820

HARLEQUIN®

AMERICAN ROMANCE®

His-and-Hers Twins

RITA HERRON

Rita Herron
His-And-Hers Twins

Аннотация

Wive and Mommi wanted for Hansom Daddi and Dorabl TwinsHow could two tiny girls cause so much trouble? Zeke Blalock had moved his vet practice to a small town to have more time with his daughters. Now, thanks to the twins' advertising scheme, he was up to his neck in wife candidates! And worse, the twins' favorite lived right next door ….Paige Watkins couldn't believe her eyes when she shepherded the twins and their fliers home. "Daddi" was six feet three inches of hard-bodied male-–and he thought she was applying for the "position."Paige had long ago decided she wasn't marriage material. Zeke's sensual appeal was just one more reason to avoid him. But neither she nor Zeke could evade the efforts of two determined little matchmakers for very long ….

Содержание

A day in the life of a single dad. 5
His-and-Hers Twins 7
ABOUT THE AUTHOR 8
Contents 11
Chapter One 12
Chapter Two 26
Chapter Three 44
Chapter Four 66
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 77

A day in the life of a single dad.

Zeke ran a hand through his hair, suddenly conscious he needed a shave and he was wearing his oldest pair of jeans. Trust his daughters to bring home a beautiful woman when he looked his worst.

He hurriedly buttoned his shirt, aware that an undercurrent of tension stretched between him and the red-haired woman on his porch. She seemed to be avoiding looking at his chest.

Finally he extended his hand. “Hi. Zeke Blalock.”

She drew in a deep breath. “Paige Watkins. I live next door.” She reached for one of the fliers sitting in his daughters’ little red wagon. “I thought you might want to see these before the girls finished giving them out.” A smile curved Paige’s lips and attraction hit Zeke square in the gut. He had the insane urge to reach out and stroke her hair.

Then he looked down and read the crayoned writing on the flier, and blushed for the first time in all his thirty years.

He’d known single fatherhood would be difficult. But what on earth could he ever have done to prepare himself for this?

Dear Reader,

Spring is coming with all its wonderful scents and colors, and here at Harlequin American Romance we’ve got a wonderful bouquet of romances to please your every whim!

Few women can refuse a good bargain, but what about

a sexy rancher who needs a little help around the house? Wait till you hear the deal Megan Ford offers Rick Astin in Judy Christenberry's The Great Texas Wedding Bargain, the continuation of her beloved miniseries TOTS FOR TEXANS!

Spring is a time for new life, and no one blossoms more beautifully than a woman who's WITH CHILD…. In That's Our Baby!, the first book in this heartwarming new series, Pamela Browning travels to glorious Alaska to tell the story of an expectant mother and the secret father of her child.

Then we have two eligible bachelors whose fancies turn not lightly, but rather unexpectedly, to thoughts of love. Don't miss The Cowboy and the Countess, Darlene Scalera's tender story about a millionaire who has no time for love until a bump on the head brings his childhood sweetheart back into his life. And in Rita Herron's His-and-Hers Twins, single dad Zeke Blalock is showered with wife candidates when his little girls advertise for a mother…but only one special woman will do!

So this March, don't forget to stop and smell the roses—and enjoy all four of our wonderful Harlequin American Romance titles!

Happy reading!

Melissa Jeglinski

Associate Senior Editor

His-and-Hers Twins
Rita Herron

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my Mom,

For raising a set of devilish twin girls herself and surviving with very little gray hair. For continuing to encourage me to go after my dreams. And most of all, for keeping my refrigerator clean so I can sit at the computer and pound at the keyboard—Thanks, Mom, I love you….

Always,

Rita—one of those devilish twins

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rita Herron is a teacher, workshop leader and storyteller who loves reading, writing and sharing stories with people of all ages. She has published two nonfiction books for adults on working and playing with children, and has won the Golden Heart award for a young adult story. Rita believes that books taught her to dream, and she loves nothing better than sharing that magic with others. She lives with her “dream” husband and three children, two cats and a dog in Norcross, Georgia.

Thumbkin Special Chocwit Chip Cookies

2 sticks margarine
1 1/4 c. brown sugar
1 tsp vanilla
1 egg
2 cups self-rising flour
2 cups chocolate chips

2 cans frosting
Candy–M&M's, red hots, sprinkles
Raisins

August Blalock

Beat margarine with brown sugar and vanilla. Add egg and beat until creamy. Gradually beat in flour. Stir in chocolate chips. Drop on ungreased cookie sheet. Bake at 375° for 10-12 minutes.

Decorate with thumbprints. Or use icing and candies to make your own face.

Summer

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter One

"The house next door is definitely jinxed." Paige Watkins sighed dramatically into the phone, aware she sounded irrational. But she didn't care—she had to talk to someone.

"What are you talking about?" Paige's best friend, Amelia asked. "You think it's haunted?"

"No, that would be better," Paige said in despair. "Another single man moved in."

"In Eric's house?"

Paige winced. "That's the one."

"Oh, that is terrible," Amelia drawled sarcastically. "I suppose he's cute, too."

Paige rolled her eyes when she heard Amelia's bracelets jangle. Amelia collected a bracelet as a going-away gift from each of her former boyfriends. So far she had three silver, two gold and one jade. "I don't know if he's cute or not and I don't intend to find out."

"Are you delirious, Paige?" Amelia sputtered. "'Cause if you need a doctor, I'll be glad to drive you."

"I don't need a doctor or a shrink." Paige chuckled. "But my new neighbor has kids, and I'm not jumping into a relationship with a single dad—not ever again."

Her friend clucked sympathetically. "Look, Paige, just because Eric went back to his ex-wife—"

“His gorgeous ex-wife with the double D cups.”

“Yeah, well, just because he went back to his gorgeous ex-wife with the double D cups doesn’t mean you have to give up on all men.”

“Why would I want to repeat the same mistake? Besides, I still haven’t gotten over what happened with little Joey.”

“That wasn’t your fault, Paige. Kids can sneak away from you in a minute.”

“Still, if that car had hit Joey…” Paige shuddered, forcing away the memory. “I don’t want the responsibility of children, especially someone else’s. It’s too scary.”

Amelia exhaled noisily. “Forget the kids, just tell me, is the dad cute?”

“How should I know?” Paige wound the phone cord around her fingers. “I’ve been avoiding him.”

“You’re a pathetic excuse for a female,” Amelia said in obvious disgust. “If you haven’t met him, how do you know he’s single?”

“Mrs. Spivy across the street.” Paige laughed as she remembered the day the good-natured, well-meaning woman had dropped the news. Mrs. Spivy was such a gossip she’d probably protested when the phone company did away with party lines. “She’s the neighborhood welcoming committee. She took him an apple pie when he first moved in.”

“Well, there’s a thought,” Amelia said. “Why don’t you make your favorite chocolate mousse and take it over? You could put

whip cream and a cherry on top."

Paige scoffed. "I am not going to bake my way into the man's bed."

"I guess that would be a little sexist," Amelia admitted. "Okay, then design yourself a sexy new outfit, something short, you know, show off your legs."

"And that's not sexist?"

Amelia laughed. "Well, I'd tell you to fix me up with the guy, but things are going pretty good with Derrick—"

"You really like him?" Paige asked, grateful for the change in subject.

Amelia cooed dreamily. "He's almost perfect. I'm surprised you set me up with him instead of keeping him for yourself."

"We've been friends since grammar school," Paige said. "But there wasn't any chemistry between us."

"Good," Amelia said, emphatically. "'Cause he might be the one."

"You're a hopeless romantic, Amelia. I've given up on men for a while."

"Gee, Paige. There're a few good ones out there. You have to keep looking."

"And get my heart broken again? I don't think so."

"Trust me, it's worth it."

Paige laughed, then shook her head. "Listen, I need to deliver these fliers. I promised Mrs. Spivy I'd head up the committee on the neighborhood watch program."

"Still having trouble with vandals?"

"Yeah. Maybe this watch thing will help."

"Hey, a perfect excuse to meet your new neighbor."

Paige rolled her eyes. "You are hopeless. He's probably a geek with monsters for kids." She hung up the phone, shaking her head at Amelia's laughter, then grabbed the fliers and headed toward the door. She meant what she'd told Amelia. She was through with men for a while, especially ones with children and pets. No more kitty litter on the carpet. No more car pools. No more back seat squabbles. No more being used for a fill-in mom. She intended to heed her mother's advice and focus on her dreams.

She'd finish her degree, then become a dress designer. Then she'd travel and make her mark in the business world.

Outside, as Paige stuffed fliers in people's boxes, her thoughts strayed to the neighbors out tending their spring flowers and yards. Thirty miles north of Atlanta, the residents of Crabapple had access to all the city offered, but land was cheaper and trees plentiful in the suburbs. Quaint antique shops lined the downtown area, which consisted of nothing more than a church, a gas station, an elementary school and a two-lane highway. Several small horse farms bordered the edge of town. But the close-knit community, famous for the crabapple trees flanking the town square, had recently been plagued by a series of mysterious vandalisms, making residents nervous and edgy.

She'd almost finished distributing the notices when she noticed pigtailed twins pulling a bright red wagon, walking an

overweight, floppy-eared dog. Or the mutt might be walking them. The child holding the leash yelled, "Whoa, Henrietta!" but the dog moaned pathetically and tried to lie down. The urchin tugged until the dog begrudgingly ambled along behind her, its head drooping, its movements labored. The girls were probably four or five years old. One wore yellow overalls, the other blue.

Where were their parents?

Stop it, she chastised herself silently. They aren't your responsibility. Thank goodness. After Joey…

Besides, except for the break-ins, this was a quiet, safe neighborhood. Teens were probably responsible for the vandalism.

