HARLEQUIN®

978
July

American ROMANCE

PROGNOSIS: A BABY? MAYBE

Jacqueline Diamond

Jacqueline Diamond
Prognosis: A Baby? Maybe

Аннотация

One Night Was All It Took…for Dr. Jason Carmichael to believe that Heather Rourke had given birth to his baby. After all, there were the rumors that she'd taken off from work for two months for "personal reasons," right around the time she would have gone into labor. And then there was that adorable infant he'd seen when he'd stopped by her apartment–conveniently unannounced. But why would Heather keep him in the dark when all this once die-hard bachelor could think about was baby booties and toothless grins? He had no clear memory of the night of passion they had shared fifteen months earlier.… Was this child his or was Heather hiding a deeper secret?

Содержание

They made it to the bedroom at last 5
ABOUT THE AUTHOR 8
Books by Jacqueline Diamond 9
Contents 12
Chapter One 13
Chapter Two 29
Chapter Three 42
Chapter Four 58
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 74

They made it to the bedroom at last

Lying with her head on Jason's chest, Heather listened to the evenness of his breathing and waited for sleep to claim her.

They'd shared something tonight that ran deeper than a casual encounter. He'd felt it, too, she was certain.

She tried not to think about what might happen as a result. Perhaps, this time, there wouldn't be any emotional fallout. Surely she hadn't misjudged Jason's capacity for intimacy.

A momentary uneasiness disturbed her tranquillity. They'd forgotten to take precautions. What if something came of it?

A longing jolted through her. A baby. To nurture a child through the miraculous stages of growth would be a joy almost as great as finding the love of her life.

As sleep began to claim her and she snuggled closer to Jason, Heather wondered whether it was possible that she might have both.

Dear Reader,

This month Harlequin American Romance delivers favorite authors and irresistible stories of heart, home and happiness that are sure to leave you smiling.

COWBOYS BY THE DOZEN, Tina Leonard's new family-connected miniseries, premieres this month with Frisco Joe's Fiancée, in which a single mother and her daughter give a hard-riding, heartbreaking cowboy second thoughts about

bachelorhood.

Next, in Prognosis: A Baby? Maybe, the latest book in Jacqueline Diamond's THE BABIES OF DOCTORS CIRCLE miniseries, a playboy doctor's paternal instincts and suspicions are aroused when he sees a baby girl with the woman who had shared a night of passion with him. Was this child his? THE HARTWELL HOPE CHESTS, Rita Herron's delightful series, resumes with Have Cowboy, Need Cupid, in which a city girl suddenly starts dreaming about a cowboy groom after opening an heirloom hope chest. And rounding out the month is Montana Daddy, a reunion romance and secret baby story by Charlotte Maclay.

Enjoy this month's offerings as Harlequin American Romance continues to celebrate its yearlong twentieth anniversary.

Melissa Jeglinski
Associate Senior Editor
Harlequin American Romance

Prognosis: A Baby? Maybe
Jacqueline Diamond

www.millsandboon.co.uk

This book is dedicated to Marcia Holman with thanks for her friendship and her expert advice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The daughter of a doctor and an artist, Jacqueline Diamond claims to have researched the field of obstetrics primarily by developing a large range of complications during her pregnancies. She's also lucky enough to have a friend and neighbor who's an obstetrical nurse. The author of more than sixty novels, Jackie lives in Southern California with her husband and two sons. She loves to hear from readers. You can write to her at P.O. Box 1315, Brea, CA 92822, or by e-mail at JDiamondfriends@aol.com.

Books by Jacqueline Diamond

HARLEQUIN AMERICAN ROMANCE
79—THE DREAM NEVER DIES
196—AN UNEXPECTED MAN
218—UNLIKELY PARTNERS
239—THE CINDERELLA DARE
270—CAPERS AND RAINBOWS
279—GHOST OF A CHANCE
315—FLIGHT OF MAGIC
351—BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS
406—OLD DREAMS, NEW DREAMS
446—THE TROUBLE WITH TERRY
491—A DANGEROUS GUY
583—THE RUNAWAY BRIDE
615—YOURS, MINE AND OURS
631—THE COWBOY AND THE HEIRESS
642—ONE HUSBAND TOO MANY
645—DEAR LONELY IN L.A.…
674—MILLION-DOLLAR MOMMY
687—DADDY WARLOCK
716—A REAL-LIVE SHEIKH
734—THE COWBOY AND THE SHOTGUN BRIDE
763—LET'S MAKE A BABY!
791—ASSIGNMENT: GROOM!

804—MISTLETOE DADDY
833—I DO! I DO!
855—DADDY, M.D.
875—KISS A HANDSOME STRANGER
889—SURPRISE, DOC! YOU'RE A DADDY!
913—THE IMPROPERLY PREGNANT PRINCESS
962—DIAGNOSIS: EXPECTING BOSS'S BABY*
971—PRESCRIPTION: MARRY HER IMMEDIATELY*
978—PROGNOSIS: A BABY? MAYBE*
HARLEQUIN INTRIGUE
435—AND THE BRIDE VANISHES
512—HIS SECRET SON
550—CAPTURED BY A SHEIKH

Serene Blvd.
Bordeaux Way
Parking
West Wing
East Wing
Parking Garage
N
Church
Parking Garage
Doctors Way West
Fountain
Breezeway
Doctors Way East
Birthing Center
St. Michel Drive
Loading Zone
Parking Bay
Trees
Pool
Tennis Courts
Garage
Barr Mansion
Bluff Line
To Harbor
Doctors Circle & Barr Mansion
(Serene Beach, California)

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 Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter One

The last man in the world that Heather Rourke wanted to see stood in the doorway of her office. She glanced up questioningly, trying to mask her speeding pulse with an air of cool professional detachment.

"Now that we're going to be colleagues, Doctor, I hope we can put the past behind us," said Jason Carmichael.

Green ice, that's what had formed his eyes in some glacial age when Neanderthals stalked the world, Heather thought. In this case, the Neanderthal had a degree from Harvard Medical School, short dark hair and a lean build beneath his expensive business suit. His collected manner failed to assuage her opinion that he was a semi-savage male who probably ate his steak sandwiches raw.

"As far as I'm concerned, there is no past," Heather told the new head of the Infertility Clinic.

The latest addition to the Doctors Circle complex, the clinic was in the final stages of remodeling and would open officially in April, two months from now. Jason had arrived earlier this week but had been so busy that, until now, he and Heather had exchanged only brief, impersonal greetings. She wished they could keep it that way.

Ever since his appointment had been announced last fall, rumors had spread about her supposed dislike of him. They'd

been right.

Some fellow staffers attributed Heather's attitude to professional jealousy. Since she'd worked as an obstetrician at Doctors Circle for three years and had handled most of the infertility cases, she might have expected to be promoted to the post.

Others guessed that there was some personal conflict in their backgrounds. No one knew the truth, that she'd nearly made love to this man more than a year ago after meeting him at a convention. What a disaster that had been!

Heather hadn't confided the story even to the few friends with whom she'd shared her other secret, that she'd given up a baby for adoption when she was fifteen. Although her daughter had reappeared in her life and, along with a baby granddaughter, was now very dear to her, Heather saw no reason to spread that information around Doctors Circle. In her opinion, the more private she kept her life, the better.

"Did you get my e-mail?" Jason said. "I expected a reply by now."

"I'm not sure. Which e-mail was that?"

"I've only sent one."

"Then no, I haven't seen it," Heather said.

Jason gritted his teeth. "I don't see how you could have missed it. I sent it twice."

"I'm sure it's in the queue." She gestured at the computer screen that dominated the scattering of files and medication

samples on her desk. “I clear it every Friday.” Today was Wednesday.

Annoyance twisted his mouth. “You’ll find I’m a stickler for organization, Doctor. That includes keeping up with your messages.”

“I’m a stickler for being on time with my patients, even when that leaves me with a messy desk.” Heather checked her watch. “Why don’t you simply tell me what the message said? And why don’t we drop this ‘doctor’ nonsense and call each other by our first names?”

Judging by his frown, Jason wasn’t accustomed to being addressed so cavalierly. He’d better get used to it. People in Serene Beach, California, didn’t stand on ceremony. Especially her.

“Very well, Heather.” He emphasized her name. “I wrote to suggest that you and I walk through the new facility, unfinished as it is. I’d like to consult you about our planning.”

A blush heated her cheeks. With her short mop of red curls and sprinkle of freckles, Heather colored easily when embarrassed.

And she was embarrassed. She’d been giving Jason a hard time when all he’d wanted was to discuss the plans for the clinic. Although she hated paperwork and therefore hadn’t coveted the post of department head, she did want a say in how they set up staffing and scheduling.

So far, the two of them were the only doctors assigned to the

clinic, although others would be arriving soon. His request was an appropriate professional courtesy.

"My four o'clock staff meeting got canceled. I could join you then," she said. "Would that work?"

"Certainly." Jason cleared his throat. "Listen, that isn't the only thing I wanted to discuss. We have some unfinished business to clear up."

Uh-oh. "Which business would that be?"

"Atlanta," he said.

Heather definitely did not want to discuss the medical convention in Georgia where they'd met some fifteen months earlier. That unpleasant experience was best consigned to the scrap heap of memories.

