



the BILLIONAIRE'S
SECRET CHILD

THE SECRET BILLIONAIRES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MELANIE KNIGHT

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To My Beautiful Kara

You are my sweetheart, my beautiful artist, my clever, sweet and kind daughter. I love you more than words can ever say – boundless, unconditional and forever. I am always with you.

ABOUT

What if you had to tell a man he was a father - not of an unborn life, not of a swaddled infant, but of a child of four?

Sound difficult? Then how about this:

What if you had to tell a man you never met?

Reporter Laura Blake always imagined she would have a child the old-fashioned way, but when life didn't work out that way, she conceived her daughter through the wonders of technology. Five years later, life is perfect... until her father's two heart attacks, and a newfound quest emerges: find the man who fathered her child to attain potentially life-saving medical records. Only the anonymous donor is not the stranger she imagined, but Aidan Bancroft, famous billionaire known for attaining what and who he wants. Furthermore...

He never was an anonymous donor.

Aidan is furious when a reporter confronts him with impossible claims. He only visited the fertility clinic to conceive with his late wife, and lost everything. Yet soon it becomes clear there is far more to her story. He will discover everything there is to know about Laura Blake and her child.

Stunned by the news and their life-altering ramifications, Laura flees, hoping for time to carve the future. Yet Aidan follows her, his suspicions forging his own investigation. As passions soar and emotions flourish, they delve closer and closer. Soon Aidan is chasing more than his suspicions.

What happens when the truth is revealed?

CHAPTER 1



It was the type of house you pointed at as you drove past in your squeaky, middle-aged sedan. The one that made you gasp – just a little – as you stared at its soaring stories, expansive lawns and pristine gardens. The home you’d never own, no matter how many extra hours you put in at the office or how many promotions you scored. The one your boss couldn’t afford, nor his boss and probably not even the one above him.

It made you wonder who could afford it. If you knew this person to be a business tycoon and a self-made billionaire, as was the case with this particular man, then you automatically knew aspects of his personality: Strong. Powerful. Intelligent. In control. Yes, indeed, Aidan Bancroft was all of these. Plus, one other moniker, which even he didn’t know:

Father.

Laura Blake’s heart slammed against her ribs, stealing the oxygen from her lungs, as she pulled into the engraved stone driveway of one of the largest homes in Miami. Close up, the house loomed even larger, powerful and massive, just like its owner. Three stories tall and quadruple the width, the building seemed better suited for a dozen families than a single man. White surfaces gleamed in the slanting sun, with rounded pillars, majestic turrets and lush, manicured lawns stretching for acres. Ten, twenty, thirty, who knew how many rooms the mansion possessed? Yet she could not let the size of the home intimidate her from dealing with the man inside. For her child,

she would engage with anyone, no matter how ruthless. Of course, Aidan Bancroft wasn't just ruthless.

He was a famous, powerful billionaire businessman, member of the fabled *Billionaires of Miami*. A man who got what he wanted – whatever it was.

Laura stopped at a huge white gate, its bars etching a majestic lion, a fitting symbol for the authoritative man. Four security cameras recorded her every move (How many were hidden?) as she cranked down her window to expose the brass intercom system. Silencing the instincts urging her to flee before it was too late, she reached out and pushed the button on the intricate device.

“May I help you?” A professional female voice spoke crisply through the air.

“I'm here to see Mr. Bancroft.” Laura fought to keep her voice emotionless, her tone even, yet an edge belied her efforts. *Stay strong.*

“Do you have an appointment, ma'am?”

“No.” Laura exhaled slowly, refused to even consider failure. Straightening, she launched into the speech she'd planned, one that would hopefully pique their curiosity enough to allow her entrance. “I represent someone very close to Mr. Bancroft, a person who lost touch with him. Seeing him could literally mean life or death. It will only take a moment.”

The first two assertions were true, the last an optimistic gambit. Hopefully, the woman wouldn't ask for details.

“Ma'am, are you a reporter?”

Laura closed her eyes at the question she'd hoped they wouldn't ask. For although her job had no relation to her visit, she was indeed a reporter. And everyone knew the reclusive Mr. Bancroft spoke to very few reporters.

“No,” she lied, since an affirmative would shatter any chance of admittance. Her daughter's future bore more weight than total honesty. And, in this case, she didn't play the role of reporter.

“Your name, ma’am?”

“Laura Blake.” He would not recognize the name, should never even know she existed. Of course, everyone knew him: Aidan Bancroft, billionaire founder and CEO of Bancroft Enterprises, an international conglomerate with dealings in dozens of industries. Unlike many men who ran such companies, Aidan Bancroft was in the prime of his life, gorgeous with the body of a movie star. The combination of good looks, charm and power had propelled him to superstardom, as well as the cover of half the business and popular magazines and every social media site. He hobnobbed with television stars, presidents and royalty, with practically every single woman on the planet (and probably some on neighboring planets) hoping to become Mrs. Bancroft.

Likely, they would assume she was here to give a proposal, decent or indecent. They would ask more questions, or just refuse her outright. Thus, she started in shock when a low buzzing sounded, and the gate began to open. “Drive through,” the voice commanded, then clicked off.

Could it truly be this easy?

Not likely.

Yet she did not hesitate, as she shifted the car into gear and slowly glided to a storybook palace come to life. Emerald green vines and lavender flowers twined around its gleaming sides, framing stained glass windows with rich brocade curtains and intricate crown molding. Curved walls sketched whimsical features, an architectural delight that rose like a masterpiece against the cerulean sky. The scent of gardenias drifted through the air, as birds sang their melodies, darting between the densely flowered bushes.

At any other time, she would have stopped, taken minutes or hours to stare in awe, but now she noted the beauty only briefly, as she approached the challenge ahead. She parked next to a gleaming new Porsche, which was next to a gleaming new Jaguar, which was next to a gleaming new Ferrari, which was next to something that looked like it could probably fly. Fortifying herself for the inevitable, she exited the car and

strode to the front of the house. She stood straight in front of the two giant oak doors and rang the bell.

Undoubtedly, she would be greeted by a secretary or assistant, someone who would ask questions, examine her intentions and then turn her away (with or without laughter, teasing and/or pity). Just because she gained admittance to the grounds didn't mean she would actually see the master of the domain. Thus, when none other than the infamous Aidan Bancroft himself, international business mogul, America's top bachelor and *father of her child*, opened the door, the world froze.

Or at least she did. She had seen pictures, read about him on the Internet, heard countless stories, but nothing could have prepared her for the actual man, flesh, blood and a whole lot of *muscle*.

He was gorgeous – no, not merely gorgeous – stunning. With thick brown hair and sea blue eyes, he boasted a model's face, chiseled and flawless, perfection defined. He towered to well over six feet, with a muscular build that cast him above the average man and far beyond Laura's petite stature. Hidden strength loomed beneath the crisp three-piece suit, power present yet controlled. He drew her in, for more reasons than his appearance. Whereas in the photographs his strength had been apparent, now it was all but overwhelming. No wonder millions fawned over him, hoping for a small piece of him.

A piece she had.

Laura met his gaze. Awareness shot through her, electrifying already over-stimulated senses. Her skin tingled as pinprick goose bumps formed, as he held her captive in a gaze as secure as iron shackles. A mixture of cologne and sandalwood assailed her, intoxicating her senses and capturing her attention. And suddenly, an altogether shocking sensation assailed her.

Attraction.

Fighting for focus, Laura pushed aside the traitorous feeling. Of course, he attracted her like a gourmet cupcake (the type with freshly whipped cream and drizzled chocolate) – he

would affect any sane woman – but that couldn't play a part in her mission. Her daughter was all that mattered. She needed something much simpler and far more important than unbidden lust.

“Mr. Bancroft, I assume.”

The man nodded, but made no comment. He neither welcomed her to his home nor invited her in. After a moment's hesitation, she continued. She would not be intimidated.

“I need something from you.” She stood tall. “I was hoping you could spare a moment for a few simple questions.”

“I'm sure you are.” When he finally spoke, his deep baritone held not the slightest bit of warmth. “I'm certain you have many questions. You are, after all, a reporter.”

Her breath caught in her throat. How had he found out so quickly?

“Surprised I know?” He studied her as if he could discern her every secret. “Paparazzi stalk me on a daily basis, with outrageous stunts worthy of reality show television. Did you think I bought your story about a long-lost relation? Don't you think I would have asked for this fictional relation's name if I thought it were true?” Furious eyes flashed. “The only reason you're here is so I can tell you that you have no chance of infiltrating my business. I have ways to investigate – and control – uninvited visitors. As I'm sure you're aware of, Ms. Blake, I do not see reporters, and I do not care for liars, so have a nice trip back to Pine Ridge.”

The man moved to close the door. “Wait!” Laura shot her hand inside the portal. He glared, but she couldn't let it end here. She might never get another chance to make her case. “Mr. Bancroft, it's not what you think. You have to listen.”

The man widened the door ever so slightly. “If it's not what I think, then tell me what it is,” he responded quietly.

In a moment's span, every option flashed, every path and every decision. Yet only one seemed to have any possibility, infinitely small, of gaining his cooperation. She would have to reveal the *truth*.

The moment she had been anticipating for five long years had finally come.

“I ask again, do you contest that, madam? Do you deny you’re a reporter?” A strong voice snapped Laura back to the present, back to the gargantuan mansion, the handsome boardroom warrior. Slowly, she shook her head.

“Then we’ve wasted enough of each other’s time. Goodbye.” Again, he went to close the door, but again she stopped him. This time, however, it was not with an action but with words.