Still, she couldn't help being curious about the girls. She turned the corner and headed toward them. The twins had stopped by a telephone pole. The one in yellow struggled with the dog to keep it from charging into the street to chase a bird while the other one pulled out a hammer and a flier from the wagon. She clumsily attempted to hang the paper on the pole. They were probably having a garage sale, or they'd set up a lemonade stand.

She chuckled again as the child slammed the hammer down and missed, then tried again. The dog howled, and the other girl brushed his long brown ears lovingly. Suddenly a gust of wind blew the paper from the second little girl's hands.

"Oh, no, get it!" she cried.

Her sister pointed to the flailing paper. "Stop!"

"I'll get it!" Paige's mothering instincts automatically kicked

in when she saw the paper swirling toward the road.

The girls halted, their eyes wide as the wind hurled the flier into the street. The mutt barked, perked his ears, and darted to chase it. So, the dog could run, after all.

"Girls, don't go into the street," Paige warned.

The one in yellow pulled the leash, struggling against the dog's weight. Her sister grabbed her waist to keep her from being dragged into the road. The dog moaned and flopped to the ground. The twins tumbled over each other, landing on top of the dog.

Paige snatched the paper from the ground and fought laughter as the girls and the dog sought to untangle themselves. Her gaze strayed to the flier and a smile curved her lips as she saw the crayon childish scrawl. Then she deciphered the words and her mouth dropped open in surprise.

WIVE AND MOMMI WANTED

Rite Away

for Hansum Daddi & Dorabl Twins

Must like anmuls and make chocwit chip cookies

Zeke Blalock 555-1200

Paige studied the girls—strawberry-blond hair, huge green eyes, with a smattering of freckles dotting their noses—they were adorable.

But why were they advertising for a mother?

She handed the flier to them. "I guess you need this."

"Thanks, but you can keep it," the girl in yellow said with a

hopeful smile.

Her sister wrinkled her nose. “That is, if you don’t already gots some little girls of your own.”

“Can you make chocwit chip cookies?”

“Well, yes—”

“You don’t gots a daddy?”

The twin in blue poked her sister. “You mean a hus…bund. He’s our daddy.”

Paige smothered laughter. The little girls were obviously serious. Did their “daddi” know what they were up to?

“What are your names?” Paige asked. She noticed the one in yellow was missing a front tooth. Good, a way to tell the girls apart.

“I’m August,” the child with the missing tooth answered.

“And I’m Summer.” The twin holding the wagon pointed to herself. “Our mama named us that ’cause we was born in the summer.”

“But she wents away,” August said in a sad voice.

“And we don’t ever see her anymore,” Summer said. Both girls’ bottom lips suddenly trembled and Paige’s stomach clenched into a knot. They looked as if they were going to burst into tears any second.

“I’m Paige Watkins,” Paige said, deftly changing the subject as she petted the mutt’s head. “Great dog, you’ve got there.” Surely, the topic of the dog was safe.

“Her name’s Henrietta,” Summer said brightening.

“Yeah, first we called her Henry, but we found out he was a girl.”

“Girls are different from boys,” August said.

“See, boys gots a—”

“Yes, honey, I know the difference,” Paige said, with a grin. So, the dog topic wasn’t such a good idea either. “I haven’t seen you two before. Where do you live?”

The girls exchanged worried looks. One of them pointed in the direction of Paige’s house. “Thataway, I think.”

“In a brown house.”

“It gots a porch.”

“We just moved in.”

“We’d put the fliers up ’fore now, but daddy just bought us some new crayons.”

“He washed the others with his underwear. My red crayons turned his shorts pink.”

“I see.” Paige chuckled and glanced down the street. The only brown house on Maple Street was the one next to hers. These were her new neighbors! They were monsters, all right—adorable, precious little monsters.

“Do you gots a dad…I mean, a husbund?” August asked.

Paige’s heart squeezed. “No, honey, I don’t.” She studied the flier again. “Has your daddy seen this?”

Both girls shook their heads emphatically, their pigtails swinging wildly. Summer leaned toward her and whispered, “It’s a surprise.”

"'Sides, he was asleep," Summer added.

"I see," Paige said again, touched by the girls, but suddenly irritated with the man. What kind of father slept the day away while his children roamed the streets? And he'd given his children the idea he needed a wife so badly they'd advertised for one!

More than likely, he wanted a cook, maid, and baby-sitter. Maybe he was a geek who had trouble meeting women, she thought hopefully. But if he left the girls alone a lot…well, he needed to take responsibility for his daughters. And what about the girls' mother? She'd actually deserted them! How could a mother do that?

Paige gritted her teeth as anger churned through her. "Let me walk you home."

The girls traded looks again. "We're not sposed to go with strangers."

Paige patted Summer's back. "That's true. But I'm not really a stranger. I live in the yellow house beside yours. So we're next-door neighbors."

Both girls' eyes danced with mischief, matchmaking wheels obviously turning in their little heads. A bad premonition sank in the pit of Paige's stomach—the house was definitely jinxed. She couldn't give the girls any false ideas about being their mother. She would walk them home. Then she would have a talk with their father, and be out of their lives for good.

ZEKE BLALOCK awoke with a start. He hadn't meant to fall

asleep at all, but between the move, unpacking and nursing an ailing golden retriever all night, he'd been completely exhausted. The silence in the house alerted him to trouble. He jumped off the sofa, shoved his tousled hair from his forehead and panicked. Where were the girls?

In the backyard with Henrietta—it's fenced in, a quiet, safe neighborhood, that's why you moved here—they're fine.

But his heart pounded anyway, and he had to see his daughters' darling, innocent faces before he could relax. Still blurry-eyed from sleep, he raced through the den, dodged the sleeping cat on the floor and almost stumbled over the maze of unopened boxes. Damn. He needed to finish unpacking. He stubbed his toe, but ignored the throbbing pain and rushed to the back door. His pulse raced when he spotted the empty yard and the gate swinging back and forth.

They were gone! Had they been kidnapped while he napped on his living room couch? Should he call 911?

He hurried up the stairs, yelling their names as he searched the house, but no answer. Remembering they liked to play hide-and-seek, he checked every closet, even under the bed. They were nowhere to be found.

Feeling sick to his stomach with panic, he almost yelped in shock when the doorbell rang. Who could be at the door? He didn't know a single soul living on the street. Unless it was some salesmen. He sure as hell didn't have time for that. Or maybe it was that nice elderly lady, Mrs. Spivy with some more pies. Or

maybe she'd seen his children!

Unless the police had found his daughters and—

Don't overreact. Maybe they're playing in the front yard.

The bell rang again and he bolted, not caring that he was barefoot and his oxford shirt was unbuttoned. He swung open the front door and squinted through the screen. A gorgeous redhead stood on the front stoop, wearing a scowl the size of Texas. Was she selling something? If so, she certainly needed to perfect her demeanor.

"Mr.—"

"Daddy!"

"Girls!" Relief ballooned inside him at the sight of his daughters. He yanked open the screen door, dropped to his knees on the porch, and pulled them into his arms. "Where have you two been? I told you to stay in the backyard." He leaned back to examine each of them, spot-checking to see if they'd been injured in any way, totally forgetting about the frowning woman standing in his doorway. They looked okay. They sounded okay. They hadn't been kidnapped. "I was worried about you," he said in a firm voice.

"We're sorry, Daddy," Summer said.

"Yeah, but we was busy," August argued.

Zeke frowned and adopted his serious-dad expression. "I don't want to hear excuses. You gave me a scare. The rule is you don't leave the yard without me. Do you understand?"

Both girls bowed their heads and studied their colored

sneakers. “Yes sirrrrr,” Summer said.

“August?”

“’Kay, Daddy.”

“But we found somebody.” Summer pointed to the woman. “She lives in the yellow house.”

“Right next door,” August added. “She walked us home.”

Zeke glanced up to see the woman still standing on the stoop. Her frown had disappeared, and her light green eyes seemed troubled.

“Thanks for bringing them home,” he said.

August pulled at his sleeve. “Her name’s Paige. Like a book.”

“This is our daddy,” Summer said proudly. “He’s a mess today, but that’s ’cause we was unpacking, and he didn’t sleep last night ’cause he’s a dog doctor.”

“A beterinarian,” August clarified, wrinkling her nose. “Daddy, your face is all fuzzy.”

Zeke ran a hand through his dark brown hair, trying to smooth the disheveled ends, suddenly conscious of his unruly appearance. He needed a shave, his shirt was hanging open and his jeans were full of holes. On top of that, he was running on two hours of sleep, max. He probably looked like a stray animal that had been digging in the yard. Leave it to his daughters to bring home a beautiful female when he looked his absolute worst.

He hurriedly buttoned his shirt, aware an undercurrent of tension stretched taut between him and the red-haired woman who seemed to be avoiding looking at his bare chest.

Finally he felt clothed and extended his hand. Maybe now she would look at him. “Hi. Uh, I’m Zeke Blalock.”

“Hello. Paige Watkins.” She drew in a deep breath and her short cropped T-shirt stretched tight across her small but ample breasts. For the first time since he’d opened the door, he noticed her running attire. Bright red letters boasting the slogan Free To Be Me emblazoned the front of her shirt. Black running shorts hugged her slender thighs and she wiped at a bead of perspiration on her forehead. Was she hot, or nervous?

“I hope my girls didn’t disturb you,” Zeke said.

“We didn’t, Daddy,” August said.

“No, they were fine,” Paige said. “Actually—”

Henrietta flopped onto the porch and whined. “My dog didn’t dig up your flower bed or something, did she?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that.” Paige reached for some papers in the wagon. She was selling something.

“We’re gonna go play,” Summer said.

“Yep,” August agreed.

“Girls, wait,” Paige said.

Uh-oh. They had done something. He’d hoped he’d be lucky enough to find neighbors who liked kids. Maybe Paige Watkins didn’t. “Look, Ms. Watkins, if the girls upset you, I’m sorry, they’re just—”

She handed him a flier. “The girls were putting these up in the neighborhood. I wondered if you’d read them.”

