘I think, under the circumstances, a little more enthusiasm is called for.’

‘Sorry, Maggie. I can’t do enthusiasm. Not for this.’ He continued to stare at the bootees. They were so…so…small. He tried to imagine feet tiny enough to fit them. Toes… He snapped his mind back from the brink. ‘She knows that. I thought the cheque would help.’

‘Did you?’ Maggie shook her head. ‘And I thought you were quite bright, for a man. Never mind, keep trying. I’m sure you’ll figure it out eventually.’

‘You think that I’m heading for wedding bells and happy ever after?’ He could read her like a book. ‘Give me a break.’ She said nothing, but she was thinking for England, he could see. ‘Okay, what would you do? If you were me? Forgetting the white lace and promises bit,’ he added quickly.

‘That would depend on what I—as you—wanted.’ Maggie waited a moment. Then asked, ‘What do you want, Jake?’

‘Me? I’ve got everything I ever wanted.’ He was successful, rich. His father would have been proud… ‘I don’t want this.’

Maggie gave him an old-fashioned look. ‘It appears that you don’t have a choice. It is yours?’ She quirked an eyebrow. ‘There’s no doubt?’ He shook his head. It was his. The only thing he could imagine worse than this situation was knowing that Amy was expecting someone else’s baby. It didn’t make sense, he knew, but then emotional stuff never did. ‘You know, Jake, having a baby is a bit like a bacon and egg breakfast.’

He dragged his thoughts back from the golden moment when they’d made the baby. ‘This should be good.’

‘It takes two to make it happen,’ she said, ignoring his muttered interjection. ‘But while the chicken makes a contribution, the pig is totally committed. The mother of your baby can’t walk away, Jake. Or pretend it isn’t happening. Or pay someone else to feel the pain.’ About to say more, she apparently changed her mind.

‘What?’

‘Nothing. At least… Well, maybe you shouldn’t take the way she handled your cheque too seriously. Her hormones are probably acting up. Leave it a few weeks. Try again when everything’s settled down.’ Then she shrugged. ‘Or you might get lucky. It might just take an extra nought.’

What did he want?

That was easy. He wanted Amy. He wanted to stop the world, rewind the tape, replay those hours they’d spent together. He wanted to breathe in the sweet scent of her skin, he wanted to wake with her in his arms, wanted to hear her whimpering softly as he took her over the edge, followed her there, briefly, to a place beyond pain. For now. He knew it was a fleeting thing. An ache that would soon pass.

Unlike fatherhood.

He didn’t want to be a father. He didn’t know how to be a father. Not the kind of father any baby would want. What he wanted, what he needed, was for Amy to take the money so that he could walk away with a clear conscience. Money to pay for help. Money to pay for everything.

Maggie was being over-sentimental about that. Money would do it every time. One way or the other. And Amy would take it. Eventually. She’d have no choice. But maybe sending it like that had been a mistake. It had been cold and impersonal, and she was a warm and caring woman. In her place, he realised, he would have been angry, too.

That she was angry he didn’t doubt for a moment. It would take a really angry woman to reduce his cheque to such tiny shreds of paper. What the bootees meant, why she had enclosed them with the cheque, was a mystery he refused to confront. He suspected he already knew the answer. She wanted him. On his knees.

He crumpled the bootees in his hand, stuffed them out of sight in his pocket. No way.

But Maggie was right, he acknowledged belatedly. The cheque had been crass. His father would have sent a cheque. He should have thought of something less direct, something that she could have accepted without losing her dignity. A trust fund for the baby, maybe. She wouldn’t, couldn’t refuse that, not once she accepted that he wasn’t to be turned to marshmallow by a pair of pink bootees.

He’d go down there tonight. Apologise. Check that she was keeping well. Not overdoing it. She shouldn’t be on her feet all day…

Dammit, he was doing it again. Thinking about her. Worrying about her. He spat out an expletive that had once earned him a beating from…

No!

He dragged his fingers through his hair. Dear God, where had that thought come from? He’d blanked it out. Walled it up in the attic of his mind with all the other ghosts.

This was her doing. Amy, with her green eyes and gentle touch. His wall was defenceless against her. He knew, just knew, that if he wasn’t very careful she would dismantle it, take it down, brick by brick, and let out all the pain. It had already begun.

Emotion was a loose cannon. Uncontrollable. And the one thing he’d always promised himself was that he would never be out of control of his life. Never again. He would get this over with. Deal with it. Finish it.

For a moment, Amy thought the courier was back. She was behind the cottage, working off her bad mood on the weeds. They would never let her down. They were predictable. They’d always be there.

She was carefully easing out a dandelion with the trowel when she heard the motorbike roaring up the lane, then slowing. Then stopping at her gate. The dandelion root snapped, leaving half still embedded in the soil.

'Damn!'

Damn, damn, damn. The day had begun so well, so joyfully; then Jake's conscience had given him a jab in the ribs and after that it had been downhill all the way.

She straightened as the leather-clad figure rounded the side of the cottage, wondering what he'd sent her this time. A bigger cheque? Did he really believe that was what she wanted? Was he that stupid?

That scared?

The man pulled at the strap beneath the black helmet. Removed it. And her heart did a crazy flip-flop that made her feel just a little dizzy, so that she grabbed for the post of the compost bin. Not a courier this time; this time Jake had come himself. Which could be better—or much worse.

He looked tired, she thought. There were dark shadows beneath his eyes and his cheeks had a sucked-in, hollow look emphasised by the stubble of a day's dark growth of beard. He looked like a man to whom sleep was a stranger.