“Do you remember the Peace Fields Fertility Clinic?” Her breath froze, as she awaited the response that could refine her world.

His eyes flashed with rage, and Laura clamped her mouth shut. He was furious, but why? Would he slam the door in her face, banish her and any hope of getting what she’d come for? For a moment, it seemed he would, yet instead he opened the door wide. “Come in,” he commanded.

She released a breath. She had definitely not mistaken the man as her daughter’s father. The powerful stranger would have exiled her for life if he hadn’t recognized the name of the clinic.

“It seems I underestimated you.” He looked at her with fathomless eyes. “Follow me.”

She walked behind the formidable man, following him through a spectacular hall filled with priceless paintings and antiques. If the exterior of the house had been stunning, the inside was breathtaking, with high sweeping ceilings and elegant gilded fixtures. It was scented with spice and oak, and set to the melody of a two-story waterfall that flowed into a lush indoor rose garden. Gold and marble furnishings adorned large airy rooms, resplendent with ornate furniture and oversized decor.

Laura vaguely remembered the mansion being featured on one of the entertainment shows, but the thought was fleeting.

As she walked behind Mr. Bancroft, her quest usurped every thought. That was, until he stopped.

And she ran into him.

For a moment, time halted, the world faded, as attraction swept through her like a tidal wave. She pressed against his powerful body, flush against unparalleled strength. Hard muscles leapt beneath her hands, firing the inexplicable urge to get closer. Instead, she jumped back.

“I apologize!” What had come over her? The stress of the situation and the proximity of the handsome man had clearly unbalanced her. A man whose child she had carried in her body.

Something fired in his eyes. It was not anger like earlier, or even distaste. It almost seemed like... interest. But it couldn't be, as he abruptly pivoted and led her to a large living room flanked by thick maroon rugs and large velvet sofas. He gestured for her to take a seat, even as he remained standing. She declined the seat (he already towered above her) as well as the drink an impeccably dressed butler offered. She would need all her faculties to get through this meeting.

Mr. Bancroft removed an object from the drawer of a large marble desk. Surprise and confusion tangled. “What are you doing with a checkbook?”

“How much?”

What? He couldn't actually believe she would use her daughter as a paycheck. She shook her head firmly. “I don't want your money.”

Mr. Bancroft breathed deeply, clearly fighting for control, as he placed the checkbook down on the desk. Likely, the amount would be substantial, but it didn't matter. She would never blackmail a man for the most precious blessing of her life.

She never thought she would come at all, approach this man whose fame and wealth rivaled the leaders of some small countries. But after her father's near-fatal heart attack, his second before sixty, life took on a new meaning. She needed to

protect her daughter, even from her own genes, and she could only do that with her father's medical history. The vital information would allow her to prepare for any potential conditions or diseases that ran in the family. She wanted nothing else.

She most certainly didn't want to touch those muscles.

Definitely didn't want to test how hard they were.

And press against them? Out of the question.

"Ms. Blake," Mr. Bancroft growled lowly. The suave businessman was gone, replaced by a pure predator. "I don't know what game you're playing, or what you hope to attain. You can drop the innocent act, because we both know you're not here for a friendly chat. However, you do have information I would rather keep out of the papers. I could sue or bully you, however if I did, the secret would undoubtedly emerge. I would rather get this over with, easy and painless."

"Mr. Bancroft, you're mistaken." Laura raised her hands, to stop him or shield herself? "I'm not after your money."

"So that's how it's going to be? Nothing will keep this story out of the papers, no matter its power to shatter my life."

Laura closed her eyes. She had known he didn't want Jeanie, but to claim she shattered his life? She opened her eyes, expecting anger, but something far more powerful lurked in his expression: pain, anguish even. Confusion reigned once more. "I'm not going to put anything in the papers," she said softly, even as his gaze turned incredulous. "I'm not lying."

"Just like you weren't lying when you said you weren't a reporter," he snapped.

"That was different. Listen..."

"No, you listen." He strode to her, blasting a hole through her personal space and her senses. "I've met reporters who employed dirty tricks, but never one who would sink to this level. You're blackmailing me for the most tragic situation of my life."

“Tragic situation of your life?” The world turned blistering red. How dare the man call her beautiful angel a tragedy! “What are you talking about? It’s not that big a deal.”

Somehow her words infuriated him even more. “Not that big a deal?” he snarled. “First my wife can’t have a child, then we go to a fertility clinic to search for a miracle and after that miracle finally happens, she’s lost in an accident. Somehow you find out and decide to blackmail me. Does that not sound like a big deal to you?”

Oh. My. Goodness.

Her world... her life... reality shattered.

Everything that once made sense, the truths that formed the foundation of her life, disappeared, rearranging into an entirely new existence. She knew he had a wife who passed away in a car crash, but not of any child or fertility problems. But still, something was missing. If he was at the clinic to help his wife become pregnant, then why...

“You weren’t an anonymous donor,” she whispered as everything fell into place, as the pieces of the puzzle locked together to form a horrifying image. The once inexplicable suddenly made sense: his confusion, his anger, his actions. Mentioning the fertility clinic must have opened new wounds of losing the child his wife had carried. But Jeanie was undoubtedly his, the documents proved it, and even more significantly, his features were unmistakable in her little face. Which meant the clinic had made a very large, very consequential mistake.

Fuzzy memories came back at her, memories of news stories about Aidan’s wife, Leanne Jo. Laura gasped softly. Leanne Jo Bancroft, LJB, just like Laura Jane Blake. If they used initials to identify the patients...

“Of course, I wasn’t an anonymous donor. Any child of mine would know me well,” Aidan ground out the words. “Very well.”

Laura gaped, her heart racing like the favorite at the Preakness Stakes. And suddenly the consequences multiplied a

thousandfold. Before coming, she had affirmed Jeanie's biological father would have no legal rights – no court in the land would contest that. But if the donor had been unwilling? He would definitely have a case, and from the looks of it, he would want it. The ramifications were staggering, the implications life-changing. Would he try to take her daughter away from her? Would he be a good father, or would he hurt Jeanie? She needed time to think, time to grapple with this new information before the powerful man stole her every choice.

“How did you know about the fertility clinic?” Aidan's voice was low, dangerous. “We specifically used a center in the middle of nowhere to keep the press away. My wife's doctor arranged everything. Now, five years later, somehow you find out. Who shared the secret?”

An image of the friendly, young receptionist with corkscrew curls arose. The truth had garnered her cooperation, the explanation that Laura's father had suffered two heart attacks and she needed medical records to ascertain if heart disease ran on the biological father's side as well. Aidan would be appalled to learn who had given away his most precious secret. Of course, the bubbly girl didn't give the information to a stranger, but to the child's mother.

Of course, his anger was justified – he thought she was trying to barter secrecy for money – but it still didn't explain everything. Why was he so desperate to hide his visit to a fertility clinic, even willing to provide a la carte access to his bank account to protect it? She could name no less than half a dozen celebrities who had used such clinics; nowadays it really didn't comprise news. Why offer to pay her instead of sending her on her way the moment she mentioned the clinic?

And if he protected such a minor detail like a top-secret military operation, what would he do when he discovered the *true* secret?

She couldn't reveal her source, at least not yet. If he visited the clinic, he would discover what they really were to each other. “Someone sent an anonymous e-mail, claiming to possess information they would exchange for a reasonable

price. He revealed the name of the clinic, saying he heard your wife talking about it to a friend at a coffee shop years ago. That was it.”

Aidan looked suspicious, but at least he didn’t immediately accuse her of lying to protect his secret child. “Did you get his name?”

She shook her head. “Informants don’t typically give names. We only communicated online, and I received no response to my last e-mail. I’m sorry, I can’t help you more.”

It wasn’t the most convincing argument, but hopefully he wouldn’t storm the clinic looking for her informant. For now, she had to depart this impossible world of wealth and power, leave his overwhelming presence, so she could consider her next move. She turned to the door, made it two steps.

“How could a single mother do such a thing?”

Laura froze. He wasn’t talking about the informant – he was talking about *her*. Somehow, he knew she had a daughter.

Did he know she was his?

“Didn’t think I knew, huh?” His heavy boots echoed on the floor as he stalked closer. “My investigators are pretty thorough. In five minutes, they produced quite a bit of information about you and little Jeanie.”

Laura fought to form thoughts, to concoct a plan, to *breathe*. One wrong word could shatter her life and her choices. Details like her job and status as a single mom would be easy to find, yet the truth about Jeanie’s paternity should be impossible to discover, at least in five minutes.

Yet Aidan Bancroft wielded power like few others.

He didn’t give her the chance to respond. “Any mother with a heart shouldn’t be capable of what you’re doing. How much do you love your child?”

The answer was automatic. “More than my own life.”

“Then how can you exploit the loss of mine?” he thundered, fiery emotion blazing. “How could you remind me

of what I almost had... what I lost.” The last words were but a whisper, pure grief.

The oxygen thinned in the room, awash with a million unshed tears. She had to fight, had to keep chaotic emotions from overwhelming her. His fury was warranted, for only a truly cruel person could exploit such a tragedy, yet was she doing worse by not immediately telling him about Jeanie? Guilt sliced through her, indecision and uncertainty muddying every path. No – she needed to protect her daughter, and that meant waiting to tell him until she had time to consider her new reality. “Mr. Bancroft, I’m so very sorry. I obviously came under false pretenses, and your comments were completely understandable. I’ll let myself out.” She pivoted towards the door.

She didn’t make it far.