What on earth had possessed her to go up to his room and throw her inhibitions out the window? Thank goodness he'd fallen asleep before they could consummate a passion that, in retrospect, struck her as incomprehensible. His crankiness the following day had made it evident what a close call she'd had.

"That business is finished. You dotted the i's and crossed the t's very succinctly the next morning." She closed the file she'd been reviewing.

"I wasn't at my best that Friday," Jason said. If she hadn't known him better, it might have sounded like an apology.

"Being hungover is no excuse for rudeness."

"I can be difficult when I have a headache," he said. "Who isn't?"

“You must get a lot of headaches. You’re famous for your curt manner.” Heather lifted her coffee cup, discovered that it was empty and set it down again. “You reduced your secretary to tears yesterday, I heard.”

Usually, the efficiency of the grapevine at Doctors Circle drove Heather crazy. Once in a while, however, it came in handy.

“I didn’t expect her to react so strongly.” Jason ducked his head, and a well-shaped head it was, too, for a Neanderthal, she reluctantly conceded. “By the time I arrived, Coral had already unpacked all my files from Virginia. I suppose I overreacted, but she’ll have to repack everything when we move across the courtyard to our new quarters.”

“You’re the one who requested a secretary be hired before you got here. In any case, you could have sent her instructions, since you’re obviously a whiz with e-mail.” Heather got to her feet.

“I assumed she would liaise with my secretary in Virginia,” Jason said.

Heather decided it would be impolitic to mention how much she hated trendy words like liaise. “Coral’s new and I am sure she was trying to make a good impression.”

“I hope she’ll learn not to take things so personally.” He shrugged. “I get so focused on my work, I don’t always realize the impact of what I’m saying.”

“By the way, I believe Edith Krick has been assigned as your nurse. You’ll like her. She’s highly competent and she has a thick hide where cranky doctors are concerned.” Heather started for

the doorway, but Jason was blocking her path.

Should she elbow him out of the way? Try to sidle past? The prospect of brushing against him sent an unwanted tremor through Heather.

She didn't like being attracted to this man. It had been a big mistake the first time they met, and she never repeated a mistake if she could help it.

"Who did Edith work with before?" Jason asked, apparently unaware of her desire to exit the room. Typical of him to be clueless, she thought.

"An obstetrician who left last fall. I could tell you all about his divorce and why he decided to move to Connecticut, but I won't. The story is as long as your arm."

"Thank you. There are enough people gossiping around here already, I've gathered." The man smiled. Heather couldn't believe how human it made him look. Maybe Jason had some Homo sapiens DNA in him after all.

"I wouldn't say people gossip at Doctors Circle. They just take a friendly interest in their coworkers," Heather said with more than a trace of irony.

"How much of an interest?"

"They want to know every move you make and every word you say."

"Then I'll be careful how I move and what I say." Jason straightened. For a moment, Heather thought he was going to move aside, until he planted himself even more firmly in her

doorway. She glared.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

Good heavens, was the man trying to be playful? She wasn't in a playful mood.

"Nothing a well-placed kick to the solar plexus wouldn't solve," she said.

"Are you hinting that I'm in the way?" A sparkle flashed deep in those ice-green eyes. He was definitely joking with her. That, or he'd perfected the art of being a royal pain.

"It's more than a hint. Put it in gear, please," Heather said.

"I'll be happy to move if you'll answer one or two questions about that past you claim we don't have," Jason murmured.

"You didn't have any questions the next morning." Heather hoped no one overheard this conversation. She couldn't even imagine the speculation it might provoke.

"I told you…"

"You had a headache," she finished for him. "Correction. You were a headache."

"I might have been a touch abrupt," Jason admitted.

She refused to give him the satisfaction of letting him know how much his coldness had bothered her. "That was nearly a year and a half ago. I scarcely remember what you said." Mischievously, she added, "Or what you did, either."

"You concede that I did something?" He appeared torn between curiosity and something that, in an actual full-blooded human, might have been described as vulnerability.

“I concede no such thing,” she told him. “As I’ve mentioned several times, you fell asleep. Don’t ask me if you snored. I didn’t stick around.”

“I passed out,” Jason said ruefully. “Jet lag and a couple of drinks will do that to you.”

“Not to me,” Heather answered. “Well, if you don’t remember what happened, why don’t you accept my version of it?”

“You haven’t given me a version.” Up close, the man was taller than she remembered, most likely because she herself barely cleared five foot two.

“I told you, nothing happened. That’s as much of a version as I can muster.”

“Then why did I find your earring in my bed?” Jason demanded.

Behind him, someone cleared her throat. Heather’s blood ran cold. She felt like a kid caught with her hand in a cookie jar.

Jason must have had the same reaction, because he paled. Against his black hair, the high cheekbones and classic jawline stood out in stark relief.

“Dr. Rourke?” came the voice of Cynthia Hernandez, her nurse. “There’s a patient waiting in Room C.”

“I won’t delay you.” Jason shifted backward, careful not to bump the dark-haired nurse behind him. That wasn’t easy, since Cynthia, six months pregnant with twins, nearly filled the hallway. “See you at four o’clock at my office.”

“I’ll be there.” Heather took the patient’s chart from Cynthia

and read the cover page. As soon as Jason was gone, she said, "What did you overhear?"

"Nothing, and I wouldn't repeat it if I had." The nurse strolled with her down the hall. "If your earring ended up in Dr. Carmichael's bed, I'm sure it was perfectly innocent."

"Yes, it was." Heather hoped Cynthia was as good as her word. She'd always been trustworthy until now.

Heather also spared a moment to wonder how long Jason would go on refusing to take her word for what had—or rather, hadn't—happened. She hoped she wasn't going to have to tell him the whole truth. After the way he'd behaved the next morning, he didn't deserve to know.

Now that they were colleagues, they'd soon put it all behind them, she figured. It hadn't been such a big deal. Doctors always let their hair down at medical conventions. They didn't always take their clothes off, of course.…

She entered the examining room and smiled at the woman sitting on the examining table. Rita Beltran beamed back. Pregnant with triplets after two years of infertility treatments, she'd been floating on a cloud for months.

Heather shoved Jason Carmichael out of her mind. Her heart belonged to her patients, and success stories like Rita's made all her efforts worthwhile.

FROM HIS TEMPORARY, second-story office in the Obstetrics and Gynecology Department, Jason stared across the courtyard. Even in late February, people lingered at the small

tables around a fountain. For this time of year, the Southern California weather was remarkably pleasant compared to what he'd grown up with in Boston.

The courtyard connected a trio of buildings: the three-story Birthing Center to the north, plus two curving Spanish-style wings, including the West Wing where he stood. At the plaza level, a couple of workmen were carting boxes into the facing East Wing. He assumed the cartons contained acoustical tiles, since that's what the men had been installing yesterday when the center's administrator, Dr. Patrick Barr, had shown Jason around.

His own clinic. Even stripped to raw flooring and taped windows, it had been gorgeous.

Although he'd loved his work in Virginia, Jason knew he'd made the right decision by coming here. At the larger, better-established facilities where he'd trained and done research in reproductive endocrinology, he'd earned a name for himself. Although he'd enjoyed the prestige, what he loved most was helping eager couples have children.

Established by Dr. Barr's late father, Doctors Circle had significantly improved infant and maternal health in the community. Now it was about to move on to the cutting edge of infertility treatments. Jason treasured the opportunity to put his signature on this new clinic.

Heather Rourke's presence had had nothing to do with his decision to accept the job. Nor had it discouraged him from

taking it, either. She had an excellent reputation and they should work well together, as long as she was willing to accept Jason's leadership.

He intended to keep their relationship strictly professional in spite of that irrepressible spark in Heather's eyes. In spite of a feminine way of moving that even a white coat couldn't disguise. In spite of a figure that, while petite in the right places, was also lusciously rounded in others.

In the past, Jason's experiences with romance had ended in unhappiness and anger. That kind of turmoil threatened to interfere with work, which was and always would be his number-one priority. Some men might be cut out for marriage and children, but not him.

A tap at the door drew his attention. George Farajian, chief of the Ob/Gyn Department, poked his graying head into the room. "Okay to come in?"

"Of course." Jason turned away from the window.

"I can't believe how organized you've got the place already." The obstetrician indicated the neatly labeled file cabinets and alphabetized shelves of books.

With a twinge, Jason recalled how he'd chewed out his secretary for unpacking his boxes. If she hadn't, however, he'd have spent the next month or so stumbling over them and cursing because he couldn't find whatever he was looking for. He supposed he owed the woman an apology.

"I have to credit Coral," he said. "She's done a good job."

“Glad to hear it. I believe she was hired specifically with you in mind. Now I’d like to introduce you to your new nurse.” George stepped to one side. “Jason, may I present Edith Krick.”

The center of gravity in the room shifted as the woman entered. Not literally, although she was heavyset, but emotionally. Dark-skinned, possessed of an inner certitude that bespoke years of experience, Edith had a knowing gaze that swept him assessingly.

They exchanged greetings and shook hands. All the while, Jason felt himself to be under critical scrutiny.

“Edith’s one of our best nurses,” George said. “She requested this assignment.”