And the flip-flop happened again. Not just her heart this time, but her entire body responding, reaching out to him. It was a good thing that her feet were weighed down by her gardening boots, keeping her pinned to the spot long enough for her to drag her protesting heart—and hormones—back into line.

'You're the last person I expected to see,' she said.

'We need to talk, Amy. There are things we have to settle.'

Talk. Settle. Worse, then, because his voice, flat and expressionless, left her in no doubt what he wanted to discuss. He wasn't bringing his heart, but his wallet. Maybe she'd got it right when she'd suggested to Willow that money was all Jake had to offer. Not a problem when you were a millionaire more times over than you could count.

But if money was all he had to offer, he was in the wrong place. This wasn't the kind of conversation she wanted to have with the father of her child. She'd thought she'd made her feelings quite clear on that point.

Most men would have taken the hint, probably thanked their lucky stars and left it at that. Jacob Hallam wasn't most men. He didn't want to get involved but he couldn't walk away. His conscience wouldn't let him.

He was in for a bad time, she thought. And felt an unexpected twinge of pity for him.

'Have you eaten?' she asked.

'We need to talk,' he repeated. As if he'd learned the words and nothing would deflect him from his purpose.

'You can eat and talk at the same time, can't you?'

'Please don't—'

'Don't what? Make it difficult for you?' She wasn't doing that. 'I'm making it as easy as I know how, Jake. You're the one making things difficult.' She stripped off her gardening gloves. 'Have you eaten?' she repeated.

'No.'

'Then come inside and I'll get something.'

'If you insist.' His voice was firm, cold. It was the gesture that betrayed him. The tiniest lift of a hand in supplication.

He was already having a bad time.

She steeled her heart. 'No, Jake. I don't do ultimatums. You want to talk; I want to eat. Stay or go. You choose.' And she walked towards the back door, kicked off her boots and headed for the sink, forcing herself not to look back and check that he was following.

'How are you?'

How could he make the words sound so impersonal? After the way they'd been together? After such passion, such tenderness? Amy took a deep breath and made an effort to match him.

'I'm fine. I had my first scan today.'

'Scan?'

'An ultrasound scan. Just to confirm dates, check the embryo has implanted properly.' He'd like that word, she thought, scrubbing her hands at the old butler's sink. Embryo. You couldn't get much more impersonal than that when you were talking about a baby. She half turned, looked back to where he was silhouetted in the doorway, unwilling to step over the threshold. Vicki might be right about black leather, she thought. It gave a man a dangerous edge. Not that Jake needed any kind of edge to hold her attention. 'And confirm the number of embryos present,' she added, a little wickedly, just to make certain she had his.

The muscle tightening in his jaw was her only reward. 'And how many are there?'

'Does it matter?' she asked, reaching for a towel. 'It's not your problem.' Then, turning to face him as she dried her hands, 'Do multiple births run in your family?'

'How many?' he demanded, with just a hint of panic.

'Just one, Jake,' she said, her voice softening, an antidote to his sharpness. 'I was going to make an omelette. The eggs are very good. Free range…organic. One of my neighbours keeps a few chickens.'

Jake didn't want to eat. He didn't want to cosy up over supper. Didn't want to know about scans, or anything else to do with her pregnancy. He wanted to get this over with and get back to London as quickly as possible. If eating with her would speed up the process… 'An omelette will be fine.'

'Then you'd better come in.'

He propped his helmet on an old scrubbed table, unbuckled his boots, stripped off his jacket and padded into the kitchen in his socks, feeling at a disadvantage. He hadn't thought about that when he'd decided that the Ducatti's two wheels would be a lot faster through the rush hour traffic than using a car. Right now he'd have welcomed the formality of a suit. Maybe he should have sent a lawyer.

The idea made him feel queasy. The cheque had been bad enough. He'd seen what she'd done to the cheque. His father, he realised with a sickening sense of his own inadequacy, would have followed up the cheque with a lawyer. At least he hadn't made that mistake.

She waved in the direction of a saggy old armchair. 'Shift Harry and make yourself comfortable.' It wasn't the glare from the cat in residence that kept him on his feet. Once he was sitting down he would have lost even the height advantage. Instead, he leaned against the doorjamb and watched her as she set about making their supper. The silence lengthened.

'Have you seen Willow and Mike since—' he began, then broke off awkwardly.

Amy broke an egg into a basin, stared at it for a moment, then looked up. 'Since?' she prompted. Then, 'Oh, I see. Since. Yes, Willow came over as soon as you'd gone. The poor girl was in a bit of a state. I told her not to…' She rubbed the back of her hand over her upper lip. Had it got warmer, all of a sudden? 'I told her not to worry.' She cracked another egg and watched as it oozed thickly from the shell to join the first in the basin. She hadn't noticed before that eggs had any particular smell. Not beautiful fresh, free range eggs. She picked up a third egg, cracked it on the side of the basin. Sort of oily…

'Amy?' She looked up and registered briefly that Jake was frowning. Then she was assailed by a wave of nausea and egg number three hit the floor as she turned and ran for the scullery sink.

The heaving, the throwing up, seemed to go on for ever. She hung onto the edge of the sink, vaguely aware of Jake at her back, holding her, supporting her so that she wouldn't just slither to the floor as her legs buckled beneath her.

Eventually, though, the spasms eased for long enough for her to apologise. 'It's not the cooking, I promise you,' she said, smiling weakly as she leaned shakily back against him.

He said nothing, just damped the edge of a towel, wiped it over her face, around the back of her neck, over her throat.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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