A hand brushed across her arm, igniting an electric spark. Sensual awareness rocked her body. “Wait.” His eyes danced with suspicion. “What are you up to?”

Had she imagined he would just let her go? She stared up at a mountain of power. “Nothing. I thought about what you said, and I felt guilty. We reporters do have consciences, you know.” She shrugged, feigning cool indifference that could not be further from the truth. “Your story just tugged at mine.”

“You’re lying again.”

Laura nearly stumbled. He grasped her arm with one large hand, easily encircling her as he steadied her. Once more his eyes flashed with *something*. Did he feel the current between them, just below the surface, far beyond the quest? Something indescribable, an inexplicable connection unlike any before?

No. She couldn’t succumb to whatever this was. She pulled back, smoothed invisible wrinkles from her inexpensive suit. She should expect perceptiveness from a man who made his first million by the time he reached twenty, his first billion by twenty-five. But now she had to get past it, had to convince him her story was true. “I thought you’d be happy. I’m not going to write an article, and I’m certainly not going to blackmail you. Please believe me.”

Aidan tilted his head back. Slowly, he spoke, “Even if you’re telling the truth, I still don’t understand. You come in here with a story worth a fortune, and now you’re going to walk away? I’m putting two and two together and not coming out with four.”

Laura shuddered under the man’s heavy gaze. At least he wasn’t putting one and one together and coming up with three. She fought the urge to tell him everything, to give in to his demands. Although he probably wouldn’t believe the truth, what if he did? Likely, he would control everything about her and Jeanie’s life from that moment forward. She needed time to ponder her choices before making a move. “There’s nothing,” she said slowly, “except for what I’ve already told you. I have to go.”

The man in front of her did not move, an insurmountable obstacle seizing all power. And judging by his solid form, she had no hope of getting past him should he not wish it. “You’re playing with fire.” He moved closer, crowding her. “I performed three hostile takeovers from corrupt executives this morning, and that was just business. But this... this is personal.”

Laura notched up her chin. “This isn’t a hostile takeover.”

“Is that right?” he drawled with complete control. “Are you certain?”

No. Not really. Not even a little.

Suddenly he relaxed, and his lips rose, forming what could only be called a smile. It created an extraordinary transformation, an astounding change that stole her breath. It revealed what lay beneath his powerful and cool exterior – the beauty, the wisdom, the power. Soft lines appeared around his eyes, telling her that despite what she had seen today, this was a man who liked to smile. What would it be like if they met in different circumstances?

“I don’t know why, but for some reason I believe you won’t print my story.”

Story? Still dazed from the smile, Laura fought to return to the present. Ah yes, the story he thought she was writing. Relief slipped through the chaos unnerving her mind.

“But—” He held up his finger. “I know there’s something more. If it has anything to do with me, I’m going to find out.”

Laura’s breath hitched. Little Jeanie had more to do with him than he could ever imagine. Nodding as her only response, she inched around the tycoon, grateful when he allowed it, even as he watched her every step. She walked through the beautiful house, to her sensible yet cheap car, away from a life of privilege and power to the everyday world. Moments later, she sped along a well-packed highway, amidst images of Aidan Bancroft and what he might do when he found out he was a father.

How could this happen? How could the clinic make such a mix up? Most of all, how could she let him affect her like that? She breathed deeply, giving herself exactly ten seconds to ponder her completely ridiculous attraction. It would be a massive mistake to let that play a part in this. Clearly nothing could ever come of it. No matter how strong his biceps, powerful his demeanor or tight his— *Stop!* Time to focus on the true issue here: her daughter.

So putting his biceps completely, 100% totally behind her forever, or at least to the side for the next thirty seconds, she pondered her next move. She could keep the secret hidden and attempt to forget all about the father of her child, yet that path possessed numerous disadvantages. Even if she could forget about the powerful man (*Chances: Somewhat less likely than her winning the lottery. Twice. Without even buying a ticket.*), Mr. Bancroft promised to uncover any secrets related to him. If he dug deep enough, he’d have no difficulty discovering the truth. If he found the fertility clinic and asked the wrong questions, he’d get the right answers.

Even more importantly, was it right to keep a man from his child, a daughter from her father? Obviously, Aidan valued fatherhood, and from his words, he would want to be part of Jeanie’s life. Was it fair to rob him – and Jeanie – of that? Finally, there remained the issue of the medical records.

Only exposure could turn her and Jeanie's lives upside down. She never regretted the decision to have a baby by herself. Everyone had showered her with doubts, unable to understand why a happy single woman would want a child without a husband. She had always imagined she would wait for Mr. Right, but when he had not yet come (as had every Mr. Wrong, Mr. So-Wrong-It's-Scary, and Mr. No-One-Is-This-Desperate Wrong) Laura had not wanted to wait any longer. She never regretted the precious child who was her dream come true.

What would happen to her family if the ultra-powerful Aidan Bancroft learned the truth? Could he take Jeanie away? It was without his permission that he created this child, thus it was without his permission that he gave her up. Would he try to claim what was his?

Endless what-ifs and life-changing ramifications tangled as she drove home, amidst the all-consuming need to see her little girl. The journey seemed endless, as she hit every red light, several twice and one four times. Twenty-six pedestrians, a toddler on a tricycle and a literal turtle passed her. When she finally arrived, she didn't say a word before racing to the room that held her baby. And when she reached the beautiful sleeping form, peace infused her, incomparable love as her path became clear.

“How'd it go?”

Laura smiled warmly at the voice of her friend. Tara knew the entire story, except of course that Aidan didn't actually know he had a child. She took a deep breath and recounted the tale in its entirety, sans that ridiculous moment she thought she was attracted to him.

“Despite everything, I can't just walk away,” Laura said when she had finished. “I love the life Jeanie and I share, but how can I deny her a father? On the other hand, I can't just let a stranger take over our lives. So I'm going to do this logically. I'll research Aidan Bancroft, make sure he's safe and responsible and then decide if and when to tell him.”

“Wow.” Tara embraced her. “Are you all right?”

Laura exhaled as the last of her energy departed, replaced by clear and utter exhaustion. “I have to be, for my daughter. Right now, I just need to get home with Jeanie.”

With an understanding smile, her friend hugged her once more. “It’s going to be okay.” She gently grasped her shoulders. “I’m here for whatever you need.”

Weary yet grateful, Laura traveled to the sleeping girl and did something that made everything better – she held her baby. And all on the way home, as she entered her tiny but comfortable apartment, placed the child in an ornate fairy-tale bed that had been the biggest splurge of her entire life and lay down herself, the mysterious Mr. Bancroft infiltrated her thoughts.

At first, he seemed so cruel, so starkly unforgiving, but once reasons were revealed, his actions were completely understandable. What he must think of her... a reporter who would resort to blackmail. At least he appeared to be honorable, as he proclaimed any child of his would know her father. Would he show the same possessiveness to a woman he deemed his? By the way he looked at her for that brief instant, the answer was clear. *Yes.*

He refused to leave her thoughts, even as she drifted to sleep. Who was he beneath the public façade? What caused the mysterious desire that hit like a tsunami? If he discovered the truth and decided he wanted in on her little family, would she have the strength to resist him? Or would she submit to his every desire?

He was a man accustomed to getting what he wanted. If that included her family, she might just have the fight of her life.



NAKED SAVE for a tiny cloth covering the essentials, Aidan lay on his stomach on the firm massage bench while Jennifer, his masseuse, worked the tension out of his muscles. Jennifer was his fourth masseuse in as many weeks; despite seeming

professional at the interviews, the others had given subtle and not so subtle hints of interest in him. Jennifer, seventy if she was a day, had been happily married for fifty years and talked about her beloved Frederick incessantly.

Jennifer expertly kneaded his sore calves, overtaxed from the two-hour exercise session he succumbed to after the reporter's departure. He had worked twice as hard as normal, and still hadn't eradicated the restlessness her visit wrought.

Or the attraction that struck like lightning.

Aidan received more than his fair share of attention. Drawn by his wealth, power and appearance, women chased after him, with respectable and not-so respectable offers arriving with startling regularity. He accepted few, instead preferring discreet affairs with sophisticated women who weren't after anything long term. Unfortunately, emotions sometimes strengthened, and when they did, he broke it off immediately. He just couldn't imagine risking another relationship, not after losing his wife... his baby.

But for a moment's whisper, when he looked at that soft, sweet reporter, whose soulful eyes and inexplicable turnaround told of a story far more complex than she admitted, he wanted something more.

Who was Laura Blake? Why had she come to him with such damning information, and then backed out so suddenly? Although he had known she lied from the first, she had stirred up memories and anticipation long thought dead, feelings from when he and Leanne had first gotten pregnant, the unparalleled joy of impending fatherhood. What if his child had been born? What if he were a father? The thousands of stockholders, board members and employees he commanded would be shocked if they knew how much he yearned for it.

Of course, he was not a father – he had been careful enough to know that no unclaimed child of his roamed the earth. Although he wanted a family, he couldn't bring himself to start a real relationship that could yield such a result. How could he ever take a chance like that again?

He could see the questions in the reporter's eyes, confusion as to why he had reacted so strongly when she mentioned the fertility clinic, why he had granted her access into his home, into his bank account. She didn't understand, but how could she? He couldn't go through it again, see the vivid photographs of the crash in every newspaper, on every website, in every *nightmare*.

The proof he killed his wife and unborn child.