The girls had made fliers? Guilt flashed onto his daughters’

faces as they backed off the porch. “We’re taking Henrietta to the backyard,” August said in a low voice.

“Yep.” Summer dropped her chin forward, avoiding his eyes.

“Wait, girls.” Zeke motioned them to stop as he recognized the familiar crayoned writing. Then he read the words and the sun grew hot on his neck and the porch spun in circles.

Chapter Two

"Oh, my God!" The paper rattled in his hands as Zeke waved it at the girls.

August poked his arm. "Daddy, you're not sposed to say that."

"'Cept in church," Summer added.

Zeke glanced in horror from one innocent set of green eyes to another, then back at Paige. A smile curved her lips and he momentarily forgot his daughters' latest stunt. Attraction hit him square in the gut. Paige was breathtaking. Sunlight glinted off her auburn hair, and he had the insane urge to reach out and touch it.

Summer tugged at his sleeve, bringing him back to reality. "Daddy, Paige don't gots a husbund."

"And she can make chocwit chip cookies."

"Daddy, be nice." August cupped her hand to her mouth and stood on her tiptoes. "And comb your hair. You look like a poodle-head."

For the first time in his thirty years, a blush crept up his neck and scalded his face. He wanted to throttle his darling daughters, then crawl in Henrietta's doghouse in the back and hide. Instead he gestured at the flier. "Uh…I didn't know anything about this."

Paige's light green eyes twinkled. "That's what the girls said. I thought you might want to see it before they finished distributing them."

"Giving them out?" Horror struck Zeke anew. Exactly how

many had they displayed? He turned to the twins, trying desperately to control his soaring temper. “Summer, August, where did you put these fliers?”

Summer chewed her lip in thought and shuffled from one foot to the other.

August piped up. “In the mailboxes.”

“All along that street,” Summer added.

“How many did you give out?” he asked, his vision blurring at the thin stack remaining in the wagon.

“I dunno know,” August said, twirling her pigtail around her finger.

“’Bout a hundred,” Summer said.

“Oh, my God!” Zeke’s stomach rolled.

“Daddy!” both girls shrieked.

Zeke pressed his hand over his racing heart as he mentally counted mailboxes. What would the neighbors think?

“You’re never gonna find us a mommy if you keep talkin’ like that,” August whispered with a frown.

Zeke clenched his jaw. Paige caught her lip between her teeth as if she was fighting laughter. He’d barely moved into the neighborhood, and now he’d have to move again.

“Girls, we have to get these fliers back,” Zeke said, his voice laced with mortification.

“But why, Daddy?” August asked.

“We just do,” Zeke said in a firm tone. “I’ll explain later.”

“Uh-oh.” August’s eyes grew wide. “Are we gonna have one

of those long talks?"

"Yes, we are," Zeke said matter-of-factly as he waved the disastrous paper in the air. "This is not the way to go about finding a wife. Or a new mommy."

"Then how do we do it?" Summer asked, looking crushed that he hadn't liked their idea.

Zeke's throat closed at the confusion in her small face. He knew single fatherhood would be difficult, but this…well, he hadn't been prepared for this kind of scene. And right in front of pretty Paige Watkins. "I don't know, but we'll talk about it later." He knelt in front of them and softened his voice. "Now, put Henrietta in the backyard, and we'll go for a walk so you can show me which houses you gave fliers."

"'Kay," both girls said. They pulled and tugged at the leash until the lazy dog groaned, then lifted her bulk and waddled behind them.

Zeke searched for some way to salvage his pride. "I…uh, thanks for bringing the girls home," he finally said. "This parenting business is harder than I thought."

"I know," Paige said sympathetically.

He narrowed his eyes. "You have children?" He hadn't seen a wedding ring. Not that he was looking, but the girls said she didn't have a husband. The big, yellow two-story seemed plenty spacious for an entire family. Did she live there alone? Or did she have a string of boyfriends or a live-in? Maybe she was divorced with kids of her own.

Paige shook her head. “No, I don’t have kids. But there’re several children in the neighborhood.”

“Really? Maybe you can give me some pointers.”

She wobbled on one foot, giving him the distinct feeling she wanted to leave. “I don’t think so.”

His ex-wife had felt the same way. A frown marred Paige’s heart-shaped face, and something about her tone bothered him, but he didn’t have time to analyze it.

The twins barreled around the corner. “Henrietta’s in the yard,” August said.

“Okay, let’s go.” Zeke pointed to the driveway. Summer and August skipped ahead. He closed the door, and he and Paige walked across the lawn to the sidewalk. When they reached her driveway, she paused, chewing her bottom lip.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, girls.”

“Aren’t you coming with us?” Summer asked.

“No, thanks,” Paige said. A wary expression streaked her slender face. “I have homework to do.”

“You go to school?” August asked.

“We’re going to kindergarten next year,” Summer said.

Paige laughed. “I’m finishing a college degree,” she answered. “And one day I’m planning to study in Europe.”

August’s face lit up. “Our mommy went there. She lives in that big town with that river running through it.”

“But she never came back,” Summer said softly.

Zeke’s heart squeezed as he remembered the day Renee had

left. Both girls had cried for hours.

"I'm sorry," Paige said gently. She gave him a forlorn look and he shrugged, trying to mask his feelings. It sounded as if Paige had high aspirations, just like his ex-wife. Well, he wouldn't travel that route again. No matter how sexy and delectable the female, looks weren't the most important thing. If and when he ever became involved with another woman, she'd want a family—she wouldn't be more concerned about her career than him or his daughters. Besides, he didn't need the complication of another female—he had his hands full with the two he had.

Paige gave him a slight wave. "Well, I'll see you later, Zeke."

Zeke nodded and their gazes locked, the magnetism between them instantly sparking his body to arousal. A sweet sensuality darkened the light irises of her eyes, and she caught her bottom lip with her teeth again, a gesture he wanted to remedy by touching his lips to hers. She exhaled, then folded her arms beneath her breasts, her cropped shirt accentuating her subtle curves. Then she turned and he made a futile attempt not to stare at those dynamite legs and her curved backside as she strode toward her house.

August tugged at his arm and he dragged his gaze from Paige to see a fuming, three-hundred-pound man storming toward him. To his horror, the man had one of his daughters' fliers clutched in his beefy hands.

PAIGE STOOD ON her porch and watched as Zeke attempted to explain his daughter's surprise to Mr. Larkin,

a heavyset man who, from his loud voice and the way he kept waving his mammoth arms around, was obviously very possessive about his wife. Finally, after a few minutes of conversation, the twins joined in and the irate man turned to mush. Before they parted, she heard him asking about Zeke's veterinary practice and agreeing to bring his bulldog to Zeke's clinic for shots. He also promised Summer and August he'd let his dog visit Henrietta.

The munchkin girls had stolen Mr. Larkin's heart, just as they had hers. All the more reason for her to stay away from them.

She sank onto the porch swing and rocked herself back and forth in an effort to get a grip on her emotions. The precious girls had matchmaking up their sleeves, and she didn't intend to raise another family. Standing on Zeke's front porch had brought back painful memories of Eric and Joey. She could still see three-year-old Joey riding his tricycle in the driveway next door, toddling along with that stuffed bear he always liked to carry, curled up on her couch, snuggled with her grandmother's afghan.

But Eric and Joey had deserted her, and she had her own goals now. Giving up her menial office job had been the first step. Taking a job at a boutique and enrolling in college was the second. Not dating any more single dads ranked next.

She laughed as the twins attempted cartwheels on the sidewalk while Zeke frantically removed the fliers from the neighbors' mailboxes. Some geek. Big and brawny Zeke Blalock was nothing like the man she'd pictured. He obviously cared a great

deal about his daughters. She had to give him points for that. As far as rating him in the sex appeal department—he'd rank up there with Tom Cruise and Tom Selleck. A definite one hundred and ten plus.

Handsome and tall, broad shouldered and muscular—she'd barely been able to resist staring at his naked chest before he'd buttoned his shirt. His chocolate-colored eyes had melted her insides and rendered her tongue-tied. His strong chiseled profile, big rough hands and olive skin suggested he worked outside, instead of inside a clinic. And his backside was firm and muscular, especially in those tight jeans, she noted, as she shamelessly watched him bend to pet Mrs. Blue's small gray cat.

Stop it. He's not for you. He has a ready-made family, and you're not mommy material. Your own mother resented the sacrifices she made to stay home and take care of you.

Renewed determination filled her and she hurried inside to finish her project. She paused when she realized she'd forgotten to tell Zeke about the vandalism and the neighborhood watch meeting. She'd been too sidetracked by his good looks. Darn, she'd put a flier in his box later.

For now, she decided to tackle her design project. But when she touched the scraps of black satin fabric she'd collected for her textile project, she moaned.

She had planned to design an evening gown with the fabric. But an unbidden image came to mind—the shimmering fabric would make a perfect bed covering, with Zeke Blalock lying on

top, naked as a jaybird.

ZEKE CLEARED A spot on the oak kitchen table and plopped the cardboard pizza box on top, using his foot to gently usher Henrietta away from the table. He'd tried to explain his reaction to the mommy-wanted fliers to his daughters, but he wasn't sure they'd understood.

"Well, daddy, if we can't adver…"

"Advertise," Zeke supplied. "No, we don't advertise for a mother or wife." He dished Summer a slice of plain cheese pizza and August pepperoni, willing himself to be patient.

"Then how will we ever get a new mommy?" August asked, nibbling at the gooey cheese.

August picked a pepperoni off her pizza, licked it, then popped it into her mouth. "And how will you get a wive?"

"A wife," Zeke corrected. "Honey, I don't want a new wife. I'm happy being with the two of you." He raked his hand through his hair and shook his head at Henrietta as she pawed at his feet. "No, Henrietta, pizza will give you heartburn." Ignoring Henrietta's woeful look, he turned his attention back to his daughters. "Listen, girls, I know you miss your mom, but we've talked about this before. You have me, and we're a family—all by ourselves."