“I wanted to work in the Infertility Clinic because I had one baby and never could have any more,” Edith told him. “I like to see women have as many as they want. It gets the love to flowing. You can’t ever have too much love in this world.” From her tone, it sounded as if she were challenging him to disagree.

“Heaven forbid I should stem the flow of love,” Jason said drily.

“I expect I’ll work real well with your secretary,” Edith went on. “Sometimes when a staffer is new in a place, she needs extra encouragement.”

So that was the problem. Obviously, Edith had heard about or witnessed Coral’s tears and didn’t intend to let Jason escape unscathed. Was this entire medical center full of hard-nosed women, he wondered, or was it just his luck to run into two of

them on the same day?

George glanced from him to Edith and back again. Clearly, he hadn't missed the undercurrents. "Is everything okay?"

"No problem," Jason said.

"If you don't mind, then, I've got some calls to return. Let me know if you need anything." With a friendly nod, George departed.

"You play golf?" Edith asked.

"Occasionally." Although the change of subject surprised him, Jason tried not to show it. "Do you?"

"No, but Dr. Farajian does. Plays every chance he gets," said the nurse. "Sometimes with Dr. Sentinel. He's our younger obstetrician."

"How about you? How long have you worked at Doctors Circle?" Although Jason didn't want to sound as if he were conducting an interview, it seemed important to take control and shift the balance of gravity back in his own direction.

"Ten years." Apparently, Edith wasn't interested in talking about herself, because she went on to say, "I suppose you know you've got patients scheduled starting on Monday."

"That's right." Although the clinic might not be officially open, Jason wanted to begin screening patients and setting up treatment plans.

"One of them is Loretta Arista," Edith went on. "She's the public relations director here, and if she doesn't get pregnant soon, she's going to give up on having babies altogether."

“I presume Dr. Rourke already did a workup on her?”

“She’s tried everything she knows,” Edith said. “Now it’s your turn.”

“I’ll do my best.” Jason found himself smiling at the woman’s obvious concern for her patients. Being a mother hen was a useful quality in a nurse. Less so in a doctor, however. He’d learned the hard way to keep a tight rein on his objectivity.

“We sure will.” Edith gave a nod, as if he’d passed inspection. “I’ll be honest with you, Doctor. People say you’re difficult to work with.”

“I set high standards and I’m impatient if they aren’t met,” Jason told her. “When it comes to infertility, time is the enemy. That’s why I hate wasting it. Sloppiness, making assumptions and failing to follow directions won’t be tolerated. I’m sure you agree or Dr. Farajian wouldn’t have recommended you.”

Edith’s grin made her face shine. “You’re tough because you fight for your patients. I like that.”

“I can see that we’re going to get along.” Jason remembered Heather’s comment that Edith had a thick hide. Good. He didn’t want to worry about accidentally wounding her ego if he snapped at her under pressure. Most likely, she’d bark right back at him the moment they were alone. Fair enough.

An almost subliminal scent tantalized Jason’s nostrils. Heather must have arrived for her tour of the new clinic. His subconscious made the connection even before he saw her.

“Hello, Dr. Rourke. How’s everything going with you?” Edith

asked the smaller woman hovering outside in the hall.

"Fine. It's good to see you." Briskly, Heather came inside.

An auburn curl straggling along one cheek was the only sign of weariness despite what must have been a long day. Having shed her white coat, she wore a dark skirt and a tailored beige blouse that, in spite of some discreet tucks, sketched her generous curves.

Jason tore his gaze away. He had the uncomfortable sense that both women had noticed where he was looking.

"We're going to check out the clinic," he told Edith. "Care to join us?"

Meaningfully, her chocolate eyes fixed on Heather and him in turn. "Like my mother used to say, three's a crowd," said the nurse. "Right now, this office is so small, I can hardly breathe. Guess I'd better go make sure the Records Department has sent over those patients' charts for next week. I know how you hate inefficiency." Fanning herself with one hand, she stepped outside and closed the door behind her.

Heather's cheeks turned an appealing pink. "She's not very subtle, I'm afraid."

"About what?" Faced with potential embarrassment, Jason had learned that the best response was to pretend you didn't get the point.

"Forget it." She brushed a speck of lint off her blouse, seemingly unaware of how the action emphasized the shape beneath the clothing. Jason struggled to keep his breathing

regular.

From the moment they'd met, during registration at a convention hotel in Atlanta, he'd felt the same powerful pull toward her. He found it hard to believe that, even jet-lagged and having consumed a couple of drinks, he'd blacked out as quickly as Heather claimed. Not with such a powerful yearning coursing through him.

Something had happened that night. Jason felt like an idiot for not being able to remember, but that was no excuse for her keeping him in the dark. Heather's earring hadn't landed in his bed by remote control.

Even though it might take a while to pry out the information, he was determined to get an answer. How he responded once he got it would depend on what he learned.

"I'll buy you a cup of coffee at the kiosk on the way over." Jason opened the door for her. "Unless you've had too much caffeine today."

"There's no such thing in this profession. Now that you mention it, if I don't get some more, I may keel over." Heather was so short, she walked under his outstretched arm and cleared it by an inch.

With hardly any effort, Jason could have drawn her against his chest and buried his face in her hair. Rejecting the image, he decided he needed that coffee even more than she did.

Chapter Two

Heather had avoided the first floor of the East Wing since the remodeling began, due to the noise, the sawdust in the air and the hazards of trying to make her way through construction clutter. With Jason as her guide, however, she found herself fascinated.

The work had progressed much further than she'd realized, transforming the area formerly leased to an outside group of pediatricians. The altered layout of the walls showed Heather a state-of-the-art facility, with examining rooms and surgical suites plus an extensive laboratory where they'd be able to offer in vitro fertilization and the whole alphabet soup of new technologies.

In a few short decades, medicine had surpassed what science fiction had proposed when Heather was in high school. In addition to egg donations and embryo transfers, researchers had developed such exotic procedures as AH, or assisted hatching, in which a small opening was etched in the outer coating of the early embryo to help it implant in the womb.

The pace of research had intensified to the point where Heather spent her free time catching up on medical journals, reading research papers and attending conferences. No matter what people thought, she was grateful to have Jason on staff with his advanced training and experience.

She was less grateful for the man's overwhelming physical presence, not to mention the impulsive way he picked her up and

lifted her over a row of boxes blocking her path. His large hands proved surprisingly gentle on her waist, the thumbs clamping lightly across her rib cage, the fingers nudging the skin below her breasts.

Ripples of desire flowed through her, speeding up Heather's breathing and spurring a sharp, Technicolor memory.

When he caught her nipples in his mouth, heat slammed into her, so intense it was almost painful. Lying on the hotel bed, Heather caressed his thick, black hair with a sense of delicious disbelief. She'd only met this man today. What was she doing? And how many times could they do it again during a three-day convention?

"The director's office is this way." Jason, seemingly unaffected after lifting her, led the way past the examining rooms. "You can pick which of the other offices you'd prefer."

"I'll take one as far from yours as possible." Had she said that aloud? Heather managed a smile. "I'm kidding, of course."

"It's up to you." Surely that was studied indifference on Jason's handsome face, not the real thing, she thought, then wondered why she cared.

They stepped through an anteroom into his future office, which consisted of bare walls, rough wooden flooring and a curtainless window. From against the baseboards, Jason hoisted a couple of sketches washed with pastels.

"Dr. Barr asked what I thought of his commissioning a mural for the hall, a motif that would carry through the examining

rooms." He handed her the samples. "Here's what the designer is proposing. What do you think?"

The artist had a clever touch with babies, Heather mused as she examined the drawings. Each sketch showed a lively youngster, its face alight with precocious emotions. Rounded and full of life, the infants nearly leaped off the paper and into her arms. They reminded her of some photographs her friend Amy Ravenna Ladd, Doctors Circle's resident psychologist, had installed in her office.

"From your expression, I gather you like them," Jason said.

"They're marvelous." Heather held them up, trying to imagine how they might figure into a mural. "Still, some patients find it painful to be constantly reminded of the babies they can't have."

"Maybe we should post drawings of ancient fertility symbols," he teased.

"I suspect they'd prefer male movie stars," she said drily. "That ought to put them in a fertile mood." Although she didn't intend to tell him so, she doubted anyone was going to need pictures of movie stars with Dr. Jason Carmichael around.

"Some of our patients are men," he pointed out.

"I'll allow a few photos of beautiful women," Heather said, adding, "In the men's bathroom."

"Whatever you've been doing until now, I was impressed by the statistics on your success rate," Jason said. "Of course, even if I hadn't read the documents, I could tell just by looking around Doctors Circle. There seem to be a lot of pregnant staff

members."

Heather handed the sketches back to him. "I don't deserve all the credit. Some women manage fine by themselves."

"I noticed that your nurse is pregnant," Jason said. "Isn't she uncomfortable, working so close to her due date?"

"She wants to save as much leave as possible for after the twins are born," Heather admitted. "Since she's a single mom…" She stopped, not wanting to reveal more of Cynthia's situation than necessary.

"I see." Jason frowned. "As the single mother of two infants, she could have a hard time keeping up with your schedule. Perhaps she and the father will prefer that she switch to a less rigorous schedule."