They all claimed it wasn't his fault, his friends, his family, *her* family. But they didn't see her face when they argued that night, a fight in which ironically he had been trying to protect her. She wanted to go on a physically-demanding excursion, claimed it was completely safe, but he had fought her on it, fearful for her and the baby. They had quarreled like never before, and finally she stormed out. But it was no time to be driving, on a night of what would later be called the storm of the decade. He told her not to go, but she ignored him, venturing out, taking the precious little life with her into the dark and windy night, into the small and vulnerable compact automobile.

He should have done more. He should have stopped her from going.

But he didn't and she did, and through the icy rain and bullet-like hail, never saw the 18-wheeler that swerved into her path. Never had a chance to brake, to avoid the inevitable collision, the fiery crash. And him...

He never had the chance to say he was sorry. Never had a chance to say good-bye to his baby.

They said two people died that night, but they were wrong. He died as well, and he continued to die every time he saw the pictures that appeared for months in the newspapers, endured the pitying looks, the comfort others strived so hard to give but that only reminded him of his culpability. Fate's only kindness was that they hadn't known she was pregnant; they thought he only lost a wife.

If the press found out about the fertility clinic, the nightmare would begin anew. The headlines. The sorrowful

whispers. The reporters knocking on his door at 5am. He couldn't go through it again, couldn't deal with it a second time around. For his sanity, the secret must remain buried.

His thoughts returned to Laura, and suddenly his anger morphed into something else entirely. Her behavior didn't make sense. She had to be hiding something – something important. Anger turned to curiosity, and curiosity to interest. What she started was not yet over. Not by a long shot.

The board of directors had been after him to find a pleasant, all-American small town to build a satellite office of Bancroft Enterprises. They worried the company's image had become too exclusive, too *hoity-toity* as they phrased it, alienating potentially lucrative business opportunities. From what he remembered of Pine Ridge, it contained good people, hard workers and some of the most gorgeous land in the country, perfect for photo shoots and corporate logos. It could very well be the perfect location for Bancroft Enterprises' new country home. Of course, he would have to go there to investigate the suitability for such an office. And while he was there, he would investigate something – or rather someone – else.

He would discover the truth of how Laura found out about the clinic.

He would discover why she came to blackmail him, and why she changed her mind.

He would discover why she affected him so.

Hopefully, Ms. Blake was ready for him, because this time he was coming after her.

CHAPTER 2



Sunday morning dawned in brilliant glory, an artist's brush of bright yellow sunshine through white eyelet curtains, illuminating the cozy apartment. Birds called out their morning song, urging the world to rise and shine, while fluffy-tailed squirrels chased each other through winding trees, pursuing their fruit and nut breakfasts. Laura lifted heavy lashes, as an incessant ringing pierced the peaceful atmosphere. Who set the alarm on a Sunday morning? She moved to hit the snooze button, or better yet, toss the contraption out the window, until she realized she lay on the sofa, not in her bed, and the guilty culprit wasn't an alarm, but the telephone.

"You're going to wake my daughter!" Laura hissed to the unrepentant device as she dove off the denim couch and leapt for the phone. She quickly grasped the four-year old smartphone. "Hello?" she whispered, placing a hand on her pastel pink dining room table for support.

"Laura, I'm so sorry for calling so early, but I just needed to tell someone the news."

"That's all right." Laura relaxed at the welcome voice of Candace, her friend and mayor of Pine Ridge. She wouldn't call early without good reason. "What's going on?"

"It's not anything bad, in case I scared you. Actually it's something great. A big opportunity for our little town." Candace's voice held unchecked excitement, unusual for the typically collected woman. Whatever happened was big indeed.

“Oh yeah?” Laura grinned. With last night’s tumultuous events, she could use a little good news. “Well, don’t wait. Tell me!”

“You’ll never guess who’s coming to town looking for a place to expand his business. It’s someone very, very big. Someone who could put Pine Ridge on the map.”

Laura’s breath hitched. It couldn’t be. There was no way. “Who?” she asked cautiously.

Then...

All time then seemed to stop...

All life seemed to halt...

When Candace responded with two simple words.

“Aidan Bancroft.”

Silence. Laura stood perfectly still, as Candace’s revelation seized her breath and tightened her lungs. The options that seemed so expansive yesterday all but disappeared in an instant. A million and one dangers rose, all culminating in one all-important question:

Did he know?

“Laura, did you hear me? Aidan Bancroft, THE Aidan Bancroft is coming to our small town. Can you believe it? This is the best thing to hit Pine Ridge in years. Everyone on the city council is so excited.” Candace squealed in joy. “Do you know what could happen if Mr. Bancroft comes?”

He could find out the truth. Decide he wanted her daughter. Ravish her.

Wait, where did that last one come from?

“He could create scores of new jobs,” Candace went on, blissfully unaware of Laura’s crumbling world. “Bring new technology, new growth. The charities are especially excited. Mr. Bancroft is one of the biggest philanthropists in the country, with dozens of organizations set up to fight everything from hunger to cancer. This is a big opportunity for our small town.”

“Yes, quite big,” Laura echoed. For everyone else, his presence was the best thing since the general store started stocking the two-ply toilet paper, yet for her a nightmare loomed. She no longer had the leisure of time to make her decision.

If she even had a decision.

“Hey, what is it?” Candace finally seemed to realize her dismay. “You should be thrilled. As a reporter, this is a huge chance for you to get a big-city story. Why are you acting like the bogeyman is coming to town?”

She would have preferred the bogeyman, riding on the back of the Loch Ness Monster and accompanying a dragon who thought humans tasted delicious. All in the midst of a zombie apocalypse. Aidan’s arrival was no mere coincidence.

He had followed her.

Laura fought for calmness. “I will explain everything soon, but there’s one thing I need to know. When is he coming?”

“Well, that’s the biggest surprise. He’s arriving today.” Candace’s voice was now measured, her concern palpable. “Is everything all right?” she asked quietly.

Not even a little. Laura’s time, her space, her very life, was shrinking by the second. Would he ring the doorbell that very moment? “Are you certain?”

“Yes.” Confusion threaded Candace’s timbre. “We’re actually having a big dinner in his honor tonight. I know this is short notice, but many of the important citizens are going to be there, and it’ll be a great opportunity to talk to Mr. Bancroft. I called to invite you, but for some strange reason, I get the feeling you’re going to decline.” Her voice softened. “Do you know Aidan Bancroft personally?”

“In a matter of speaking I know him more personally than anyone. Thank you so much for thinking of me, but I can’t make it.” She didn’t elaborate further. She couldn’t go to the party, offering herself like a virgin sacrifice, however she had no misconceptions about her fate. Sooner or later, he would track her down.

After all, he was here for her.

Apologizing to Candace, Laura made a quick good-bye and hung up the phone. She rubbed her temples as a headache started to bloom.

“Is something wrong, Mommy?”

The world calmed at the high-pitched voice. Jeanie stood in front of her with tiny furrows in an equally tiny face, framed by blond tousled curls. With rosy baby cheeks and sweet bow lips, the child bespoke an artist’s rendering of pure beauty. Laura couldn’t stop a small smile, despite the morning’s grim start. “Come here, sunshine.”

Jeanie broke into a wide grin as she ran towards her mother with a rapid pitter patter. She leapt into waiting arms. “Who were you talking to?”

“Miss Candace.” Laura hugged the sweet bundle, as tiny hands clutched her back. “Did you sleep well, sweetheart?”

The little girl nodded brightly. “I’m ready for breakfast now.”

Laura chuckled at the mature reply. Every day Jeanie grew up just a little. How quickly time passed. “Then go and wash up. How does French toast sound?”

Jeanie answered with a squeal and a giggle that lit up the room. She jumped to the ground and ran into the bathroom, and a moment later, the faucet sprang to life.

Laura turned towards the kitchen, stopping as the phone once more gave its shrill call. Was it another friend, Mr. Bankcroft or perhaps the bogeyman himself? She answered with a cautious greeting, relaxed at the nasal tone of Andrew Nelson, the editor of the Pine Ridge Press and her boss. All relief vanished when he voiced the apparent statement de jour, “Laura, you’re never going to guess who’s coming to town.”

Could she hope for the bogeyman, riding on the back of the Loch Ness Monster and accompanying a dragon who thought humans tasted delicious? All in the midst of a zombie apocalypse? How could a man she had only met once invade

her entire life? “Would it be too much to ask for the bogeyman?”

“I’m sorry, did you just say—”

“I’m kidding, of course.” Of course she’d prefer Mr. Bancroft to a mythological monster. Although were they really that different? They were both strong, powerful, preyed on people. So logically, if given the choice...

A cleared throat snagged her attention back to the phone call. She cleared her own. “Is it Aidan Bancroft?”

“Ahhh, so you’ve already been told. You must be thrilled.” Mr. Nelson was clearly ecstatic, as well he should be. A small-town newspaper getting the scoop on a celebrity who usually graced the national juggernauts was a story itself. “I’m surprised you haven’t already called, begging me for the exclusive to this story. Were you that sure you’d get it?”

Where was the bogeyman when you needed him? Her editor was about to bestow a great gift, or so he believed, the scoop on Aidan Bancroft. It might make her career, but at what cost? Her child, her life, *herself*? Everyone knew the businessman was a pit bull when it came to getting what he wanted – he never lost. If he decided to come after her...

Maybe she was being presumptuous. Maybe the editor wasn’t about to offer anything.

Mr. Nelson didn’t wait for a response. “Well, you’re right.” He laughed. “You’ve been my best writer for years, and you deserve this. The story is yours. For however long he’s here, you’re going to spend every moment covering Pine Ridge’s newest – and only – billionaire. Congratulations, Laura, Aidan Bancroft is yours.”