August poked out her bottom lip. "But you're a boy," August said as if it were a news flash.

"Of course, I'm a boy," Zeke said patiently.

"But boys can't be mommies," Summer protested.

Zeke's throat clogged. "Honey, I'll try my best to be both a mother and father to you."

"But boy mommies can't come to our Mommy and Me Tea at preschool. Only girl mommies!"

Zeke felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach. How could he have forgotten that Mother's Day was coming up? Because he was an idiot.

At least he'd finally discovered the crux of the problem. "When is the mother tea?" he finally asked.

"Next week," Summer said, sounding stricken. "Friday."

"Yeah. Everybody else's mommies will be there."

Drive the knife in a little deeper, girls. Henrietta added to his guilt by whining and giving him a pitiful flop-eared look. He gritted his teeth and tossed her his pizza crust. If he could find Renee right now, he'd throttle her.

"I have an idea." He forced a cheery smile. "Your grandmother can come. I'm sure she'd love to visit your school."

Both girls' faces fell.

"You can call her yourselves." Zeke tried to brighten his voice with enthusiasm. "Maybe you could even spend the night with her." And you could have a night out, a silent voice whispered. Call Paige. Have a date. A conversation with an adult, not a child or an animal.

Summer's eyes lit up. "All night long?"

"Yep. Wouldn't that be fun?"

August nodded. "Grandma lets us eat cookies for breakfast."

Grandma would. Zeke ran a hand through his hair. Oh, well, it would only be one morning. And he had to do something for his heartsick daughters. He couldn't allow them to be the only ones at school without a mother figure.

He handed them the phone. "Here, dial Grandma's number. She's been begging me to let you spend the night."

Together the girls punched in the number. When he heard his mother's voice screeching over the phone, he assumed by the pleased expressions on his daughters' faces she'd accepted the invitation.

One more problem licked. At least temporarily.

When they hung up the phone, the girls' moods had drastically changed. August gobbled another piece of pizza and Summer gulped her milk, then ran to the bathroom. He breathed a sigh of relief but the feeling disintegrated when Summer screamed. "Daddy!"

He sprinted through the house to find her. August trotted behind him, stepping on his heels in her haste.

Summer was standing in the bathroom, her eyes dazed. Her little hand shook when she pointed at the cat huddled in the bathtub. "What's…wrong with Buffy?"

Zeke swallowed nervous laughter. "There's nothing wrong with her," he said gently. He knelt down beside the fat, panting calico cat and wrapped his arms around his daughters' shoulders. He'd barely survived one traumatic moment before another struck.

Now, he had to explain the facts of life to his four-year-old daughters. Buffy was having kittens.

THE CREATIVE SIDE of design and the actual sewing intrigued Paige. She started sketching various ideas for the design project, considering fabric choice, cost and accessories as she worked. For this project, she only needed to design one outfit, but for her final, she'd design an entire wardrobe, taking into account the busy lives and schedules of the women who might wear her creations.

Several minutes later, she stared at the sketch, crumpled the paper and tossed it into the trash. The dress looked all wrong. Too high of a neckline. Not tapered enough. She started another drawing, but the telephone rang, disturbing her concentration.

Maybe it's the sexy guy next door, calling to ask you for a date.

She reached for the phone, ordering herself to decline the invitation, then sighed in disappointment at the sound of Amelia's voice. "Hi, Amelia."

"Hey, Paige. You have to come to my party next week!"

"A party?" Paige blinked in surprise, searching her mind to see if she'd forgotten an important date. No holidays coming up. No birthdays. "What brought this on?" she asked, when nothing special registered.

"I'm getting married!" Amelia squealed so loudly Paige had to hold the phone away from her ear.

"Married? When? To whom?"

"To Derrick, of course. He asked me this afternoon!" Another

bout of squeals filled the line. “We’re having an engagement party next Friday night. Can you come?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. But Amelia, this is happening so fast. Are you sure?”

Amelia laughed. “I am. He’s definitely my soul mate.”

“That’s great.” Paige twisted the phone cord around her fingers. So, now she was the last of the dying breed of single women among her friends. It shouldn’t bother her. And she was happy for Amelia.

“I would ask you to be my maid of honor, but we’re eloping,” Amelia continued. “He’s taking me to Paris on our honeymoon, I can’t wait, Paige. Life is wonderful.”

Paige’s hands instantly moved across her sketchpad as she began sketching a wedding dress. “I wish you were having a big wedding though. I’d like to design your dress.”

“I know.” Amelia sounded faintly disappointed. “But Derrick wants to get married right away and I’m afraid to wait. You know how guys are, he might change his mind.”

Don’t I? Eric had canceled their wedding the morning of the ceremony.

“Paige, I’m sorry, I know how that must have sounded.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Paige said. “I’m not going to rain on your parade, Amelia. And we are not going to talk about my failed love life.”

“Thanks, Paige, you’re the best,” Amelia said softly. “I’ll see you next Friday.”

The phone clicked into silence before Paige could think of a way to beg out of the party. She turned back to her project, but the house seemed unusually quiet. Growing up as an only child, she should have been used to be being alone. But she'd craved a big boisterous family with lots of sisters and brothers. In retrospect, maybe her need for a family was the reason she'd become so attached to Eric and his son.

But the silence hung in the air, echoing off the walls. Eerie, cold, almost smothering her with the emptiness.

Stop it. You have to get used to it.

Determined to forget Amelia's wedding, she flipped on the radio and decided to make a batch of brownies. Comfort food always spurred her creativity. She threw the brownie ingredients into a bowl, stirred the thick rich batter and popped the mixture into a pan.

A loud howling sound caught her attention and her gaze strayed to the Blalock house next door. She'd still forgotten to tell Zeke about the neighborhood watch. She'd take them brownies and tell Zeke about the meeting. After all, a welcoming basket of food was only neighborly, and she didn't want anyone to accuse her of lacking in Southern hospitality.

"DADDY, THAT'S GROSS." Summer covered her eyes with her hands and peeked through the finger holes as the fourth kitten popped out. Buffy, following her normal motherly instincts, licked the kitten clean.

"They look like skinny rats," August said, watching the other

three kittens burrow underneath Buffy.

"Yeah, they do." Zeke hoped this kitten was the last. The girls refused to go to bed until all the kittens had been born. But Buffy started panting again, signifying the onset of another birth.

Henrietta sniffed her way in and dropped into the corner, her tongue lolling out as she joined the scene. The doorbell rang and August and Summer both sprang up from their perch on the floor by the tub.

Zeke rose, but August pointed her finger at him. "No, Daddy, you watch Buffy. We'll get it." August and her sister scrambled through the door at the same time. Zeke heard their feet padding on the hardwood floor in the foyer as the doorbell rang for the second time.

"Paige!" both girls chimed.

"Hi, girls."

A second of elation gathered inside Zeke at Paige's soft musical drawl, but his smile instantly faded when he realized the house was a mess. Boxes cluttered the den, laundry littered the sofa, blankets and kittens filled his bathtub, and pizza sauce spotted his shirt where Henrietta had licked him. He pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn't have to worry about Paige being attracted to him. She'd never be able to wade through the tornado-strewn house to find him.

"Daddy, Paige brought a treat," August yelled.

Summer raced into the bathroom. "Daddy, look!"

Buffy's panting quickened and she dropped another kitten just

as Paige and Summer stepped into the doorway.

"We're having kittens," August announced proudly.

Paige's expression turned wary. "I hope I didn't come at a bad time. I brought over some—"

"Brownies! Yum!" Both girls reached for the basket and Henrietta lunged against Paige, almost knocking her over.

Zeke grabbed Henrietta while Paige held the brownies in the air. "Get down," Zeke yelled.

Henrietta chowed down on the chocolate chunks that spilled from the basket. Paige's rich laughter rang through the crowded bathroom, joined first by August's, then Summer's.

Zeke lost himself in the moment. It was the first time Summer had laughed in ages. She'd taken the divorce harder than August, having bad dreams and moping around. "Thanks, Paige, those look great," he said, reaching for a brownie.

"Sure." Paige leaned over and peeked inside the tub. "The kittens are precious. How many so far?"

Summer held up five fingers.

"The spotted one's called Callie," August said.

"And the white one is Cotton."

Paige nodded. "Do you think she's finished?"

Zeke shrugged. "Probably." His pulse hammered as Paige knelt, her bare thigh brushing against his. She reached a finger inside to pet the baby calico's fur.

"They're beautiful," Paige said softly.

The girls gobbled a brownie, dropping chocolate flakes all

over the floor. Henrietta quickly lapped up the crumbs.

"Take Henrietta and put her in the yard," he told the girls. "Then put on your pj's and brush your teeth. With toothpaste. I'll be right in to kiss you good-night."

The girls scampered out, leaving Paige and Zeke alone. Paige watched the kittens nurse and Zeke forced his hands to remain on the tub when they desperately itched to touch her. "Thanks for the brownies," Zeke said. "My favorite."

Paige's gaze locked with his, but she quickly looked away. "I… I meant to tell you earlier that we've had some vandalism in the neighborhood."

"What?" Zeke's pulse raced. "I thought this neighborhood was safe. That's why I moved here."

"It is." Paige placed a reassuring hand on his arm. "We think the vandals are teenagers. So far, they've been sneaking into houses, playing video games, generally messing up people's homes."

"Sounds like some real troublemakers," Zeke said.

"Anyway," Paige continued, removing her hand, "We're organizing a neighborhood watch program. The first meeting's next week at my house." She absentmindedly ran her tongue over her lower lip as if she were nervous, drawing Zeke's gaze to the spot. "I hope you'll come."

Zeke tried not to read anything personal into the invitation, though he wondered why Paige suddenly averted her gaze again. "I'll try to make it. That is, if I don't get hung up at the clinic."