"The father's out of the picture entirely." She pressed her lips together, not wanting to say anything further.

"I'm sorry to hear it, for everyone's sake." He shook his head. "She's going to be exhausted and distracted. If she starts making mistakes that affect patient care, she'll have to be transferred."

"She'll be fine." Heather wasn't sure why she bristled at his tone, since she shared the same concerns. But after providing excellent assistance for several years, Cynthia had earned her loyalty. "She loves working with me. She doesn't want any other position."

"Then she should have thought things out more carefully in advance," Jason said.

How dare he blame the pregnancy on Cynthia when she

already had enough problems? “Are you blaming her for having an accident?”

“No, but…” Jason seemed briefly at a loss for words. Finally, he said, “As an obstetrical nurse, she surely has the knowledge to prevent this kind of situation.”

“People have been known to get carried away by their passions,” Heather said. “Not that I need to mention any names.”

She saw by the way his eyes widened that she’d hit her target. “You’re changing your story? It’s no longer that nothing happened. Now it’s that we got carried away by our impulses?”

“We went part of the way before you fell asleep,” Heather said. “That’s all.”

“I’m willing to believe that in my less-than-optimal condition, my memory lost what must have been a delicious experience.” Jason moved closer, looming over her. Heather had to fight the impulse to take a step backward. “But you’re saying that I fell asleep in the middle of making love to you? That’s going a bit far. I’m thirty-six, not ninety-six.”

“What difference does it make?” she snapped. “Whatever we did, it’s over.”

“I’d like to know where I stand.”

“A little too close for comfort, frankly.”

Deliberately, he shifted toward her. “Let me know when you’re ready to run screaming into the woods.”

“I should warn you, I know karate.” And several other Japanese words.

“That won’t do any good. The highest you could kick would be my kneecap.” He grinned. “You know, the two of us really should spend more time together. Maybe my memories will flood back.”

“My memory doesn’t need refreshing.” Heather had to tilt her head to meet his gaze. “Anything you want to know, you’re free to ask. But since you made it clear the next morning that you had no interest in pursuing the matter, I’m surprised you keep harping on it now.”

Jason reached out and brushed an errant curl off her temple. His touch shivered straight into parts of Heather that she considered off-limits to him or anybody else. “In my hungover condition, I may have muttered something less than gallant. For that, I apologize.”

“Your exact words, as I recall, were, ‘Whatever happened last night, I trust I’ll hear nothing further about it.” A slight tremor undermined Heather’s tone. Darn it, she didn’t want to show any vulnerability around Jason.

He had no right to know how much he’d wounded her. For the first time in years, she’d begun to open up to a man, only to have him throw it in her face.

If she’d had different life experiences, she might have found his attitude merely churlish and dismissed it from her mind. To a woman who’d been abandoned as a teenager by the man she’d loved and trusted, however, his rejection had struck her like a physical blow.

“Did I really say that?” Jason asked. “Ouch.”

“Those were your exact words. I already explained that there’s nothing wrong with my memory.” Heather was preparing a few more sharp remarks when she saw him focus on a spot behind her and realized someone had come into the room.

She turned, already knowing there was only one person at Doctors Circle who could approach that quietly on bare floors. Coral Liu possessed an inner calm that had impressed Heather from the moment the young woman started work in January. Even now, when she was probably quaking inside at facing her boss, her smooth, intelligent face showed only respect.

“I hope I’m not interrupting.” Coral held up a catalog of office furniture. “Mrs. Barr asked me to show you this. I thought it might be helpful to make your selections while you’re in the new office, so you can picture how things would fit.”

With an impatient expulsion of breath, Jason took the catalog. “I don’t have much of an eye for interior decorating.”

Coral bit her lip. Jason’s slight sign of impatience bothered her, Heather could tell. It was too bad such a rough-edged man had been paired with a sensitive secretary, although she knew Natalie had interviewed a number of applicants before recommending Coral.

“I took the liberty of drawing a floor plan, if you’d care to look at it,” the secretary said.

“Sure.” Jason didn’t lift his eyes from the catalog as he flipped through.

Coral handed Heather a sheet of paper. Although the

markings had been sketched with a tentative hand, the young woman had done a careful job of arranging the desk, a couch, chairs and filing cabinets. “Looks good to me.”

Jason gave it a quick glance. “Might work. I’ll give it a more thorough going-over later.” He handed everything back to Coral. “Put these on my desk, please.”

“Yes, Dr. Carmichael.” She turned away, disappointment clouding her eyes. Apparently she’d hoped her floor plan would draw a more positive response.

“Oh, Coral. One more thing.”

She stopped, her slim back rigid, and turned to face him.

“On second thought, I realize it wasn’t such a bad idea to unpack my files and books,” Jason said. “We won’t be moving for at least a month, and I’d have hated not being able to find things when I needed them. In future, just check with me before doing something like that, okay?”

“Yes, sir.” After giving him a shy smile, Coral retreated. Her shoulders, Heather noticed, had relaxed.

“What were we talking about?” Jason asked after Coral had left. “Something important, I recall.”

Heather refused to resume the discussion of their ill-starred encounter in Atlanta. “We were reviewing the mural. I approve of it. Babies, babies everywhere sets the right tone.”

“I’ll tell Patrick. As I said before, decorating isn’t my strong point.” Despite his well-known dislike of wasting time, Jason appeared in no hurry to move on. “The rest of our new staff

should be on board before April. I'll forward their bios to you, if you're interested."

"I'd like that." Time to make her getaway, Heather decided. "Thanks for showing me around. I have to be going."

"You haven't picked your office."

"I'll leave that to you," she said. "I've got an appointment."

Although technically she was finished at five o'clock, infertility patients had to be seen during their optimal times of the month, which weren't always predictable. Some of the women also contended with rigid work schedules, so Heather made a point of staying flexible.

"I'll see you later, then." Jason didn't suggest walking back across the plaza together, to her relief.

Once she was out in the fresh air, Heather's spirits rose. With luck, they had put that entire Atlanta business behind them. With a little more luck, the sensual awareness vibrating between them would abate as soon as familiarity bred boredom. Any day now.

She marched across the courtyard, her sensible pumps clicking confidently against the pavement.

"TELL ME AGAIN what was wrong with this one," Rob Sentinel said as he and Jason emerged from the third apartment building they'd visited.

Jason appreciated the young obstetrician's offer to spend part of Saturday ferrying him around town. As a recent arrival himself, Rob knew the ropes of apartment hunting.

"There was no built-in microwave," Jason said.

“That’s what I thought you said. I just didn’t believe it. They sell microwaves at discount stores, you know.” Rob sounded impatient, which was understandable, considering that he’d given up a chance to play golf with George today.

“I’ve already accumulated more stuff than I want.” Jason knew it didn’t make sense, his dislike of loading himself down with material possessions. Still, with only a few clothes, a small TV and a boom box, he’d been able to ship everything easily from Virginia.

If he had good financial sense, he’d buy a place, his mother had advised in a phone call from Boston. Being a real estate agent, she figured he was making a mistake by not investing now that he appeared to be putting down roots.

Certainly Jason didn’t plan to change jobs any time soon. Possibly not for many years.

Yet in the past there’d been times—one in particular, after his engagement had fallen apart—when both his personal and professional lives had benefited from his ability to pack up and move on short notice. He wasn’t ready to give up that freedom yet.

“Hold on.” Rob paused next to his car and folded his arms. “Didn’t you ask me earlier whether any of the apartments allowed dogs? A dog isn’t exactly what I’d call a minor acquisition.”

“It was an idle question.” Jason had always dreamed of having a dog. His parents, who took pride in their spotless Brookline home, had nixed the idea while he was growing up, and he’d had

no opportunity since then. “Maybe when I retire, I’ll buy a large place and a dog to go with it. I don’t know why I bothered asking today. It just popped into my head.”

For some reason, he wondered whether Heather liked dogs. He’d spent the last couple of days wondering about Heather’s taste in a lot of things, although he’d been too busy to seek her out again.

“Your subconscious might be sending you a signal,” said his companion.

“Excuse me?” How on earth had Rob figured out that he was thinking about Heather?

“The dog. If that’s what you really want, we’re taking the wrong approach.” The obstetrician leaned against the car. “I don’t think an apartment is what you need.”

“If you’re about to suggest I invest in real estate, stop right there,” Jason said.

“I was thinking more along the lines of renting a house or a town house,” the younger doctor said. “That’s what Dr. Rourke does.”

“Oh?” He tried to sound casual, although he found himself intensely interested in hearing more. “Where does she live?”

“In a town house development on Bordeaux Avenue. That’s in the northeastern part of town,” Rob said. “I’d have rented there myself if it were closer to the beach.”

“Do they allow pets?” That would be ideal, Jason thought.

“I don’t know,” said the other doctor. “You could ask her about

it on Monday."

"I don't want to wait that long. I'm tired of the hotel." He was impatient to get settled and curious to see where Heather lived, too. "Why don't we swing by there and take a look at her place?"

"I don't know her unit number. Besides, she's probably not home." Obviously, Rob wasn't eager to make another stop. If he were getting tired of the apartment hunt, Jason couldn't blame him.