Laura clenched cold fists. Aidan Bancroft was hers, or was it the other way around?

“No, thank you.”

A second ticked. Then another and another and... “I’m sorry? I must not have heard correctly.”

“No, thank you.”

“I have one question for you.”

“Sure.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Incredulity and shock turned his voice louder than a rocket. She rubbed her ear. “Are you telling me you don’t want the story? Is this Laura Blake?”

“Yes, of course it is.” She held the handset a few inches away. “I know it doesn’t make sense, but I just can’t take the story.” What else could she say? *Sorry, but Mr. Bancroft is my baby daddy? Oh, and I have this ridiculous attraction to him? By the way, do you have the bogeyman’s phone number?*

By his stunned tone, her boss was well aware she had lost her mind. “I can’t comprehend why you’re not jumping at this story when you should be thrilled. But it doesn’t matter. You have to cover him. You see, I wasn’t the one who chose you. Mr. Bancroft did.”

Suddenly Laura knew how a small furry animal felt when a majestic lion approached, licking its chops. Mr. Bancroft was as much a hunter as the king of the animals, and she – she was the prey.

“Did you hear me, Laura? The man himself requested you. Somehow Mr. Bancroft heard of you, and he personally requested you be the sole liaison between him and the press. So it’s not a choice. It’s your job.”

Could she refuse, demand a bake sale expose instead? *Exclusive: Winifred’s homemade brownies actually come from a mix. Millions shocked. Town declares state of mourning.* Yet it wouldn’t solve her problem. If she didn’t lose her job, it would likely plummet to actual brownie scandals and armadillo races. If refusing would help her situation with Jeanie, she would, but surrendering wasn’t Aidan’s style. He would simply find another way to get to her. “All right.”

“I’m sorry I had to compel you,” Mr. Nelson’s voice was a combination of gruffness and confusion. “Any other writer would have given a year’s salary for this opportunity. Anyway, the job starts tonight. There’s a big welcome party at *The Enchanted*. Be there at eight.”

Before she could protest, a loud click sounded, signaling the end of their conversation. Seconds later, her daughter bounded back into the room, her hands and cheeks aglow with cleanliness. “French toast?” she queried.

“Coming right up.” Laura held out her palm. Giggling, Jeanie took it, and hand in hand they walked into the kitchen.

The two ladies donned matching aprons, retrieved the ingredients and set to work. After a satisfying breakfast in which Jeanie “helped” her splatter batter all over the table, floor and ceiling fan, they changed again, into less batter-filled clothing. Despite the nearly unsurmountable urge to stay in the house with her daughter, safe and secure from the outside world and the man who ruled it, Laura had no choice but to venture out. She had a flurry of activities planned, from buying Jeanie some much-needed clothing (how do kids grow so fast) to volunteering with her daughter at the children’s library.

Once they left, the hours passed quickly. First, they enjoyed a play date at the local playground, which involved a lively game of tag, endless “just five more minutes” and an amount of sand in her hair that would probably take two weeks to fully eradicate. They then set off for a pizza party with the little girl’s ballet class, where the kids and adults had a raucous discussion on whether jellybeans belonged on pizza (final verdict: *absolutely*). After that, they crisscrossed the small town, did their volunteering and completed their errands. Throughout it all, Aidan occasionally made his way into Laura’s thoughts, as if his power somehow extended to the psychic. Okay, perhaps it was slightly more than occasionally. Well, really, most of the time. Fine, all the time, but only because of her daughter. It certainly had nothing to do with soulful eyes, rock solid muscles or power that couldn’t be denied.

After they finished their activities, Laura traveled to her parents’ house to drop off Jeanie. She hated leaving her child two days in a row, but if Aidan cast eyes on his miniature doppelganger, not even the bogeyman could save her. Leaving Jeanie in the most capable hands of beloved Grandma Beatrix,

who already had chocolate chip cookie ingredients prepared, Laura hurried to her father's bedroom, where he spent most of his time since his last heart attack.

She stilled at the threshold to the darkened chamber. The room smelled like antiseptic and gloom, the air heavy and stale. She suppressed raw pain at the man on the bed, her shock at his drawn-in features and stark weakness never diminishing, even as the days and weeks passed. It didn't need to be like this, the doctors claimed, citing depression and lack of activity as the true culprit in his inability to regain his strength and health. Although their relationship had been strained for a while – since the day she decided to become a single mother –she couldn't abandon the once robust man who had taken her on wild piggyback rides and ice cream shop extravaganzas.

“It's way too dark in here.” She strode to the curtains, lightly coated with dust as a testament to how long they'd been closed, and reached to open them.

A gravelly voice stopped her, “Don't.”

She clenched the thick brocade fabric in her hands. A moment later, she turned back to her father, the barrier to the outside still firmly in place. “You can't stay shut in here forever.”

“I can stay until my twelfth heart attack if I want,” he shot back, settling back into the thick down pillows. He reached for a glass of cloudy liquid by his bed; unable to get it, he collapsed down, exhausted from the attempt. “It'll just happen again.”

Laura closed her eyes, sorrow washing over her like a tidal wave. How could she make him understand? She forced her eyes open and strode to the bed. “It doesn't have to happen again.” She handed the glass to him. He grasped it with shaky fingers, large hands that used to play tickle monster. “The doctors say another heart attack is very preventable with the right lifestyle changes and proper medication. You can get back in shape if you want, but only if you get out of this bed.

Are you doing the exercises the doctors suggested? They said it could really help—”

“If I wanted a nurse, I’d pay for one!” he wheezed, holding up a bony hand. “As I recall, you weren’t too happy when I questioned your choices.”

Familiar anger seized her, endless frustration and breath-stealing pain. Before she could stop herself, she responded. “Do you wish I didn’t have Jeanie?”

“Of course not. I love that little sprite!” Her father turned red, apparently embarrassed by his own outburst. Laura couldn’t stop a rush of joy at his declaration of love, no matter how unintentional. It died at his next words. “It’s just not right to raise a child as a single mom. It’s not fair to—”

“I’m not going through this again.” She rubbed her forehead, as the wall clock ticked the hour, a bright green circle with rotating golf clubs instead of hands. Yet another lost pastime. “I have to go. Can I get you something?” she asked simply.

He seemed poised to say more, something important, something meaningful, but when he spoke, his voice was even and resigned. “I guess not. Tell Jeanie to stop in on her old grandpa when they finish cookie creation. She promised me a checkers rematch.”

Laura nodded, amidst a thousand unsaid words, the urge to say more, *do* more. She strode from the room.

Yet something was different as she drove home. Beyond the emotionally draining visit, a sliver of hope sparked. Perhaps because Jeanie might get her own father/daughter relationship, for the first time in years, something urged her to try again with her father, to not simply accept the contentious relationship. If there was hope for Jeanie and Aidan, perhaps there was hope for them, too.

Laura reluctantly pushed aside thoughts of her father as she arrived home, embarking on the mental and physical preparation for the night’s festivities. She showered with rose-vanilla body wash, then tried on half her closet, and then the

other half, dozens of outfits, ranging from business-casual to formal to everything in between. Finally, she chose a tea-length, silk gown with a sweetheart bodice, fitted waist and skirt brilliant with shimmering beads. It hugged her figure like a tight glove, accentuating ample curves and outlining *everything*. A tiny topaz solitaire sat nestled above her breasts, with two simple silver bracelets encircling her wrists.

She let her hair cascade freely down her back, adorned by an elegant mother-of-pearl comb just above her ear. She stepped before the mirror, stared at the curvaceous woman who stared boldly back. If she was going to be with the handsome Mr. Bancroft all night, at least she was dressed for the part.

With a deep breath, she set off on her journey. She traveled winding roads, as the sun sank slowly towards its bedtime, bathing the world in twilight's shadow. Millions of thoughts and mere minutes later, she reached *The Enchanted*. And enchanted it was.

Swirling curves etched whimsical designs on cream-colored walls, with towers that scraped the sky, in an elegant three-story eatery more a small palace than a restaurant. Rounded pillars stood guard on each side, beyond large windows that revealed an elegant interior with golden decorations and large chandeliers of cascading cut crystal. *The Enchanted* was better known than the town itself, drawing visitors from near and far, catering events from local baby showers to celebrity weddings. It was the brainchild of a celebrity, who wanted to prove he could build a high-class establishment anywhere. Even the world-traveled Aidan Bancroft was sure to be impressed.

Laura parked in the rapidly filling lot, then passed through huge double doors carved with blooming roses, lilies and love-in-a-mist. She entered a double height foyer with a gilded domed ceiling, before ascending a grand, red-carpeted stairway. Detailed paintings spanned walls of spun gold, whimsical fairy-tales of beauty and happy endings. At the top of the stairs, the ballroom beckoned, a breathtaking chamber with rounded tables covered in chiffon and blown glass vases

bursting with white calla lilies. The flowers scented the room, which was set to the lilting melody of a five-piece band.

Due to the early hour, only a sprinkling of guests had arrived, the Who's Who of Pine Ridge as well as less local figures. Surprisingly, several members of the Miami media were also present, a stark reminder of Aidan's true status in life. Laura strode to the bar and ordered a ridiculously expensive glass of Chablis, a splurge for her scattered nerves. Only it wasn't necessary, as the waiter declined payment, explaining that the entire function was sponsored by Mr. Bancroft. Of course. He could probably afford to buy the restaurant.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Ms. Blake."

Her breath disappeared.