Paige nodded. “I left a flier on your kitchen counter.”

He winced, wondering how she’d found the counter.

Paige laughed as if she’d read his mind. “It’s by the pizza box.”

He chuckled, aware her eyes darkened when she gazed at him. His body tightened at the undercurrent of attraction strumming between them. Her soft strawberry scent invaded his senses, making him momentarily forget all the reasons he shouldn’t touch her. A dollop of chocolate batter dotted her cheek and he reached out and gently brushed it onto his fingertip. She glanced up in surprise, her eyes widening when he licked the tip of his finger.

Paige’s expression filled with uncertainty, but her lips parted slightly as if in invitation. She was so close her warm breath mingled with his own. Tension, tight and sensual, radiated between them, drawing her closer, dragging him into a web of desire he hadn’t felt in a long time. A year of celibacy surged into need. He didn’t miss the sex as much as he missed the affection, the tender look a woman could give a man, the sweet satisfaction in hearing her whisper his name. Temptation made him tilt his head, and the sensuality and innocence in her expression shocked him.

“We’re ready!” August shouted.

His children’s voices jarred him back to reality. “I’ll be right back,” he said in a husky voice. Don’t move.

He took the steps two at a time, ushered his daughters back upstairs and into bed, then said good-night in record time. He

forced himself to walk back down the steps. He didn't want to act too eager. After all, he'd barely met the woman. He didn't even know if she had a boyfriend.

But when he stepped into the bathroom, Paige had disappeared.

Chapter Three

Paige avoided Zeke all week. Still, the memory of his masculine scent and his breath whispering against her face made her heart pound with excitement. And turmoil.

Why did all the handsome ones have to be married, divorced with kids, or already committed? Not that she was actively manhunting, but a date here and there would be nice. She deserved some fun. But Zeke Blalock definitely didn't fit the idea of footloose and fancy-free. Even if he wanted a no-strings relationship, it wouldn't be fair to his children. They wanted a mother.

And she was not mommy material.

She tried to recall the negative aspects of her neighbor—his house was a mess, he had animals everywhere, and he had no sense of style. For heaven's sake, his pants and shirt hadn't even matched.

Still, she'd worked late two nights in a row at the dress shop so she wouldn't give in to temptation and visit him. The other two evenings she'd stayed up well past midnight working on her design project. The black satin dress had proved to be more of a challenge than she'd expected—especially since every time she pinned the material around herself to assess the fitting, she imagined Zeke unpinning it.

Thursday afternoon, she stood in the window of Beverly's

Boutique, redressing the mannequin. She'd chosen a forest green linen suit and elegant accessories to complement the outfit.

"That looks great." Beverly traced a finger over the paisley silk scarf she'd used to accessorize the suit.

"Thanks." Paige changed the belt for the third time.

"You have a hot date tonight?" The thirty-five-year-old entrepreneur who owned the store had become a good friend and confidant in the past few months.

"Not even a cold one," Paige said with a wry laugh. Not a possibility either. "The neighbors are coming over for a meeting. I am going to an engagement party for a friend tomorrow, though."

"Great." Beverly tapped her polished nails on the counter. "Maybe you'll meet someone there. You're single and free now, you should be dating a different guy every night."

"I don't have time." Paige stepped back to scrutinize her work. "I'm working my way through school, remember?"

A customer slipped into the shop and Beverly's posture straightened as she recognized the possibility of a sale. The tall brunette flitted through the store, choosing several outfits to try on, then meandered over to the jewelry counter. Beverly would be off to brownnose any second. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. Beverly worked seventy-something hours every week. Her social life was more nonexistent than Paige's.

Beverly gave her a forlorn look as if she hated to run out in the middle of such an important conversation. Paige laughed,

nonplussed. “Go on, make your sale.”

Paige cleaned up the window area, closed out one of the cash registers and waved goodbye as Beverly ran the customer’s credit card through the machine. She could almost hear Beverly’s squeals of excitement as the dollar signs brringed. She admired Beverly. After her husband had deserted her for a younger woman, Bev had borrowed money, opened the shop and made a success out of it.

Paige intended to make a success out of herself the way Bev had with the shop. Her high school home ec teacher had raved over her sewing projects, and a couple of her college professors had encouraged her dream of becoming a designer. Even if she never made it big with her own designs, she could work as a buyer for a big department store.

As she pulled into her driveway, she noticed Zeke and the girls’ empty driveway. As a veterinarian, Zeke probably had to work long hours. Shoving thoughts of them from her mind, she strolled up her driveway and went inside to enjoy the peace and quiet. Zeke probably wouldn’t even make the meeting.

WHAT HE WOULDN’T give for five minutes of peace and quiet before the meeting, Zeke thought as Summer and August battled over who would push the grocery cart. But hoping for peace was futile with two exhausted, hungry, irritable girls in tow. He tried to ignore his daughters’ next argument—which kind of cereal to purchase—as he wove his way through the aisles searching for something nutritious to serve them that could be

nuked in the microwave and ready to eat in five minutes.

"I'm starving," August said, dragging the toes of her sneakers.

"And I'm tired," Summer whined.

"I'm almost done." Zeke ignored the boxes of sugar-coated cereal the girls sneaked into the cart. Dinner, bath, the baby-sitter—he wondered how fast he could manage it all once he arrived home.

The young girl behind the counter snapped her gum as she rang his purchases, her gold nose ring dangling precariously. He inwardly cringed, feeling a million years old. How would he handle it if Summer or August grew up and wanted their bodies pierced or tattooed in ungodly places?

"Did you have fun at day care today?" he asked.

"No, Charlie stoled my finger-paint picture," Summer said.

"But I smacked him one," August said.

"You did what?" Zeke's gaze shot to August.

"Right between the eyes," August said.

"He bledded and everythin'," Summer mumbled in a low voice.

The girl behind the counter laughed, flashing a mouth full of braces. "Fifty-two dollars and thirty-five cents."

Zeke sighed. What kind of school allowed children to steal and hit each other?

"Yeah, Ms. Edie said she's gonna call you," August said. "But I tolded her you'd want me to 'tect Summer."

Uh-oh. Zeke paid for the groceries and hauled his girls toward

the minivan. On the ride home, he heard them nibbling on the dry cereal, and his thoughts drifted to his uncertainties about parenting. The girls were only in preschool and he was already receiving discipline calls from the teachers. His stomach knotted. He needed a woman's help. What if he totally screwed up this parenting thing? Would his kids wind up on some daytime talk show one day?

As soon as they pulled in the driveway, the twins ran to check on the kittens. He fixed soup and sandwiches, eating quickly so he could make the meeting next door. He tried to stifle a tingle of excitement at the thought of seeing Paige again.

Zeke showered and quickly changed, choosing his clothes carefully. Being color-blind made matching his wardrobe difficult, so he'd pinned simple tags inside. He carefully matched the tags, then dragged on fresh army green slacks and a cream shirt. By the time the sitter, a teen from down the block, had arrived, he had minutes before the meeting was to start. He strode next door, wondering if he would have a few minutes alone with Paige before the neighbors descended.

PAIGE OPENED THE door and tried not to react to the sight of Zeke's handsome face grinning at her. Then she noticed his dark gray slacks and brown shirt, and a frown wrinkled her brow. And his socks—one navy, the other brown. The poor man, someone needed to dress him!

"Is something wrong? You're frowning."

"No," Paige said, quickly recovering. "Come on in. You're the

first one here." Even with mismatched clothes, you look sexy as hell. Darn it.

Zeke entered, sweeping the comfy room with his dark gaze. "Nice house. A little neater than mine."

"I live alone. That makes all the difference."

"Yeah." He jammed his hands in his pockets. "I guess it does."

She ignored his adorable dimple and offered him a soda as they worked their way into her den. Thankfully the doorbell rang again and Paige hurried to answer it, grateful not to be alone with Zeke.

Within minutes, neighbors filled the room, chatting easily. Zeke smiled politely to the guests as Mrs. Spivy introduced him. A slender, plain woman with short brown hair sat on his left and Dannika, a tall, leggy divorced brunette, maneuvered her chair close to his right. Paige caught Zeke's panicked look and almost felt sorry for him. Then Derrick came in and swooped her into a hug.

She threw her arms around him. "I'm so happy for you and Amelia," she whispered. "I just knew the two of you were perfect for each other."

Derrick kissed her cheek. "I love you, you know that! You are the greatest, Paige."

Paige laughed, but the two of them pulled apart when she heard Mrs. Spivy clucking. "Can you two put your love life on hold while we get this meeting under way?"

"CAN YOU TWO put your love life on hold while we get this

meeting under way?" Mrs. Spivy's words reverberated in Zeke's mind like a yelping cocker spaniel. The macho guy who held Paige simply grinned and pulled her onto the couch beside him, slinging an arm around her in a too-cozy move that rattled Zeke's teeth. The guy loved her—he'd said so right in front of the whole neighborhood.

So much for wondering if Paige had a boyfriend. And he'd thought they'd had chemistry between them. She'd probably been suffering from shock over his messy house and sloppy appearance. And that flier—he was mortified.

"Let's get started," Paige said in her silky voice. "We're all aware there've been some break-ins recently."

Heads nodded in agreement. Zeke's attention strayed as he studied Paige's den. A comfortable leather couch, beige and red plaid recliner, pine tables. Everything neat and orderly. Paige's voice broke into his reverie.

"And the police are doing all they can." Paige folded her hands together. "But we've always been a close neighborhood, so Mrs. Spivy suggested we start this neighborhood watch program."

"I still can't get the ketchup out of my white sofa," Myrtle Simmons said with a sigh.

"They took my car, drove it around and left it dead on empty," Bert Collins added.

"One of 'em left a pair of unmentionables on my floor," June Bailey said, patting her neatly coiffured hair.

"The police are investigating each incident. But as citizens, we

can help prevent crime. We want to keep our kids safe."