"You've been great today," he said. "You've given me a good idea of what's available. Why don't you drop me at my hotel? I can take it from there."

"I promised to help," Rob said stubbornly. "Besides, you don't know your way around town."

"I've got a map," he pointed out, then added the kicker. "It's still early enough to hit the golf course."

The man ran through several expressions as he waged an internal debate. "All right." The call of the links had won out. "I'll take you back, but let me know if you need more help."

"You bet." Jason didn't plan to do anything of the sort.

At his hotel, he thanked Rob. As soon as the man was out of sight, Jason called Patrick's home. The administrator had given him the number in case of weekend or evening problems that required his immediate attention.

Patrick's wife, Natalie, answered. After Jason explained that he wanted to check out the town houses, she gave him Heather's address and cell phone number. "I'm not sure if she's home,"

Natalie said. “She volunteers in a program for unwed mothers on Saturday mornings.”

Into Jason’s mind flashed their conversation on Wednesday about the pregnant nurse, along with Heather’s sharp reaction. Had she misinterpreted his remarks as an insult toward unmarried mothers? He’d only meant to point out that, if anyone knew enough to take precautions, it ought to be an obstetrical nurse.

“It’s nearly noon,” he said. “She might be home.”

“You can call her,” Natalie said.

“I appreciate the information.”

“Good luck on finding a place.”

“Thanks.” Jason didn’t mean to mislead her, but, as he rang off, he’d already decided not to bother calling in advance.

Heather might tell him to stay away. And he had no intention of doing that.

Chapter Three

Pushing up on her hands and knees, the baby rocked her little body forward, lost her balance and plopped onto the carpet. Doggedly, she hoisted herself up again and began rocking once more.

"She's trying to crawl," Heather said in delight.

"Wait! I'll get my camera." Her daughter Olive ran for the digital apparatus, which was never far away. "I have to send John a shot."

"He's getting out of the marines next month," Heather pointed out. "He'll be able to watch her crawl and stand and walk before you know it."

"I can't bear for him to miss any of it. He's miserable that he wasn't here for her birth." Crouching, Olive took aim and snapped a shot just as Ginger flopped onto her side and opened her mouth to bawl. "Oh, no. That's going to look awful."

"It's cute," Heather said. "Everything she does is cute."

"Typical grandmother." Her daughter smiled indulgently. "Even if you are ridiculously young."

"You think she's cute, too!"

"Granted, but I don't dote on her the way you do." With an arch look, Olive added, "Maybe if you could brag about her to your friends, you'd get it out of your system."

"I do brag about her to my friends."

“Only Natalie and Amy.” Olive stretched onto her stomach, keeping the baby in the frame. When it came to taking pictures, she had a lot of patience. “I know you’re not ashamed of us, Mom, but you need to get over being ashamed of yourself.”

That was perceptive for a twenty-one-year-old woman, Heather reflected. “Things have changed. When I got pregnant out of wedlock, people sneered at me. I was held up as a bad example.”

“Oh, come on! Even twenty years ago, nobody believed that old business about fallen women.”

“You’d be surprised.”

Olive clicked quietly as Ginger tried again. This time, the baby managed to move her arms and legs fast enough to keep her balance as she lurched forward. “She did it!”

“I’m going to get my camera, too,” Heather said. “Don’t let her grow up before I get back.”

She’d scarcely taken two steps before the phone rang in the kitchen. It was John, making one of his rare overseas calls to his fiancée. After they exchanged greetings, she went to get her daughter.

Olive vanished to take the call. In the living room, Heather indulged herself by shooting a series of photos as Ginger bumbled her way along the carpet, making a colorful splash with her yellow jumpsuit and carrot-colored hair.

Although Olive and Ginger had been staying here for five months, she still could hardly believe she’d not only been reunited

with her daughter, she'd also gained a granddaughter. It was more than she'd ever dared hope for.

Heather had been a confused fifteen-year-old when she got pregnant by her eighteen-year-old boyfriend, Ned. A handsome young man with a tan complexion and dark hair like Olive's, he'd sworn he adored her and wanted to marry her someday—until he discovered that she was with child.

The first words out of his mouth had been, "It's not mine." Shocked, she'd burst into tears. He was the only man she'd ever been with, she'd pointed out. They loved each other, didn't they? Surely he was going to stand by her.

What a fool she'd been! For the next few weeks, Ned had avoided her. When Heather showed up at the auto repair shop where he worked, he'd ordered her off the premises.

She'd spent a miserable week confiding in no one, telling herself Ned would come to his senses. Finally she'd dropped by his house. His mother had fixed her with an angry glare.

"He's gone," the woman had said. "Don't ask me where. It's your fault. He should never have gotten mixed up with a tramp like you."

Stunned and frightened by the thought of what lay ahead, Heather had cried until her eyes were raw, then gone home and confessed to her parents. Seeing the disappointment in their faces had been almost as bad as experiencing Ned's betrayal.

Her father, a truck driver, and her mother, a supermarket checker, had always encouraged Heather and her brother to focus

on their studies and aim for the stars. News of the pregnancy had hit them hard.

They hadn't rejected her, though. Their love had made life bearable while she attended an alternative high school and suffered snubs from former friends. When the baby was born, Heather had known she wasn't prepared to raise a child, so she'd tearfully given her up for adoption. At every point, her parents had delivered their support without question.

"I'll never let you down again," she'd told them, and she hadn't. When she graduated from college, the first person in her family to do so, they'd been thrilled, and she'd been pleased when her brother followed in her footsteps.

Earning her medical degree, although it required financial sacrifices of everyone, had filled them with pride. So had Heather's brother's decision to become a police officer.

Over the years, she'd always wondered where her little girl was and hoped she was loved. Although Heather had never doubted the wisdom of her decision, she'd ached for the child she would never see.

A few years ago, she'd signed up with a service that matched parents and birth children, in case her daughter ever wanted to find her. About a year ago, she'd received a call.

Olive's beloved adoptive parents had died in an accident while she was in college. Engaged to a marine, pregnant and temporarily alone while he served overseas, she'd sought to connect with the woman who'd given birth to her.

As soon as they met, they'd become best friends. From her flashing brown eyes to her sense of humor, Olive seemed like a younger sister. Even the parts of her that came from Ned, like her dark hair and slim build, were a gift, in Heather's opinion. The man was a fool who'd lost much more than he'd taken.

She could never regret having this daughter and granddaughter, no matter how much they'd cost her. And she knew her parents, who'd met them at Christmas, no longer regretted it, either.

There'd been plenty of speculation at Doctors Circle last fall when Heather, without explanation, took two months leave to coach Olive through the birth and spend time with her afterward. Office gossip attributed her absence to pique at Jason's appointment, and she'd done nothing to correct the impression. It made as good an excuse as any, since she had no intention of subjecting her painful past to the scrutiny of others.

Afterward, the pair had come to live here while John wrapped up his service. Olive, who'd grown up only an hour's drive away in Los Angeles, had finished earning her degree at nearby Serene College. This month, she'd taken her last final and completed her work. Soon, John would be returning.

Heather didn't want to think about how much she was going to miss living with her daughter and granddaughter. Strange as it seemed, she enjoyed having her once-tranquil living room crammed with a playpen and toys and she loved being called Mom, an honor Olive had spontaneously bestowed upon her. She

hoped the new family would settle nearby so she could watch every step, literally and figuratively, of Ginger's development.

"Mom!" Olive sprinted into the living room. "I'm so excited! John wants to get married as soon as he arrives. He can't bear to wait, and neither can I! We're going to have our wedding next month."

"I'm pleased for you." Relief was Heather's first reaction. She'd never met her future son-in-law in person, and until now had had only Olive's assurances that he was loving and rock-solid. Thank goodness John hadn't turned out to be a cad like Ned.

"It's been so lonely with him gone, and now we'll be together all the time." Joy made Olive shimmer as she sang, "Here comes the bride! Big, fat and wide! Not!"

Despite Heather's happiness for her daughter, reality intruded. A little less than three weeks. That was all the time they had until John returned.

"How will we ever be able to put a wedding together?" she cried. "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be a spoilsport and I know Amy managed hers in a week, but I have no idea where to begin."

Amy and Quent Ladd had married quickly in order to gain custody of his orphaned niece and nephew. They'd been assisted by Amy's highly capable Aunt Mary, who'd offered the use of her large home for the ceremony and reception. This town home, despite its vaulted ceiling and graceful design, wasn't nearly big enough, in Heather's opinion.

“You’re such a worrier,” chortled her daughter. “We’re going to get married at a Las Vegas wedding chapel. The only guests will be you and John’s parents from Texas. You’ll bring the baby home and watch her for me during our honeymoon, won’t you? We’re going to celebrate right there in Vegas.”

“Of course,” Heather said.

Olive performed an impromptu dance that made Ginger laugh. “Your daddy’s coming home! I’m going to be a bride!”

“You need a dress,” Heather said.

“John told me to pick out a ring, too.” Olive started for the kitchen again.

“Where are you going?”

“To call my friend Julia to help me shop. I know how impatient you get in stores,” her daughter said. “Don’t argue. I’ll let you see what I choose before I make the final decision, okay?”