The voice originated from mere inches away, and it rolled over her skin, casting static tingles. Her heart slammed against her ribs, shortening her breath and numbing the world. *Stay calm.* She couldn't deal with him if emotion took over. She could be as controlled as he, as calm, as powerful. Too much was at stake, and if she gave at all, he would take control in an instant. *Of everything.*

She turned, yet keeping control turned into an even more arduous task, an almost impossible feat. Because...

The bogeyman himself, Aidan Bancroft, had arrived.

CHAPTER 3



He was even more gorgeous than she remembered. The strong and commanding body, the classic and handsome face, the deep penetrating eyes. She stood still as the winter midnight, frozen at his deep perusal.

And peruse he did.

Yet not with his normal control, but with the focus of a predator. Inch by inch, limb by limb, he studied every last detail. His nostrils flared, betraying his perfect discipline, and the truth he couldn't hide. She affected him as much as he affected her.

Laura shook her head, as if the physical action could slay traitorous thoughts. This moment would define everything. Would he confront her with the truth, that he was the father of a little girl tucked in bed not ten minutes away? Would he demand his child, her family? Would he steal her every choice? There was only one way to find out. "Why are you here?"

Aidan smiled, and as earlier, it transformed him and relaxed her. Why, she didn't know... perhaps it had to do with his resemblance to Jeanie. Perhaps it was something else entirely.

"You don't waste any time, do you?" he asked smoothly. "No 'How are you, how is everything, thank you for this exciting opportunity?'" In stark contrast to the harshness of earlier, his voice was softer, lighter. And suddenly, relief

brought the world back into focus. He didn't know about his daughter. His tone was too calm, his manner too relaxed. No matter how good a pretender, he couldn't be this composed if he knew the secret.

All the options she had once thought gone reappeared, as well as the decisions. In an instant, his visit turned from tragedy to opportunity, from disaster to boon. She would now have the time and power to decide whether to share the most beautiful part of her life with him.

Of course, she would have to be careful. His visit was no coincidence – no doubt he had come to investigate her. His amicability toward her could certainly not be genuine, not after his accusations. She must ward off his suspicions and safeguard the secret until she deemed it time to reveal the truth. And somehow she would ignore the attraction that usurped her control.

Now, however, she could enjoy the renewed oxygen in the world. Cooperation might even help her attain information. She smiled. “How are you? How is everything? And thank you so much for this exciting opportunity.”

“Fine, satisfactory, and you're welcome. You?”

“Splendid, great, and *you're* welcome.” Her voice surged in strength. “Why did you say you were here again?”

Aidan's fierce gaze pinned her. “I don't think I did say.”

“Ahh, so you didn't.” Laura took a sip of her wine. “Then why don't you tell me now?”

“You don't ever give up, do you?”

“Answering a question with a question to avoid responding?” Laura applauded the man's clever manipulations. “I'm a reporter, as you are well aware, and you asked for me by name. Thus I can only assume your visit has something to do with me. Something to do with yesterday?” she ventured, raising an eyebrow and waiting for a reaction. It didn't take long.

Aidan's eyes darkened. His jaw tightened and he flexed his fingers. Before he could respond, she whispered in softer

tones, “I wanted to apologize again. I shouldn’t have come to see you.” Sincere regret infused her voice, a sliver of honesty she could provide. If she addressed the incident, perhaps he would reveal his true reason for coming to Pine Ridge.

Aidan, however, was not to be deterred. “No, you shouldn’t have.” His voice was quiet and serious. “So why did you?”

Laura fought the urge to share all. Only her daughter’s welfare gave her the strength to continue her plan. “I wanted to do a story but hadn’t considered how it would affect you. When you confronted me, I realized a scoop wasn’t worth the price you would pay. So I dropped it.”

“Just like that?” he murmured.

“Just like that,” she affirmed.

“I see.” His expression was unrevealing. “Then it’s my turn to share why I’m here.”

A thousand possibilities screamed. Instead of speaking, however, he leaned in close. Real. Close. Her breath hitched as his own fanned her cheek. “I’m here because I don’t believe you.”

Where had the oxygen gone? As Laura sucked in sharp breaths, she leaned back, fighting to form a cognizant retort. She opened her mouth, stopped as a group of people descended.

“Aidan Bancroft, a pleasure to meet you!”

“Yes, what a delight!”

“We’ve heard so much about you!”

She closed and opened her eyes, but could only play passive audience as the “Official Pine Ridge Delegation” greeted the billionaire businessman in a manner fit for a newfound prince. He responded graciously, sharing niceties and promising a new relationship between Bancroft Enterprises and the small town. And during every painful second, she stood by his side, a false smile stretching her lips.

If only they had finished the conversation. He had come to investigate her, that he had outright admitted, because he didn't believe her. Although he didn't yet suspect the truth, how long could she hide? With the loose-tongued receptionist at the Peace Field Fertility Center, it would take thirty seconds to have all his questions answered, should he ask. It was his asking she needed to prevent.

“And Laura, you lucky lady, do you know how many people would like to be in your shoes? Those big-city reporters are swarming like a hive of bees.”

Laura winced at the city chairman's statement. If they had any idea... “I'm quite fortunate. I'm not going to leave this man for a moment.” In a bold move, she reached out and grasped Aidan's arm, basking in the surprise that fired in his eyes.

His smile widened as he laughed. “I'm the lucky one. I would never allow such a fascinating woman to leave my side.” He put his hand possessively around her, matching the danger lurking in his expression. Its message was clear – he was the predator, and she was his prey.

Laura suppressed a shiver. “Mr. Bancroft...”

“Aidan, please,” he interjected. “If this is going to be a long-term relationship, then we should be on a first name basis. Don't you think so, Ms. Blake?”

She clenched her teeth. The man was a master at keeping control. “Laura,” she ground out.

“Ahh, what a beautiful name. And you are?”

Person by person, Aidan introduced himself to every member of the group, sufficiently charming the entire lot. His allure seemed so simple, yet it was a talent few commanded.

“Now about our plan...” Deftly, he shifted the conversation back to business. “I see a potential synergy between my corporation and your town. A satellite office of Bancroft Enterprises could boost the economy triple-fold, creating scores of solid, high-paying jobs for your citizens while maintaining a small-town atmosphere. It could bring

exciting new opportunities right away, not to mention future implications.” His grip on the delegation ever widening, Aidan went on, outlining not only vague plans but intricate details of the proposed deal. Laura stayed silent, every word deepening his grip into her world.

The deal actually sounded plausible and, even more, rewarding. What frightened her, however, was that if his presence was solely because of her, the entire prospect could be nothing more than an excuse to stake her out. From her research, Aidan seemed to be an upstanding businessman practicing honorable corporate techniques, but his current motives were suspect. Perhaps this was all a charade, a façade to cover his investigation. Of course, if the collaboration was real and Aidan became a semi-permanent fixture of Pine Ridge life, it had huge implications for Laura and her daughter. Because sooner or later, he was bound to find out the truth.

It was time to get involved. Asking questions might shed light on whether he was serious about the collaboration. Plus, she was going to have to write a story on what was bound to be front-page news. She would need something to put in there, and the headline “Is Aidan Bancroft Worthy Enough to Be Jeanie’s Father?” was out of the question, although it could easily score a spot in *Celebrity Gossip Weekly*. “So, Mr. Bancroft – Aidan – why did you choose our special little town for your business venture? Seems like you had countless options, many towns that would have done anything for this opportunity and with better resources. Why Pine Ridge?”

Before Aidan could answer, the town chairman interjected with a nervous laugh, “Come now, Laura, he doesn’t need to explain his reasons. Our wonderful town has plenty to offer.”

“It’s no problem.” Aidan’s expression was knowing, challenging and *predatory*. “I understand my motives might seem suspect, but I assure you, there is plenty here for Bancroft Enterprises. There’s something about this little town, something mysterious that draws me.” Now it was his turn to pierce Laura with a penetrating stare.

Was it getting hot in here?

“When something captures my interest, I perform a thorough exploration...”

Maybe they forgot to turn on the air conditioning.

“Until everything is spread open and uncovered before me.”

Boiling.

“Do you have any idea what that is?”

Laura managed not to fan herself like a swooning Regency heroine in those books she secretly read at night. But, actually, in her stories, the heroines were as strong as the heroes. In the latest one, they had even formed a secret society for social action.

Aidan cleared his throat, snagging her attention. He was doing his best to unnerve her, and it wouldn't work. Well, not much. “Must be the pleasant scenery,” she gritted out.

“Must be.” The town chairman gripped the conversation like a relay track baton. “Can you tell us more, Mr. Bancroft?”

Aidan smiled wolfishly, imparting what, or rather whom, he was planning to uncover. He returned to his vision, drawing the crowd and her in, despite her resistance. It was nearly impossible to ignore the power that was Aidan Bancroft, and by the end, a startling realization emerged:

She liked him.

It was a good thing, to like the man who gave you a child, but she would have to be extra cautious. How would his passion translate to her and little Jeanie? Would he be as dedicated to fatherhood? What would it mean for *them*?

After many minutes of serious discussion, Aidan finally addressed the group that had grown far beyond its original numbers. “Ladies and gentlemen, that's enough business for today. In the coming days, there will be many opportunities to discuss such matters, but I want you to enjoy your time tonight, and the five-star buffet is open.” He winked, and people literally licked their lips. For the buffet, or *him*? “Thank you so much for your time.”

Thoroughly enamored, the group didn't notice how quickly they'd been dismissed, bidding farewell and dispersing at the command. The room had become crowded, almost uncomfortably so, with hundreds of citizens hoping to meet the exclusive Mr. Bancroft. Sweat formed under the silky dress, slick and sticky against her skin. Her skin tingled with dueling urges to stay and flee, to both escape this man and surrender to him.