A hushed chorus of agreement filled the room. The woman beside Zeke offered him a shy smile. "I want my Daryl to be safe. Especially since his father's not around."

He nodded, wondering if he'd been pegged as potential father material.

Paige cleared her throat. "We have a large neighborhood so we've decided to pair off and run regular checks on each other's homes. Derrick assures me that posting a sign announcing our watch program will deter some crimes."

A hearty discussion followed, including who worked and who stayed home, how Genie Atkins would watch anyone's house when she was bedridden, who to call if someone saw something suspicious, and how old Mr. Pirkle could dial the phone on a bad day with his arthritis. Mrs. Spivy silenced the room with her hand. "I've already made a list to pair people up." She stood and handed out the papers. Zeke glanced at his and saw he'd been paired with Paige. He felt as if he'd won a small lottery.

"In setting this up, I took into account homes with working parents, elderly people at home who might need help, the proximity of neighbors." The leggy brunette beside him had been paired with Derrick. Good.

"I'm the new vet in town," Zeke announced. "Watchdogs help in deterring break-ins. If anyone wants a dog or pet, let me know and I'll match you with an appropriate animal."

"That's a great idea," the woman beside him whispered. "I

want one of those little terriers."

"I'll see what I can do," he said, avoiding her come-hither look.

"I own a security consulting business," Derrick added. "I'll be happy to install new dead bolts on doors and windows. If anyone wants a security system, we'll work out a special deal."

"That would be wonderful." Mrs. Spivy pressed her hands to her cheeks and tittered. "We feel so much safer with you around, dear."

Zeke ground his teeth. He was going to provide dogs to people and help teach the animals how to pee outside while Derrick installed security systems.

An hour later, the crowd dispersed and Zeke couldn't think of a reason to stay any longer, especially when Derrick cornered Paige in a private conversation.

It was better Paige had a boyfriend, he told himself as he left via the back door. She wanted a career, he wanted a wife and mother for his girls. And Renee had already taught him about the heartbreak involved when you tried to combine the two.

"I'D LOVE TO help you find a house for Amelia," Paige said, grinning at Derrick.

"I thought you might help me choose a bracelet as an engagement gift, too."

Paige winced, hoping Amelia wasn't already banking on another failed altar attempt, but she smiled and patted Derrick's arm. "I'd love to, Derrick."

Derrick's smile grew wider. "Great. Now what about you,

Paige? Are you interested in anyone?"

Paige shook her head emphatically, pretending nonchalance as she scanned the room for Zeke. "I'm concentrating on finishing my degree."

"How about that guy who moved in next door?" Derrick raised a dark eyebrow. "He was giving you the eye during the meeting."

Paige brushed at a piece of lint on her shirt. "You're imagining things. He wasn't looking at me any certain way."

Derrick's warm laughter boomed. "Look, Paige. I know that predatory gleam when I see it."

Paige rolled her eyes. "He's a neighbor, that's all. Besides," she said, trying to hide her disappointment over Zeke leaving without saying goodbye. "He has kids."

Derrick nodded knowingly. "You think it'll be a repeat of Eric?"

Paige shrugged. "I can't take any chances."

ZEKE PAID THE baby-sitter, watched her walk across the street to her house, then grabbed a beer and sank onto the sofa. He flipped on the TV, grimacing when he noticed old reruns of the syndicated show, Father Knows Best, playing. His insecurities about single parenting kicked in again.

He knew what to do with a sick animal, could perform surgery on a traumatized cat or dog, but would he know what was best for his children?

They needed a mother. And as much as he hated the dating game, he should make himself look for someone suitable. Paige's

image quickly surfaced, but he blotted it away like an unwanted ink stain, then flipped the channel again and groaned as The Brady Bunch piped onto the TV. Now, that was exactly the kind of woman he needed. A stay-at-home mom, cook, housekeeper.

But his body curled in distaste. Not very modern thinking. Aggravated with himself, he stood, ready to take Henrietta for a walk and settle down for the night. Henrietta was nowhere in sight.

He noticed his front door swinging open and glanced outside to see a shadow that looked like Henrietta trotting toward Paige's. He groaned, hoping Henrietta hadn't gone in search of more brownies. He certainly didn't want to interrupt Paige, especially if loverboy was still there drooling all over her like a lovesick St. Bernard.

"HENRIETTA, WHAT ARE you doing here?" Paige watched in surprise as the bulky dog wiggled through her pet door and sniffed the kitchen floor. Henrietta turned up her nose and her eyelids drooped in a pitiful begging expression. "Sorry, I don't have any brownies tonight," Paige said sympathetically. She studied the pet door, wondering if she should board it up against the vandals. But the door was so small, only a child could crawl through.

The dog whimpered and Paige stepped from her stool and walked awkwardly toward her, clutching the black satin around her body. After the neighbors had left, she'd decided to experiment with a new design. She barely had the fabric pinned

above her shoulder.

Henrietta sprawled on her floor, looking woeful. Feeling sorry for her, Paige unwrapped a leftover biscuit from her counter and handed it to her. The mutt accepted it happily, thumping the floor with her short, stubby tail.

"Come on, Henrietta. I bet the girls are looking for you." Paige opened the back door and almost bumped into Zeke.

"She's here," Page said. "I guess she came looking for more brownies," Paige said.

Zeke reprimanded the dog. Too late, Paige remembered she was wearing nothing but her panties and the scrap of black silk wrapped turban style around her body. Zeke's gaze flashed with heat as he skimmed her attire. Paige felt exposed, as if the silk were as transparent as cellophane. Her nipples beaded beneath the skimpy fabric and desire curled low in her belly. He had to know she was naked under the fabric. A slow smile spread on Zeke's face, revealing that killer dimple in his left cheek. She was a goner.

Paige backed away, panic bubbling inside. Warning bells chimed in her head like a police siren, screeching for her to run —to avoid impending danger.

"Nice outfit," Zeke said with a broad grin.

Paige ignored the flutter in her stomach. "It's a project for my clothing class."

"Hmm." Zeke folded one arm across his middle and grinned wickedly as his gaze rested on her bare shoulder. "I think you

should get an A plus. Maybe even extra credit."

Paige shivered at the flash of hunger in his eyes, then swept her hands down the sides of the satin. A mistake. The slippery material drooped off her other shoulder, making her feel bare. "It's not finished yet," she said taking another step back inside her house.

Henrietta must have realized she was being ignored because she suddenly lunged against Paige's knees, begging for another biscuit.

"No, Henrietta," Zeke ordered.

Paige shrieked, pushing at the animal. But Henrietta's paws caught the fabric and became embedded. Zeke yanked at the dog, but Henrietta snatched the silk between her teeth and jerked it so hard the material ripped, then dropped completely to the ground. Paige shrieked again and Henrietta took off running with the fabric clenched in her mouth as if she'd found a fresh ham bone. Paige brought her hands up to cover herself.

"Henrietta, come back here!" Zeke glanced at Paige and hesitated. She bit down on her bottom lip as he zeroed in on her skimpy black bikini panties and bare breasts. Then he swallowed visibly, sweat beading on his lip. If Paige hadn't been so utterly mortified, she would have admired the gallant way he brought his face up to hers. "I'll get her."

"I'll be inside," Paige said in a voice that squeaked out. Then she ran in her house to safety, her face burning.

ZEKE'S HEART pounded as he chased Henrietta across the

yard. Not only had his children humiliated him, now his damn dog had embarrassed him.

Of course, Paige looked pretty embarrassed herself.

He'd known from her running attire she had a nice figure, but her firm, high breasts had taken his breath away, and her muscular thighs and slim legs stretched out from those bikini panties like a man's dream. Exhausted or not, after seeing Paige half-naked, he'd never be able to sleep tonight.

"Henrietta, give me the fabric!" he ordered.

Henrietta growled, darted into the backyard and dragged it into her doghouse.

He knelt on his hands and knees and crawled toward the entrance of the doghouse. "Here, Henrietta. Here, doggie. Give me the fabric."

Henrietta growled again. The dog acted as though the material was a security blanket, like the ones his daughters slept with. A brainstorm hit him and he ran inside, grabbed an old blanket and hurried back. Dropping to his knees again, he stuffed the blanket inside. "Here, nice warm, cozy blanket for Henrietta. Give me the other one."

After several long minutes of coaxing, he finally exchanged the material for the blanket and examined it. It was wet with dog slobber, dirty and grass stained—what was he going to tell Paige?

Before he faced her, he rushed in to check on the girls. Thankfully they were both snuggled in their beds sound asleep. He practiced an apology as he walked back to Paige's house,

trying desperately not to think about how sexy and enticing she looked wearing nothing except black lace, with her auburn hair feathered around her bare shoulders, her dusky nipples pouting for attention.

When he reached her porch, he exhaled a shaky breath. As if she'd been standing with her hand on the doorknob, she opened the door, but only wide enough for him to see her blushing face and the big, green furry housecoat she'd pulled to her chin. He almost laughed, but the memory of her bare breasts remained imprinted in his brain and arousal strummed through his body, throwing him completely off center.

"I'm afraid Henrietta ruined the material," he said sheepishly. "I'll replace it if you'll tell me where to find the fabric, or I can write you a check to cover the costs."

Paige narrowed her eyes in disappointment. "No, I don't want money. Besides, the project's due tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" He jammed his hands in his pockets, realizing the stores were probably closed. "Well, um, you want me to wash it for you?"

Paige shook her head. "No, this fabric isn't washable."

"Paige, I'm sorry. At least let me take it to the cleaners?"

She patted his hand in a sympathetic gesture. Her fingers were soft and warm and he fought the urge to wrap her dainty hand in his. "Don't worry, Zeke. I have some extra fabric. I'll make a short dress instead of a long one."

Zeke read the uncertainty in her expression as she studied the

stained material, but admired her easygoing nature. She should be furious with him.

He felt even more guilty. “Well, I guess I should go then.”