“All right.” Despite her sense that the mother of the bride ought to have a finger in every pie, Heather knew that after one hour in the mall, she’d start tapping her foot and biting her nails. “Leave the baby with me while you shop.”

“Julia would have a fit. She’s always complaining that she doesn’t get to spend enough time with Ginger.”

“Babies don’t make good shopping companions. She’ll get restless,” Heather warned.

“We’ll take lots of breaks,” Olive said. “Don’t fuss over me, Mom. Not that I really mind. Gosh, you’re so much like my mama used to be, I almost feel like she’s here.”

“I’m sure she is.” Heather felt a deep gratitude to the woman who’d raised Olive. “She’ll always be here in your heart.”

Her daughter’s eyes got suspiciously bright. She hurried to stuff supplies into the diaper bag. By the time she whisked Ginger out the door, Olive was dry-eyed and eager to look for a gown.

After the door closed, the two most precious people in Heather’s life were gone, if only for a little while. The sparkle vanished from the air.

“So this is what empty-nest syndrome feels like,” she told the silent house. “It’s not as if I’d spent twenty years being a mother. I shouldn’t make such a big deal of it.”

With a sigh, she bent to pick up the scattered toys that had accumulated on the carpet along with bits of lint and shreds of paper. They must be transporting themselves here from an alternate universe, because Heather had never figured out where all this stuff came from.

The doorbell rang. Olive had forgotten something, which wasn’t surprising in view of her rush. Pushing a flyaway strand of hair from her forehead, Heather went to answer the door.

The dark-haired man who filled the doorway regarded her with amused curiosity. “Just getting up, at this hour?” he asked.

Uncomfortably, Heather realized what a picture she must make. After rising early to feed Ginger while Olive slept, she’d showered and thrown on a sweatsuit that resembled pajamas. Although she’d brushed her hair, that was many hours and diaper changes ago.

Jason, by contrast, looked as if he'd strolled out of a magazine ad. It was positively indecent the way his polo shirt stretched across his broad chest and his jeans hung low across his hips. It looked as if one tweak would be enough to make the snap give way.

Stop thinking like that! "I'm getting a head start on my spring cleaning," Heather improvised. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm house-hunting and got curious about where you lived." With a swift motion, he plucked a wisp of paper from her hair. "Did you hold a confetti parade through your premises this morning?" He peered past her into the entryway.

With a jolt, Heather realized that if she opened the door any further, he'd see the playpen in the living room and the high chair visible through the doorway in the kitchen. Not to mention assorted toys and parenting magazines.

"Yes, I had a parade, and that's why you can't come in," she said tartly. "There's horse poop everywhere."

Jason's smile turned into a grimace. "That's the weirdest excuse I've ever heard."

"For what?"

"For keeping me out."

"Women make a lot of excuses for keeping you out, do they?" Heather said. "The truth is, as you can see, I'm in no shape to receive company."

He composed his features into a semblance of injured innocence. "I'm simply looking for ideas about what kind of

place to rent."

"That's easy. Don't rent, buy," Heather said. "That's what I'm going to do as soon as I save the down payment." If she hadn't been repaying student loans until the previous year, she'd have purchased a house long ago.

"If you're planning to close the door on my foot, it won't work," Jason said. "I'm wearing heavy shoes."

"Why would I need to close the door on your foot, since you're going away?"

He edged closer. "I just want to take a look at the layout of your town house. I've been thinking of renting here in the development."

Dismay squeezed the air from Heather's lungs. Jason, living in her complex? That would mean running into each other at the mailboxes and the pool. He'd see her in her bikini. What was worse, he'd see Olive and Ginger.

"You'd hate it," she said. "It's noisy."

"It seems quiet today." Sure enough, the only sounds were birds twittering in a tree and the hum of a car passing on the street. "I'm sure it'll be fine."

Dropping the noise angle, Heather shifted to a more promising topic. "You should check out the area where Amy and Quent Ladd live, near the beach. It's much more suitable for a single person."

"Why don't you live there?" he asked.

"Because I'm stuffy and conventional." This wasn't working,

she could tell by his stubborn stance. “I’ll tell you what. Wait out there while I change, and I’ll take you to meet the manager. I’m sure she’d be happy to…”

He’d leaned a bit too far toward her. Even a strong guy like Jason could only challenge gravity so far before he lost his balance, and at the merest bump from his strong shoulder, Heather staggered backward. The door swung wider.

“I’m sorry.” Jason grabbed her arm in time to prevent a tumble. “I’m not usually this clumsy.” His head came up as he took in the contents of the room. There was a long, contemplative pause. “When did you start running a day-care center?”

“Believe it or not, one baby created all this mess. My niece and her daughter are visiting.” Heather hated to lie, but if there was anyone she didn’t choose to bare her soul to, it was Jason Carmichael. Especially after that comment about how Cynthia should have known better than to get pregnant out of wedlock.

“Great architecture.” Apparently accepting her explanation, he indicated the high ceiling and open staircase. “How’s the construction?”

On the verge of praising it, she remembered her goal of discouraging him from renting in the complex. “The upstairs bathroom tilts. There are cracks in the walls, too.” That was true, more or less. Practically every wall in Southern California had a few cosmetic cracks, thanks to the occasional earthquakes.

“There’s got to be some reason you chose to live here,” he said.

Darn the man, why did he insist on questioning her so closely?

He took far too great an interest in Heather's home for her comfort.

"I'll show you," she said, deciding openness was the only way to satisfy his curiosity. "Follow me."

She led him through the living room. The angles and sightlines felt different when she tried to regard them from Jason's point of view. Or perhaps it was his thoroughly male, keenly inquisitive presence that changed everything.

He radiated a subtle energy, a vibration that filled the town house. Heather battled the instinct to touch him. In spite of herself, she knew where that could lead and wasn't absolutely certain she'd be able to stop.

In the kitchen, Jason's eyebrows rose at the sight of the high chair. "Your niece brought a lot of equipment for a visit."

"She's staying with me while she finishes college," Heather clarified. On the point of mentioning that Olive was getting married next month, she stopped. Guilty people gave themselves away by prattling too much, and the more she talked, the more suspicious he was likely to become.

"You're a gracious aunt to put up with all this mess," he said.

Heather's gaze traveled across the unwashed dishes on the counter to a bib smeared with breakfast food. She supposed it was disorderly from the point of view of a man who had only himself to care for. Until this moment, she'd hardly noticed. "I don't mind. It's only temporary."

"At least the kitchen is a good size," he said approvingly.

Heather tried to find some flaw to point out, but failed. Reaching the glass door, she slid it open and stepped onto the enclosed patio. “This is the reason I rented the place.” She indicated a small flowerbed bursting with cool-weather flowers suitable for a Southern California winter.

“It’s very pretty. You like to garden?” Jason asked.

“I’d love to have a whole yard full of flowers.” Heather’s mind painted the scene as she spoke. “Rose bushes in every corner and climbing on a trellis. I want enough blooms for cutting and the air filled with old-fashioned perfume.”

“You’ve got it planned out, I see.” Jason edged away, or perhaps he was turning to examine a potted coleus. “I can’t imagine where you find the time.”

“Gardening’s restful,” Heather said. “Digging in the dirt settles my mind.”

His teasing manner of a few minutes ago disappeared. “It looks to me like a lot of effort for a place you’re going to leave behind eventually.” Heather could have sworn she saw disapproval in the way he regarded the rioting flowerbed.

“Sticking a few bedding plants into the ground isn’t exactly a lifetime commitment,” she said. “Besides, these are annual flowers. They have to be replaced a couple of times a year in any case.”

“Suit yourself,” Jason said.

She couldn’t resist teasing him. “If you decide to lease a unit, I’ll be glad to offer you tips. You might become a real

aficionado."

"I can't imagine investing that much effort in something I'm going to leave behind," Jason answered. "It's a waste of effort."

"How soon are you planning to move on?" Heather leaned down and yanked a weed.

In the midday light, Jason's green eyes took on a hard emerald gloss. "Not soon, of course, but let's be honest. Although heading this clinic is a terrific opportunity, I don't picture myself sticking around forever."

"No roses and no roots," Heather said. "How sad."

Jason shrugged. "A house is just a place."

She imagined him as an old man, living in Spartan quarters, still refusing to commit himself to anything beyond his profession. Feeling a pinch of regret, she conceded silently that, without meaning to, she'd begun to picture Jason in a romantic light. The man was so darn handsome, and the way he moved sent shivers down her spine.

She ought to know better. Thank goodness he'd brought her up short today. There were good men in the world, such as her friends' husbands, but they were few and far between. Too many were like Ned, quick to promise the moon and ready to run when a woman needed them.

Or like Jason, who valued only the professional side of himself. There was no point in arguing with him. The man was as set in his ways as concrete.

After dusting off her hands, Heather took him back inside.

“I’d show you the bedrooms but they’re in worse shape than the kitchen.”

A subdued Jason didn’t press the point. “Thanks for the tour. I’ll see you at work on Monday.”

“Good luck finding a place to live.” Although it might be unwise, she found herself adding, “Did you decide against renting a town house?”

“It’s a bit large for a single guy. I wouldn’t want to inadvertently encourage any relatives to move in with me, particularly ones with babies,” he said, and let himself out.