The need for a moment's respite moved her, only as she took a step, an iron band captured her. His hand was warm and large, and it completely surrounded her, conveying power, challenge, *possession*. "You're not planning to leave, are you?"

"Of course not," she lied, standing taller. She was just as strong as he. "I'll be right by your side the entire time."

Would the declaration irk him? Someone this powerful must dislike clingy people, and it seemed everyone clung to him. Only instead of dismay, discomfort and disappointment, the corporate tiger smiled wider. "As I desired."

She swallowed her own dismay, discomfort and *lack* of disappointment. "Back to the conversation of earlier, what did you mean when you said—"

"Mr. Bancroft!"

She bit back a groan as another well-wisher joined their conversation. Aidan leaned in, casting heat through every inch. "Don't worry. We'll be spending lots of time together. Enough for all of your and *my* questions to be answered." Then, without taking his solid-as-a-rock arm off her, he spoke to the man. "A pleasure sir. I'm Aidan Bancroft."

Laura barely heard the conversation as his closeness usurped her attention. If he strove to set her off-balance, it was working better than she'd ever admit. It had been a long time since she'd been this close to a man, and the sensation was doing strange and not altogether bad things to her. Clearly, she needed to date more, but it wouldn't be a billionaire powerhouse who was trying to take control.

Yet instead of shifting away, she found herself edging closer to him. And when he tightened his hold, bringing her nearer and cementing his claim, she allowed it. His expression clearly said...

You're not getting away.

"We'll talk soon." Minutes later, the newcomer bid farewell and left, only to be replaced by another three in seconds. This time she did take part in the conversation, if only to keep her mind off the man branding her with his nearness, discussing an eclectic mix of business and personal matters. The personal discussion did not, unfortunately, revolve around Aidan. Each time a matter of his personal life surfaced, he deftly brought the conversation to another subject, sharing something Laura already knew. He was exceedingly intelligent.

And suspicious.

And possessive.

The hours flew by, but he never allowed her out of his sight. Every time she started to slip away, he would do or say something to return her to him. Every touch caused an unwilling shot of excitement, every movement an addictive sensual heat that made her entire body tingle.

So what if she slipped away an extra time just to get that touch?

Okay, four or five extra times.

Unfortunately, with everyone wanting a piece of him, she never had the opportunity to get him alone and have her wicked way with... ummm, garner information. A new face, always eager to meet the town's new golden child, would arrive seconds after the old left. But through it all, one truth remained:

He never let her escape.

"I'M LEAVING," Laura announced suddenly. It was a rare moment of solitude after several businessmen left, a moment

Aidan had been wishing for since she challenged him. He had come to investigate her sources, but that didn't stop the attraction to the beautiful reporter, or the urge to learn everything about her. Before he was finished, he would discover her every secret.

Oblivious to her hunt, his quarry continued, "It's been an interesting evening, Mr. Bancroft."

Yes, it had. "Mr. Bancroft again? And why so early?" He crossed his arms over his chest. "Is someone waiting for you?" His voice came out low and dangerous. The very thought was... wrong.

Laura neither answered nor denied his assertion, instead evading the question altogether. "It's been a long day. We'll have plenty of time to talk later."

"Your daughter." He remembered. "Where is she tonight?"

She paled, and he frowned. Why was she so nervous? "She's with my parents," she responded quickly. "Having a great time baking cookies and manipulating them into letting her watch television way past bedtime. She'll stay with them tomorrow so we'll have time to work."

Aidan stifled a smile. When it came to convincing parents to forgo bedtimes, he had been world champion. It seemed like the miniature version of Laura was as clever as her mother. "When will I get to meet little Miss Jeanie?"

Laura blinked rapidly, appearing all but ready to faint. What was happening? "I'm not sure. Not tomorrow. Definitely not." Her voice sounded strange.

Despite all this woman had done, stark concern narrowed his eyes. She had tried to blackmail him, yet he couldn't help but feel... something... for her. Despite her earlier actions, she didn't seem the sort to hurt people, which made her all the more a mystery to solve. Right now, he only wanted to care for her. He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

The skin under his hand was as chilled as the icy atmosphere. "Yes, I'm fine. Maybe I didn't get enough to eat."

He frowned. She had declined every offering from the waiters and hadn't even visited the smorgasbord. She needed to take better care of herself. "Just a minute." He pivoted to walk away, stopped and turned back. "Don't leave." When she gave a curt nod, he strode to the buffet and filled a platter with steaming baked ziti, roasted garlic bread and two oversized cannolis bursting with sweet cream and drizzled chocolate. He returned to the reporter, who, somewhat surprisingly, hadn't moved from the spot where he left her. "This is for you."

Her beautiful eyes went wide. "I couldn't possibly eat all that."

"You have to eat something before you drive." Too bad she hadn't ridden in his car, and well, if she were in his car, she might as well go to his home. Not for any nefarious purpose, but so he could learn more about the woman who infiltrated his life, in more ways than one. For now, he directed her to a plush velvet couch and sat her down. She started on the food, first hesitantly but then heartedly. Finally, she finished a good three-quarters of the meal and put down the napkin. He wished he could further delay her departure, but he had to bide his time. Like it or not, she would be spending a great deal of time in his company. "I'll walk you to your car."

He was pleased when she didn't fight. Even in a respectable town such as this, he would ensure she made it safely to her vehicle. The fact that he could spend a few more minutes with her – a few *private* minutes – was a bonus. She needed to grow accustomed to his presence.

He stayed close by her side. He brushed by her a few times, and she started every time he did, betraying his effect on her. The truth was she affected him, too. Somehow in this short span of time, she had become more than an investigation, more than a problem to be solved. He desired far more than her source and motives. Exactly how much, he didn't know, but it was *substantial*. Neither said a word until they walked outside into the cool spring night.

"Why don't you believe me?" She turned to him, referring to their conversation of earlier. Her tone light was light, but

her eyes were serious. Out here, in the cool starry night, they were the only two around.

He gazed into the velvet night sky, a brilliant background to soaring nightbirds. The stars burned brighter out here in the country. “I bet you’ve been dying to ask me that all night.”

She grimaced, then gave a curt nod of admission. He studied her with stark focus. She squirmed slightly, and he regretted the necessity to be so harsh. He had to discover the truth, despite her discomfort.

Then he would explore the force between them.

“I’m concerned about your visit the other day. *Extremely* concerned. At first, I thought you were just after money, and had I been correct, it would have ended there.”

Her features tightened. “I already admitted my mistake and apologized. Why don’t you let it go?” The unspoken question hovered in the air. *Why don’t you let me go?*

He didn’t hesitate. “Because of two excruciating factors, which lead me to believe you’re being less than honest. First, you dropped the story. I’m sorry, but I don’t believe you were planning to blackmail me only to have a bout with your conscience at the last minute. You’ve been a reporter for years. You must have encountered many situations in which a story warred with integrity. As I’ve gotten to know you, I’ve become more certain you are not a woman inclined to rash decisions.”

“You don’t really know me,” she protested.

“A problem I plan to rectify,” he replied smoothly. “Secondly, I need to know who told you about the fertility clinic.”

For a second, panic blazed in her eyes. He pressed on, “I know he didn’t reveal his identity, but e-mail can sometimes be traced. You said the price was reasonable. Maybe he’s selling my secrets to every reporter in town. I need to access your computer to look for him and make sure my story won’t appear in newspapers across the country.” Aidan set his most

stern gaze on Laura, the one that intimidated countless boardrooms.

His little siren breathed deeply. “I can’t let you into my computer. It contains information on numerous sources, and I would lose my job, not to mention my integrity, if I allowed it. For what it’s worth, he promised the information would be exclusive.” She hesitated. “I have to go. Goodnight, Mr. Bancroft.”

They arrived at the car, and in one fluid motion she unlocked the vehicle. Before she could get in, however, he leaned closer, crowding her, invading her space. Marking *his* space.

“Are you trying to intimidate me?” she whispered. “Because if you are, it’s not working.”

She was lying, and yet despite the affect she couldn’t hide, a challenge burned in her eyes. This woman was made of something far stronger than he anticipated. It made her all the more alluring, in ways that had nothing to do with his quest.

“Shall I prove it to you?”

He lifted an eyebrow as the beautiful woman lifted her chin, pushing into *his* space. Then...

She pressed her lips to his.

One second. He stayed still for only a second before he kissed her back. She tasted of vanilla and honey, as he massaged her lips, as she clutched him. Her breasts pressed into him, soft and sweet and generously curved. Her eyes fluttered as he brought her even nearer. He recognized when her mind turned hazy, her muscles liquid, as she surrendered to the kiss – and to him.

The kiss could’ve lasted forever, and yet he ended it, fighting the insatiable need that demanded so much more. His mind and body dueled for this woman who was lying to him, had all but blackmailed him, yet he could only think of getting closer to her, and not just physically. And he would, but slowly, subtlety.

He retreated, but not so far he couldn't hear her rapid breathing, see the passion still lighting her eyes. "I will find your source and learn your motives. As I told you before, I will discover anything that relates to me. Understand?"

A spark of defiance flashed. "And I will protect my source until the end. Understand?"

Aidan smiled, welcoming the challenge. "I expected no less. You're going to be covering my entire trip, correct?" At her wary nod, he stood taller. "Then I'll see you tomorrow. We have much to discuss."

For a second dismay lit her eyes, like a cornered animal who realized escape was impossible. She guessed right. "Goodnight, Aidan," she whispered.