“I guess.”

“Good luck with the project.”

“Thanks.”

He stared into her eyes, a picture of her naked flashing through his head like an erotic magazine photo. “Are you sure there’s nothing else I can do?” Maybe help pin the material around you, then take it off and touch you all over?

“I’m sure,” Paige said softly. “Go on back to the girls.”

“Oh, yeah, right.” The girls. Geez, he’d almost forgotten. What kind of father was he?

“Well, I’ll see you.”

“Yeah, see you.”

“Good night, Paige.”

“Good night.”

Zeke slowly walked back to his house, his thoughts jumbled. He liked Paige, and he was undeniably attracted to her. But he had to focus on raising his daughters.

Back inside, he yanked off his clothes, took a quick shower and collapsed into bed. It had been an exhausting day. As he closed his eyes, images of Paige’s flushed skin, her rosy lips, her high cheekbones and dainty nose, her glorious auburn hair, her curvy, sexy legs taunted him. He missed having a woman’s body snuggled up next to his, his legs tangled with her silky, smooth

skin, her soft breath whispering against his face.

Problem was, he didn't just want any woman. He wanted Paige Watkins.

Reality shattered his dreams when he rolled over to the empty space beside him and felt the crisp cool sheets. He couldn't have Paige. And if he pursued her, he'd be on a collision course with trouble.

So once again, he went to sleep. Alone.

PAIGE SHOVED THE embarrassing memory of Zeke seeing her practically naked from her mind and tried to salvage her project. Unfortunately, Zeke's heated gaze and sexy smile popped into her head at the most inopportune times. She'd stuck herself about twenty times with a pin and had almost sewn her finger on the sewing machine. Finally, around 3 a.m., she finished the dress and sat back to admire her work. She'd fashioned a tea-length semi-formal dress that dipped off one shoulder. The tapered skirt accentuated a woman's normal curves while drawing attention to her best features. Around 4 a.m., she stumbled into bed and closed her eyes.

Zeke's unbidden image drifted through her dreams but this time, Zeke was undressing her. And this time, she blushed from excitement and passion. Then she undressed him, savoring every delightful moment as his bronze skin and rippled muscles were unveiled.

At 5 a.m., Paige woke up from her dream with the sheets tangled around her, her head throbbing from lack of sleep.

Shocked at her lustful thoughts she leapt out of bed, threw on her jogging clothes and ran out the door.

Forty-five minutes later, she returned to the house, her energy renewed. The neighborhood had been filled with early morning walkers and runners and the fresh air had cleansed her senses. She showered, planning to have breakfast and study her marketing before she headed to her 9 a.m. class. But when she stepped into her kitchen, there sat the troublemaker—Henrietta.

"COME ON, GIRLS, we need to leave." Zeke buttoned his white shirt, tucking it inside his pleated navy trousers.

"But I can't find my shoes," August said.

"Try your feet." Zeke pointed to her bright yellow sneakers.

"Not these." August rolled her eyes. "They don't match my blue dress."

"I see." Actually, he didn't. Being color-blind definitely had its limitations.

"Here they are!" Summer held up another pair of shoes.

"Bailey's bringing his grandma, too," August said. "'Cause his mom is a 'portant psych…head doctor."

Zeke clamped his mouth together to prevent a chuckle, grateful at least one other child had a substitute mom for the tea. The telephone jangled and Summer and August raced to it, fighting over who would answer. After a few seconds of wrestling, they finally compromised and held it between them. But their faces instantly crumpled before him.

"Grammy can't come to the tea!" August wailed.

“She’s throwed up her waffles.” Summer’s lower lip trembled, then she promptly burst into tears.

His heart jumped into his throat as he grabbed the phone. “Hello, Mom. Are you okay?”

“Listen, Zeke, I’m so sorry, but I have the flu.” His mother’s voice sounded weak. “It’s one of those twenty-four-hour bugs, but I don’t want to expose the girls.”

“Oh, Mom, I’m so sorry you’re ill.” Zeke rubbed his temple, trying to talk over the sound of Summer’s wailing. “Sure, Mom, I understand. I hope you feel better.”

“Tell the girls I’ll make it up to them. They can spend next weekend with me.”

Sympathy for his mother softened his voice. “It’s okay. These things happen. The girls understand.” He grimaced, hoping he sounded halfway convincing. He had a feeling his mother could hear Summer bellowing and August kicking her feet against the steps. He expected August to start throwing things any minute.

“You know I’ll be glad to keep the twins if you want to go out sometime, son. There’s a couple of attractive single women in my church, women who like to stay home—”

“I’m not interested, Mom.”

“You’re not still pining for that awful woman, Renee, are you?”

“No.” Zeke gritted his teeth. “I don’t care if I ever see her again.”

“Good. I told you she wasn’t right for you. But I’ll help you

find someone—"

"Mother, I don't need you to help me—" he paused to rein in his temper "—except with the girls occasionally. Now get some rest. I'll call you in a day or two." He hung up the phone, uncertain how to handle his daughters' disappointment.

"I'm not going to school!" August yanked off her shoes and tossed them into the corner. The shoes banged against the wall and bounced off with a loud thud.

"Me neither." Summer poked out her bottom lip.

"Girls, listen," Zeke said, feeling forlorn himself. "Grandma can't help getting sick. I know you're disappointed—"

"You don't know anything!" August yelled. "You don't have to go to school without a mommy, not even a subst…a pretend one!"

Zeke sank into the chair beside the phone and dropped his head, despair momentarily filling him. Maybe he didn't know anything. He kept telling himself he was doing the best he could. But what if it's not enough?

The doorbell rang, giving him a moment's reprieve, and when he opened the door, Paige stood on the other side, Henrietta in hand.

Was she still upset about the night before?

Paige pointed to the ground where Henrietta lay sprawled on her belly. "Henrietta seems to like my place."

Summer's bellowing drowned out his reply. August ran over and flung herself at Paige, knocking her off balance.

“What’s wrong?” Paige’s brows crinkled in concern.

“We don’t wanna go to school,” August wailed.

“We can’t go today.” Summer sat up and rubbed her puffy, swollen eyes.

Paige patted August’s back. “Why can’t you go, sweetie?”

Zeke frowned, a headache forming behind his eyes. “They’re having this Mommy and Me Tea at school and my grandma was supposed to go—

“’Cept she’s sick,” August said, sniffling.

“She’s upchucking,” Summer cried.

He frowned at the girls. “You have to go to school, girls. Dad’s already late for work. You don’t want the sick animals to get sicker because I’m not there, do you?”

August hedged, chewing her lip. Summer sniffed and swiped at her nose with the sleeve of her dress.

“We could go to work with you,” August suggested.

Frustration welled up inside Zeke. “Girls, I can’t keep you there all day. I have surgery scheduled—”

August tightened her grip around Paige’s legs. Summer leaned over and whispered something in her sister’s ear. August nodded to her twin, then spoke up, her eyes wide. “Okay, we’ll go, Daddy, under one ’dition.”

“A condition?” Zeke ran a hand over his jaw. “I don’t believe this. I’m bargaining with my four-year-olds.”

“You want us to go to school?” August folded her arms as if preparing for battle.

Zeke nodded.
“Then Paige has to come to the tea with us.”

Chapter Four

Paige quickly searched Zeke's face for his reaction. Kids! They had no idea how awkward they'd made things for both of them. Zeke looked as if he'd been strung up and left dangling over a tank of hot oil. "Um, girls—"

"I'm sure Paige is busy," Zeke cut in firmly, giving the children a stern glare.

Paige hesitated. She was busy. She had to turn in her project at ten. But Zeke's haggard expression and the twin's swollen eyes tore at her heart. She couldn't help but sympathize, and she'd always had trouble saying no, especially to innocent children. Another reason she wouldn't make a good mother.

"I'm sorry you walked in on all this, Paige. We'll work it out somehow." Zeke shrugged, then took Henrietta by the collar and pulled her inside. She flopped at the girl's feet and covered her furry face with her paws, letting out a whine of her own that added to the saga of sobbing.

"I do have class," Paige said, hoping the girls would be all right. "My project's due today—"

"You don't like us," August blurted, poking out her bottom lip.

"It's 'cause we're lots of trouble." Summer swiped at her puffy eyes. "Just like Mommy said."

Paige's chest tightened at the misery in the girls' expressions. She chewed her lip, not knowing what to say. Fury streaked

Zeke's face, but he seemed to mask it quickly as he knelt before the girls. He patted both their backs, then spoke in a calm husky voice, "Listen here, girls. I don't know why your mother said that, but I'm sure she didn't mean it the way it sounded. Your mom loves you."

Summer's lip trembled. "She said we make too much messes to go with her."

"That we'd get in the way. That's why she won't come back," Summer's voice cracked as another onslaught of tears slipped down her cheeks. "Eber."

Moisture pooled in Paige's eyes but she blinked to stem the tears, shifting uncomfortably. She felt like an intruder to a private conversation. Zeke clenched his fists by his sides and her heart went out to him. She should retreat to her own yard, give the threesome time to discuss the situation, but her feet refused to budge. She remembered how her mother's absenteeism from the events in her life had made her feel. And Summer and August's mother had chosen to leave when they were small. They couldn't possibly understand.

"I'm sure Mom was just in a bad mood when she said those things, honey." Zeke tipped Summer's chin up with his thumb. "She loves both of you very much. We'll call her tonight and you can talk to her, okay?"

"We tolded her we'd be good," Summer whispered. She stuck her thumb in her mouth and chewed on her fingernail.

Paige's own nails dug into the palms of her hands. She cleared

her throat before she spoke, sympathizing with Zeke. How could any parent explain or defend another parent who'd deserted their child? Zeke's broad shoulders stiffened, his chocolate eyes dark with anger. And some other emotion she didn't recognize. Hurt? Was he still mourning over the loss of the woman, or did he hate her for leaving them?