Maybe he was joking, but Heather didn’t find the remark funny. She was tempted to throw one of Ginger’s toys at his retreating back.

She couldn’t imagine why she’d ever allowed herself to be attracted to that stuffed shirt. Okay, Jason could be charming when he turned the frost level down to low, but with him, as with most men she’d met, you never knew when you were going to get a blast of arctic air in the face.

Well, Heather had better things to do with her Saturday than stand here hurling mental insults at Jason Carmichael. Even a woman with a limited attention span for mall shopping could help her daughter get married.

She switched on her computer, logged on to the Internet and cruised the wedding-related websites, bookmarking pages with gowns she thought Olive might like. Being the mother of the bride provided a lot more satisfaction than she’d ever found or

ever expected to find with a man.

Chapter Four

The three puppies wiggled in their basket, barking excitedly and trying to pour over the edges. Two little boys whom Jason guessed to be about six and eight kept stuffing them back inside.

"Hi, there." He crouched on the walkway and scratched each set of floppy ears in turn. Eager pink tongues swiped his hand and one pup, a shaggy black-and-tan shepherd mix, leaped as if trying to land in his lap.

"You want one, mister? They're ten dollars." The older boy pointed at a hand-lettered sign for confirmation. "Our mom says we can't keep them."

"Neither can I, I'm afraid." After spending Saturday and most of today exhausting rental possibilities, Jason had returned to Heather's development in earnest a short time earlier. Yesterday, he'd been so put off by the notion of nesting that he'd ignored a sign at the manager's office advertising a unit for rent. He hadn't forgotten about it, though.

By comparison to everything else he'd seen, he'd found the empty town house to his liking. Located halfway across the complex from Heather's, it featured a similar layout and came furnished. The only vegetation on its patio was a ficus tree watered through an automatic system.

Jason had signed up immediately. The month-to-month lease meant that if he found something he liked better, he was free to

move. Because of the location, there was no reason for him and Heather to get in each other's way, and he appreciated the peace and quiet.

The one drawback was that renters weren't allowed to have pets. The manager had explained that owner-occupants could keep animals as long as they didn't allow them to run loose. The boys' family must be owners, Jason thought.

"That's Frodo. He's my favorite." The younger boy indicated the black-and-tan pup, whose tail was wagging so hard that Jason half expected it to propel its owner into the air.

"I can't have a dog because I'm renting," he said.

The older boy's face scrunched. "What's the use of being a grown-up if you can't have a dog?"

"Good point." Jason got to his feet. "I hope you find homes for them."

"Thanks," they chorused.

What was the use of being a grown-up if you couldn't have a puppy or roses or any other reasonable thing that you wanted? he mused. It was an internal discussion that would have surprised Heather Rourke, Jason supposed.

He'd certainly bristled when she'd showed him her flower garden. Its blooming lushness had filled his senses with perfume and his soul with an intense yearning. For what, he wasn't sure, but he'd yanked himself back to reality in a big hurry.

As he strolled around the complex to check out its amenities, Jason wondered if he would ever feel ready to settle down in

one place or with one woman. He didn't believe in love sweeping people off their feet, though, especially not a scientist like him. Some guys weren't cut out to be husbands, and he was one of them.

He tried to remember what impulse had prompted him to get engaged during his residency. He'd met Eileen, a law student at Boston University, through family friends. They'd had a lot in common, including busy schedules, a taste for Greek food and a love of jazz. Eileen had understood about Jason's long hours and seemed to share his vision of a future devoted to becoming among the best in their fields.

Somewhere along the line, the subject of marriage had come up. Knowing that he needed a wife with similar goals and attitudes, Jason had fallen in with the idea. Both of them agreed that they wanted to work the long hours required by their professions, with children postponed indefinitely.

He tensed as he recalled his last year of residency. During a difficult period, he'd driven himself harder and, he knew, become snappish to those around him. Perversely, Eileen had chosen that time to press him to set a date for their wedding.

He'd told her frankly that he couldn't handle getting married right then and needed the freedom to relocate if necessary. Her response had been tears and nagging. Jason knew he should have tried to understand, but he hadn't possessed the energy to deal with her. When a prominent institution in England invited him to pursue his work there after completing his residency, he'd ended

his engagement and removed himself from the situation.

Later, through friends, he'd learned that Eileen had planned to drop out of law school and didn't want a demanding career. She wasn't crazy about Greek food or jazz, either. Their relationship had been built on her molding herself to suit him, without his realizing it. Perhaps she hadn't been honest with herself about what she was doing, either.

Although Jason regretted having disappointed her, marriage would have been a huge mistake. Perhaps that was why he'd reacted so strongly to the flowers yesterday. Subconsciously, he'd pegged Heather as being dedicated to her work, and it disturbed him to discover that at heart what she wanted was the whole picket-fence, rose-trellis scenario. Just like Eileen.

Seeing the playpen and toys in her living room had given him a start, too. Oddly, Jason had found them kind of appealing, although he was relieved to know they belonged to Heather's niece.

Babies were cute. So were little boys like the pair with the puppies. Their dad probably loved taking them to ball games and playing on the beach with them. Someday, Jason supposed, he might want kids of his own. Someday, like in another ten years.

Lost in thought, he didn't realize he was passing Heather's unit until he saw her standing in front, trimming dead blossoms from an azalea. In a tan T-shirt and beige jeans, she was shapely enough to catch any man's eye.

When she caught sight of Jason, her hand jerked and she

mangled a branch. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m glad to see you, too,” he said.

Heather ducked her head, acknowledging the veiled complaint. “You’re right. It’s nice to see you again, Dr. Carmichael. Did you have some questions about the care and feeding of rose bushes?”

“I’m afraid not,” he said. “If you see me traipsing by later with my arms full, you can lend a hand if you care to.”

Her half smile shaded into a frown. “You rented a place?”

He shrugged. “Serene Beach turns out not to have a very big supply of available housing.”

“You swore you’d decided against renting a town house.”

“That was before I looked all over town,” Jason said. “I honestly tried to find a place somewhere else. I combed the newspaper and an Internet referral service.”

“You haven’t been looking very long,” Heather retorted mercilessly.

“I’m sick of the hotel and I’ve got a busy week ahead.” He knew it was a low blow, to use work as an excuse for encroaching on her territory, but it truly was part of the reason for his rush. “There’s no reason for us to see each other except in passing.”

“We’ll run into each other at the pool,” she countered.

The image that came to mind, of Heather’s full breasts and slim waist displayed in a bikini, almost broke down Jason’s determination to regard her purely as a colleague. His voice catching, he choked out, “I don’t plan to do much swimming.”

“Good.” Returning her attention to the azalea, she cut the broken branch and tossed it into a plastic bucket. “I trust you won’t be running over to borrow a cup of sugar or a pair of pruning shears.”

“Scout’s honor.” She hadn’t mentioned laundry detergent, he thought. He might run out of that.

“And don’t you dare go anywhere near my health club!”

“Which health club is that?” he asked, his interest perking.

“Never mind.” Heather appeared fascinated by a weed near the base of the bush. “I’ll see you around.”

“You bet.” Although he would have enjoyed lingering, Jason knew he had a lot to accomplish this evening.

With a wave, he strode away, his thoughts flying ahead to the process of moving. The heated buzz in his nervous system abated too slowly for comfort.

A health club, eh? He’d make a point of finding it. A man needed exercise, after all.

“OH, COME ON, Mom,” Olive said. “You can’t tell me his moving here doesn’t mean he likes you. I can’t wait to meet this guy!”

“Jason Carmichael is my boss and an annoying one, at that.” Heather glowered. The last thing she wanted was for her daughter to start trying to pair them off.

“That doesn’t mean he can’t be interested in you! Besides, he’s your supervisor, not your boss. He doesn’t have the power to fire you, does he?”

“No.” The hospital administrator was the only one who had that right.

“See?” Olive crowed.

“He needs a place to live. That’s all.” Heather clicked to another page on the computer screen. “What do you think of this one? I wasn’t sure whether you liked scooped necklines.”

“So I can show off my nonexistent cleavage?” Her daughter sighed. “I wish I’d inherited your figure, Mom.”

“You have a great figure!”

“Not as great as yours.”

“I have a hard time finding clothes that don’t make me look fat,” Heather protested.

“What you look is stacked,” Olive said. “No wonder this hunky guy wants to be our neighbor.”

When Heather had mentioned Jason’s first visit the previous day, Olive had been too distracted by her armful of brochures and brainful of wedding ideas to pay much attention. After learning that he’d actually rented a place, however, she’d seized on the topic with glee.

“You’ve never met him,” Heather pointed out. “What makes you think he’s hunky?”

“The little smile you wear every time you mention him.” Leaning over her, Olive flicked from one web page to another so rapidly that Heather couldn’t keep track of what they were looking at. She supposed you had to be under twenty-five to master that skill. “You smile the same way whenever you see one

of your favorite actors."

"Oh, seriously!" she scoffed.

Olive paused at a Victorian-style gown, studied it intently for about five seconds, then zoomed onward. "Let me guess. He's tall, dark and handsome."

Heather wondered if her daughter were psychic, since her taste in movie stars was wide-ranging. "How on earth did you know that?"

"Because my father must have been." Olive paused in her surfing. "Obviously I didn't get my coloring from you."

"You have my eyes, though. Ned's were darker." Heather smiled. "It's funny how the red hair skipped a generation."

"You haven't met John yet," Olive pointed out.

In Olive's favorite photo, they both wore ski caps and jackets. Until now, Heather hadn't realized she'd never seen his hair.

"He has red hair?"

"Like a carrot with a sunburn."

Olive logged off the Internet. She must be nearing wedding overload, at least for the moment. Besides, it was dinnertime.

The younger woman set the table while Heather made spaghetti. "You should invite him for dinner," Olive said as she worked.

"By 'him,' should I assume you mean Jason?" Heather checked the hot water, but it wasn't quite at a boil yet.

"None other." Olive clinked down two plates.

"I'd be happy if I never saw him outside the office again."

She meant it. Brisk professionalism was the best attitude to adopt where that man was concerned.

"What's his voice like?" Olive turned to offer Ginger another spoonful of baby food. Strapped into her high chair, the little girl swallowed it hungrily.

"What difference does it make?"

"There's nothing like a sexy voice." Olive paused as if listening to something Heather couldn't hear. "John has a slow, sensuous way of talking. I guess it's the Texas accent. What kind of accent does Jason have?"

"Boston." Heather hadn't given it any thought until now. "Not a strong one, though." And a deep voice, but she wasn't going to give her daughter the satisfaction of mentioning it.

"Mom, have you had a serious relationship in your entire life?" Olive resumed feeding Ginger. "I mean, aside from my father?"

After their reunion, Heather had related the story of their ill-starred romance, softened to depict Ned as immature rather than self-centered. To Heather's relief, her daughter had shown no interest in locating him.

"No. I haven't met a man I could love. Sometimes I doubt he exists." Although Heather dated from time to time, her self-protective instincts had led her to keep men at bay, at least until that night with Jason. In retrospect, she was grateful that he'd fallen asleep. If they'd made love, his thoughtless remark the next morning would have been devastating.

"Stop!" Olive waved excitedly.

Looking down, Heather discovered she'd been about to drop the uncooked spaghetti into the simmering tomato sauce instead of the boiling water. "Oops. Thanks for warning me."

"Don't try to convince me you weren't daydreaming about someone of the male persuasion." Her daughter grinned. "Care to mention any names?"

"Brad Pitt," Heather said quickly. "Ewan McGregor. Heath Ledger."

"Jason Carmichael?" suggested her impish tormentor.

"Why does he fascinate you so much?" Heather stirred the spaghetti with a pasta fork, separating the strands.

"It's long past time you got over my father being such a jerk." Apparently Olive had drawn her own conclusions about Ned's behavior despite Heather's attempt to spare her the worst. "Maybe it's because John and I are so happy that I want you to find the right man, too."

"I have no problem with that," said Heather. "When I find him, I'll let you know."

"Sure you will." Skepticism rang in every word.

Heather hoped this was the last she'd hear of the topic. She didn't need a matchmaker living in the same house, particularly one who'd seized on the misguided notion that there was some kind of chemistry between her and Jason.

With luck, plans for the wedding would put the whole thing out of Olive's mind soon enough, she told herself, and switched off the burner under the tomato sauce.

THE PATIENT was thirty-four years old and had been trying to get pregnant for five years. She and her husband had undergone a battery of tests with no definitive explanation for their infertility, which was often the case despite advances in medicine.

Loretta Arista was also, Jason knew, the public relations director at Doctors Circle. She'd organized a press conference for him last fall to announce his appointment to this position.

Sitting across the desk from her, he recommended in vitro fertilization, which she hadn't yet tried. "It's a lot simpler than it used to be," Jason said. "We no longer have to perform surgery. Both the egg retrieval and the implantation are outpatient procedures."

"That's good." Loretta hugged herself defensively. She had short, dark hair with a vivid white streak in the front.

"It's basically a three-week procedure." Jason produced a brochure to illustrate his words. "For two weeks, you'll be intensively prepped with hormones."

When the eggs were ripe, they would be removed with a needle under local anesthesia and grown in a laboratory for several days. After fertilization with her husband's sperm, they would be implanted in her womb. The odds of a pregnancy resulting were about one in four.

"That means a 75 percent chance of failure, doesn't it?" Loretta explained that her sister, Rita, was pregnant with triplets, which only made her more eager to have a child herself.

“I understand.” Jason was pleased to see from her file that Loretta had been seeing the staff counselor to deal with the emotional fallout of infertility. “Have you and your husband considered adoption?”

“We already went through the home-study process, but I understand it’s difficult to find an infant,” Loretta said. “Besides, I’m not ready to adopt yet. Can my eggs be ready when the embryologist comes on board in two weeks?”

“The timing looks good. Let’s set up our next appointment and we’ll get started,” Jason said.

“Thanks, Doctor. Is it okay if I put on my public relations hat now?”

“Of course.” He grinned at the metaphor.

Loretta visibly relaxed, becoming more animated as she switched gears. “I want to photograph you in the new facility when it’s closer to completion. I’ll need to interview you and the embryologist for a press kit, too.”

“Just let my secretary know what day would be convenient,” he said.

After she left, Edith appeared. “Can you help her?”

“I hope so,” he said. “Wait, don’t say it. I know we have to keep the love flowing around here.”

His nurse chuckled. “You got that right.”

The rest of the day flew by, with patients lined up for appointments. Many, he concluded after reviewing their charts, were candidates for the latest techniques. Like Loretta, most

couldn't wait to start.

After work, Jason stopped by the supermarket. Having transferred his few possessions to his new home yesterday, he'd been too tired to do more than send out for pizza.

On his way to the checkout stand, a bag of puppy food landed in his cart. One minute he was passing a display of chow, and the next minute there it was, nestled among his selections. Jason nearly put it back, until he told himself that he should give it to the little boys. Maybe it would convince their mother to let them keep Frodo.

At the town house, he stowed the puppy food near the washing machine and fixed himself a meal of rotisserie chicken, mashed potatoes and salad. Afterward, silence settled over the town house like a shroud. He hadn't realized how much larger this place was than the bachelor flat he'd leased in Virginia.

Jason threw on a light jacket and went out for a walk. What a peaceful place this was, he reflected as he admired the lavender azaleas and orange-and-purple birds of paradise. As he passed one unit after another, he heard the murmur of voices and the clink of pots and pans.

When he was growing up, his mother had often missed dinner while selling houses and his father, a doctor, had frequently worked late, too. Still, they'd made a point of dining together two or three times a week.

Meals were meant to be sociable. Jason shoved his hands into his pockets and hurried on.

On the far side of the pool and spa enclosure, he heard yipping noises coming from one of the units. Jason didn't even have to think about it. He walked right up and knocked on the door.

It was answered by the older boy he'd met on Sunday. "I don't suppose Frodo's still for sale, is he?" he heard himself ask.

"I thought you weren't allowed to have pets," the boy replied.

Did the kid have to have such a good memory? "I'm not," he said. "I was asking for a friend."

The boy's father came to the door and introduced himself as Gordon Gray. While they were shaking hands, a small black-and-tan whirlwind flung itself at Jason, leaping at him until he couldn't resist picking it up. His reward was to have his chin sandpapered by an eager tongue.

After he explained that he was considering buying the pup but was concerned about leaving it alone all day, the man said, "My wife, Alice, runs a service, taking dogs for walks. That way they don't get so lonely."

"It sounds perfect," Jason said.

The dog was still for sale and the price of Alice's service proved reasonable. Jason tried not to think about the fact that he was breaking his newly signed lease by acquiring a pet. After a lifetime spent living by the rules, he figured he was entitled to a minor infraction.

There was also the issue of whether he'd be able to take a dog with him to wherever he might move in the future. Jason decided to worry about that when the time came.

He tucked Frodo inside his jacket, where the pup settled contentedly, and went outside. Some brave soul had ventured out to soak in the spa, he realized when he heard the rumble of the jets. As long as the pool gates were unlocked, he might as well cut through to get back to his place.

Halfway across, Jason came abreast of the spa. Steam formed a pillar in the chilly air, ghostlike beneath the overhead lights.

He broke stride when he spotted the woman lounging in the water with her eyes half-closed. There was no mistaking that auburn hair or that familiar face. Although most of Heather's shape disappeared beneath the roiling water, her breasts made an impressive appearance in a skimpy bikini bra that more than matched his fevered imaginings of the previous day.

They strained the fabric almost beyond endurance. Almost beyond his endurance, anyway.

Beneath his jacket, Frodo chose that moment to protest his confinement by squirming. The normal complement of two arms and two hands weren't nearly enough to hold one puppy while maintaining a nonchalant attitude, Jason discovered.

Heather's eyes flew open. "Jason? I thought you weren't going to use the pool!"

"I'm not," he said. "I'm just taking a walk."

"Then what are you doing in here?" She frowned at the way he clutched his chest. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," he said. "I'm in kind of a hurry, actually."

"I don't understand. What…" She stopped as a nose poked

out of his jacket and a sharp yip disturbed the evening calm. Heather's expression warmed. "What a cute puppy."

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.