"What time is the tea?" Paige finally asked.

Zeke's gaze locked with hers and he shook his head, his voice hard when he spoke. "Look, I appreciate the offer, but you don't have to do this, Paige. The girls are my responsibility, I can take care of them."

"I know you can." Paige blushed, suddenly aware how handsome Zeke looked in his white shirt and navy slacks. "But I want to go to the tea. For them." She forced herself to stop staring at him, then knelt beside the girls and patted their hands. "I haven't been to a tea in ages. What time should I be there?"

"Twelbe o'clock," Summer and August said in unison.

"You're really gonna come?" August asked in disbelief.

"Paige—"

"I'm really going to come." Paige tucked a strand of the little girl's red hair behind her ear, ignoring Zeke's brittle look, "that is, if it's okay with your daddy."

Zeke's smiled tightly, his voice low, "I guess so."

"We promise not to pester you too much," Summer said in a shaky voice that tore at Paige's heart.

"You could never pester me too much, girls. We're friends,"

Paige said gently. Both girls threw their arms around her neck and Paige fell backward with the impact, almost toppling to the floor.

Zeke's tender look sent butterflies shimmying through her stomach. "Hey, you, two, you're going to wear Paige out before the tea." When Zeke had settled the twins on the floor, he reached out a hand and helped Paige up. His hand was hot and rough, his olive skin a sharp contrast to her pale complexion, his hand almost swallowing hers in size. The irises of his dark eyes sparkled with awareness, traces of the emotional ordeal with his daughters still lingering in the soft set of his mouth and the tight lines around his eyes. Paige's heart thumped a strange pitter-patter, his masculine touch sending a trace of awareness rippling through her, igniting an undercurrent of emotional and sexual energy that she refused to acknowledge.

"Thanks, Paige, I appreciate this." Zeke squeezed her hand, holding it a fraction of a second longer than she thought necessary.

"Sure, it'll be fun," she said, praying she didn't make any mistakes. The girls would be in school, teachers would be there, nothing could happen. They would be safe.

She could be the girls' friend and Zeke's, but not his lover. If she let herself get attached to them, and they left, she'd never survive. Not a second time. Eric had claimed to despise his ex, but had taken her back the second she'd come groveling. And when Paige had made a mistake with his son, Eric had

immediately pointed out that Paige wasn't Joey's real mother.

She was simply going to be neighborly to Zeke and his children, nothing more.

The girls grabbed their shoes, then tugged at Zeke's pant leg as if they suddenly couldn't wait to go to school. "Daddy, we're gonna be late." August charged toward the door.

"Yeah, let's hurry." Summer pulled at his hand. "We have to decorate the…" She clamped her hand over her mouth, her eyes glowing with excitement.

August poked her. "Shh, you're not sposed to tell."

Summer giggled. "The surprise for the tea," she finished.

Paige stood and met Zeke's gaze. His dark eyes held hers and for a moment she forgot the girls were in the room. Turmoil hardened his angular features and his shoulders slumped. He seemed tired and sad and angry at the same time. Did his heart still belong to his ex? Or did he have a sixth sense about not trusting her with his daughters?

He raked a hand through his hair, the longish ends brushing the collar of his shirt, then clenched his teeth when he spoke. "Thanks, Paige. I owe you one."

Paige shrugged and swallowed the sudden nervous tension wedging itself between them, barely noticing when Summer ran outside. He sounded as if he'd bitten the words out, as if he hated being indebted to her. Had she made a mistake? Had he hoped she would decline? She finally shook her head, breaking the moment. "No problem. That's what neighbors are for." She

glanced at her watch, trying not to dwell on the masculine scent wafting around her. His aftershave reminded her of the outdoors—rugged, woodsy, and intoxicating—and the smattering of dark hair she noticed peeking through the top of his white shirt warmed her insides, suddenly making her feel hot. "I really need to go though, or I'll miss my first period class." Her legs quaked as she stumbled toward the door.

"Come on, Daddy!" Summer and August screamed from the driveway.

Zeke chuckled at the girls, some of his tension draining away. "This is really nice of you," he said quietly. "I know you had your day all planned."

Paige shrugged again. "I told you, it's no big deal. I still have time to make class, turn in my project, go to the tea, then come home and get ready for my date tonight." As soon as she said the words, Zeke's jaw seemed to tighten again. Or maybe it was her imagination. Then his expression turned blank and he turned and walked toward his car. She followed, trying not to stare at his delectable behind or the way his broad shoulders filled out his starched shirt.

"Oh, by the way. Where is the tea?" Paige called.

Zeke pivoted slightly as he opened the car door for the girls. "At Riverwood Day Care. Do you know where it is?"

Paige nodded, her stomach cramping. Of course, she remembered the day care. She'd gone there herself as a child. And she'd absolutely hated it.

PERSPIRATION TRICKLED down Zeke's collar and dampened his shirt. He had to force himself to remain calm and concentrate on the sutures needed to repair the Maltese's battered leg, but his jaw ached from clenching it. Damn Renee. She'd actually told the twins they were too much trouble. How could she have said something so cruel to her own daughters? Tension churned through his stomach, and he gripped the needle, his fingers trembling with anger. Taking a deep breath, he exhaled, the pent-up air from his lungs wheezing out shakily, then set to work repairing the animal. Thank God the shot had worked and Snowball now lay limply on the table. He wasn't in the mood to struggle with the dog or be bitten, and although she was normally a sweet, friendly little thing, any animal reacted differently when in pain. He stroked Snowball's soft white fur, then swabbed antiseptic on the nasty wound to clean it before he added the stitches. His best estimate—she'd need about fifteen. She had taken quite a beating from a much larger German shepherd, no doubt coming out the loser. Just the way his daughters had from someone who was supposed to love them.

He swallowed, blotting the girls' early morning crying jag from his mind. At least Paige had agreed to serve as their temporary mother figure for the day. But they didn't need a temporary mother figure. They needed a real mother, someone who'd be there at night to hold them, someone who would cuddle them when they were sick or scared, someone who wouldn't desert them for her own selfish interests. And Paige wasn't that

someone. Knowing she had a career in mind, he couldn't let them become too attached to her or raise their hopes, or they would be hurt even more.

"Dr. Blalock, call on line two." His receptionist, Clara, poked her head in the treatment area.

"Can you take a message?" he asked threading the needle with the synthetic suture thread.

Clara frowned. "It's from the day care."

Zeke's heart paused, then began beating frantically against his chest. What if one of the girls were hurt? He instantly dropped the needle on the table and hurried across the room. "I'll take it in here."

Clara shut the door and he picked up the phone in the lab area. "Dr. Blalock here."

The second it took for the woman on the other end to answer seemed like an excruciating eternity. "This is Edie Benson. I'm one of the four-year-olds' teachers."

"Yes, Ms. Benson, is something wrong with Summer or August?" he asked impatiently.

"No, oh, no, they're fine." She hesitated, the silence unnerving him. "But we're having some problems at school with the girls."

"Problems? What kind of problems?"

"Well, Summer seems to get upset over little things. She cries a lot."

Tell me something I don't know.

"And August has become quite volatile lately," she continued.

“The other day she hit another child.”

Zeke relaxed, leaning against the whitewashed walls. “Yes, I know. She told me you’d be calling. Do you really think hitting someone is that abnormal for a four-year-old?”

“Not really,” the woman said in a sympathetic voice. “Some children are naturally more aggressive than others. But lately August has been hitting a lot. And this morning she punched a little boy in the stomach. I thought it might help if you’d talk to her.”

“Now?”

“Yes, she’s sitting right here.”

Zeke sighed. “Put her on.”

“Daddy, he’s a big fat meanie,” August argued.

“Sweetheart, if you’re upset or he’s bothering you, tell your teacher. You can’t go around hitting other children.”

“But it’s no fair, he called me a dummy.”

“I’m sorry, honey. But you still can’t hit him.” He ran a hand through his hair, exasperated. “August, sweetie, put your teacher back on the phone. We’ll talk some more tonight.”

“’Kay, Daddy,” August said in a pouty voice.

Zeke sighed when he heard the teacher’s voice. “Ms. Benson, August says this boy is being mean to her.”

“I know, and we’ve reprimanded the boy and are also calling his parents.”

“Good. I’ll talk to August again tonight.”

“Thank you.” Relief lightened the middle-aged woman’s

voice. “She’s a precious little girl. I know being a single parent isn’t easy.”

Zeke’s fingers encircled the handset so tightly his knuckles ached. “You think I’m not a good parent?”

“Oh, heavens, I didn’t mean that,” the woman said kindly. “But parenting is hard on everyone. And sometimes when there’s a change at home, children’s behavior is affected.” She hesitated, then spoke softly. “I don’t mean to pry, but have you considered counseling for the girls?”

Zeke’s stomach clenched. “No.”

“Well, it might be worthwhile. I’m afraid this mother-daughter tea we’re having may have triggered some emotions. Holidays are always difficult for kids from single parent homes, especially at first.”

Zeke swallowed, his voice thick. “Did the girls tell you my neighbor’s coming today?”

“Yes, that’s great. But still, Dr. Blalock, consider counseling. Some of the local churches offer support groups, as well as seminars and counseling for divorced families.”

“Fine. I’ll think about it.” He rolled his shoulders to relieve the ache coiling in his neck. And he would consider counseling for the girls, he decided, as he hung up the phone. But first, he’d talk to August and see if he could understand why his sweet, darling little daughter had suddenly become a four-year-old terrorist at nursery school.

Because her mother had left her?

Renee had been gone less than a year and had said she was moving back this summer, but he didn't harbor hopes of her returning for good. Even if she changed her mind and decided she wanted family life, he wouldn't want her. His taste for flighty blondes had run its course with their disastrous short marriage. And they'd only married because of the pregnancy. When the girls had been born, he'd grown up and accepted responsibility for them. Too bad his former wife hadn't done the same.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.