He bowed his head. "Goodnight, Laura." He closed the door and stood silent guard as she drove away. And as she disappeared into the night, he repeated his promise, "I will discover anything that relates to me."

And that included her.

CHAPTER 4



Monday morning arrived heralded by flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder. Torrential rain pounded the roof as bullets of hail rattled the windows, echoing throughout the tiny apartment. Shifting, Laura burrowed deeper under the covers, cozy in the warm bed. She opened her eyes lazily, expecting to catch a glimpse of her daughter cuddled up next to her. Instead, the bed beside her lay surprisingly empty, the covers still upturned. This morning, the storm was her only companion.

She ignored the sudden desire for another companion, someone who would do far more than cuddling. Someone who would make up for the chaste way his seed had grown in her.

Laura forced her thoughts back to her daughter, frowning over the unusual absence. Jeanie always stayed next to her in the morning – it was a special ritual never to be missed. A loud clang came from the kitchen, and she went from half-awakened state to complete alertness in an instant. Mommy radar sensed trouble.

With the swiftness only the mother of a too-clever-for-her-own-good four-year-old could possess, Laura leapt out of bed and raced toward the bedroom door. When she finally saw her daughter and her... artwork, she received confirmation she should've stayed in bed.

Evidence #1: The quivering bottom lip, the little blue eyes of guilt.

Evidence #2: The devastation that had once been her kitchen.

The kitchen wasn't normally spotless – she was a single working mom after all – however, it stayed reasonably in order. Yet now a variety of substances painted the furniture and floor, the walls and the ceiling?! Flour. Eggs. Orange Juice. Something she didn't even *recognize*. Only one thing could produce such a frightening result. A four-year-old had tried to cook.

“I'm sorry, Mommy.” Big blue eyes blinked in anguish. “I was just trying to make pancakes like you make for me.”

“Oh, sweetheart, it's all right.” Laura held out her arms, and her daughter lunged into them, flour poofing a miniature cloud as she hugged her tight. Thank goodness she had made the kitchen child-safe. There were safety locks on the stove and the other appliances as well as the cabinets containing sharp knives and chemicals. Gently Laura turned the child so she could look at her. “I appreciate what you tried to do.”

“You're not mad at me?” The little girl sniffed.

“Of course not.” Laura ruffled petal-soft hair. “You were just trying to surprise me. But next time, wake me up and we'll cook together. Deal?” She held out her pinky.

Jeanie returned to her normal cheery self in an instant. “Deal!” She offered her own pinky finger. Laura gave Jeanie another big hug as a loud thunderclap boomed, rumbling tiny reverberations through the air. Laura opened her mouth to suggest retry the pancakes (this time with less batter on the ceiling) when she glanced at the living room clock. She blinked, yet the reading remained the same: nine-thirty. Which meant it was...

An hour and a half past when her alarm clock should have beckoned.

Forty-five minutes past when Jeanie should have left for preschool.

A half hour past when Aidan's meeting began.

Whoops.

A storm-driven power surge must have knocked out her alarm. This. Was. Bad. “Honey, we are very late. Let’s get ready.”

Jeanie laughed in delight as Laura scooped her up and raced to the bedroom. Since she had already selected their clothing, she managed to dress her daughter and herself in less than five minutes, yet she could not speed her daughter’s bathroom time, which involved several dolls using the facilities before her daughter would. She ran a brush through her daughter’s golden locks, forwent the stylish updo she planned for herself and let her own hair fall freely down her back. Fortunately, the preschool provided food, so Laura just grabbed a granola bar for herself. The kitchen cleanup would have to wait. In fifteen minutes flat, they were ready to go.

She should have brought an umbrella. It was apparent the moment they reached downstairs, as rain soaked the world. The storm was as strong as ever, the rain sweeping down in large, slanted waves, scattering debris and turning the sidewalk into a shallow river. However, the five minutes to run back was not an option, not when they were so late. Laura covered Jeanie with her overcoat and made a dash for the car, as the water soaked her, saturating her skin and sending ice through her veins. Protected by the coat, Jeanie emerged dry and happy as she was strapped into her car seat.

It was little sitting in a wet dish sponge. The seat cushion squeaked, water pooling as the fabric stuck to her wet legs. Normally a five-minute drive, the trip to the preschool took three times as long due to the unrelenting weather. With a kiss and a hug, Laura left her daughter with a smiling teacher before tearing off for town hall. The tempest once more forced her to drive slowly, however, and by the time she reached the civic building, she was a full hour and a half late. The spacious parking lot was full, as was the secondary lot and the third, except for a flooded area that resembled Lake Okeechobee. And, as if the universe was sticking out its big cosmic tongue, the rain intensified just as she parked, drenching her even more on the way in.

She stopped for a moment in the ladies' room to compose herself, halting to stare at the wild woman in the mirror. Her navy cotton dress plastered to every curve, outlining her body in slick precision. Her normally tame hair stood in all directions, wild and windswept, while her skin glowed with diamanté rainwater. She looked more like Tarzan's Jane than a dignified reporter, but hopefully everyone, including a specific someone, realized her "new look" was due to the weather and not some plan to attract attention. Especially not *his* attention.

Fixing herself as best she can, Laura ran through a wide, brightly-lit hallway to the auditorium, stopping every few seconds to dry the droplets leaking onto the floor. She skidded to a halt outside the great metal doors, where the meeting was already in progress. Aidan was speaking, his loud voice booming in powerful tones. With as little noise as possible, she opened the door and slipped inside.

Hundreds of people filled the mauve-colored chamber, overflowing the spindle back chairs and spilling into standing room only. She tip-toed to the reserved press area at the front when the speech suddenly ceased. Aidan speared her with an unreadable expression, his eyes so bright they were almost unnatural. She breathed relief as he continued a moment later, and thankfully no one else seemed to overly notice her arrival or his perusal of such. She flattened herself against the wall and brought out her laptop.

She typed notes as Aidan spoke. A gifted orator, he graced his words with enthusiasm and purpose, delving into intricate details without becoming too technical for the layperson or too drawn out for the more knowledgeable. He presented the collaboration between Pine Ridge and Bancroft Enterprises not simply as a beneficial business venture, but instead as a rare opportunity for both his company and their town. Even she couldn't help but imagine the possibilities.

After Aidan's speech, Candace spoke on behalf of the city. Then various town leaders talked about the benefits of the proposed collaboration. When they finished, Aidan returned to the podium for a question and answer session. He responded to a variety of queries related to the proposal, thoroughly

explaining each point and assuaging any concerns and issues. Laura took notes for her article, although the questions she most wanted to ask were not voiced. Queries like “What would you do if you found out you had a long lost daughter?” and “What do you look for in a woman who just happens to be the mother of your child?” never made it to the podium. She raised her hand with one that could elucidate matters without raising suspicion.

“Laura.”

She hesitated over Aidan’s use of her first name, a diversion from the surnames he used for previous exchanges. A moment later, she asked in a clear voice, “Mr. Bancroft, if this business deal goes through, what will your personal involvement be?”

The answer should be obvious. The collaboration with Pine Ridge would be a minute fraction of the juggernaut that was Bancroft Enterprises, a tiny piece usually given a maximum two-hour visit a year. Typically satellite offices were run entirely by executives far down on the corporate ladder, not because they weren’t important, but because of their relative size to the business as a whole. Although Laura loved her small town and its people, it was not large for a company headquartered in five of the grandest cities in the world.

Aidan took no time to answer. “I plan to take a very hands-on approach to this collaboration.” He nodded at the audible exclamations of surprise. “I realize this is a deviation from my normal involvement in these situations, but something about this town calls to me.” He gazed directly at her. “At least for now, I plan to head up the entire project.”

Hushed whispering buzzed at the unexpected announcement, followed by rapid typing on laptops, tablets and cell phones, creating dozens of social media posts, confirming the unexpected news. Laura should be crafting her own story, yet instead she stayed frozen, staring at Aidan. Somehow a short visit had turned into a prolonged stay. How long could she keep Jeanie hidden? Every minute not at work was typically spent with her, and tiny Pine Ridge left little space to hide.

Remain calm. The only true thing she lost was time – her decision over whether to tell Aidan would have to be made soon, which meant...

She would need to get to know him very well.

“That’s all the time we have for now.” Candace took the stage again. “Thank you for coming to hear about this exciting opportunity, and don’t forget tomorrow is our annual town carnival. Mr. Bancroft has assured me of his presence, if that convinces some people to go.”

It appeared to convince *everyone* to go, as evidenced by the excited titters, the people rapidly making plans. When Aidan descended the stage to mingle with the crowd, Pine Ridge’s feminine forces rushed to address him, some with subtle moves and others with bold, clear signals. Three women even extended “personal” invitations. Graciously, he declined all, explaining how his hectic schedule left little time for anything but business. Laura slowly made her way to the front. It was time for a fourth invitation.

“Laura, how are you?” Aidan’s smoky voice warmed her. “You look beautiful.”

She narrowed her eyes, fighting to restrain a fitting rejoinder. She looked like a cat who fell in a lake, who emerged only to fall in a river, who then fell into the ocean. And then got eaten and regurgitated by a whale. “Do you like the caught in a thunderstorm look?” she teased.

As if to support her claim, thunder boomed, and the overhead lights flickered for an instant. Aidan’s amusement faded, replaced by dissatisfaction and... concern? “You drove through the storm? Why didn’t you wait it out?”

Why did it suddenly feel like she was back in the principal’s office, apologizing for her first editorial: *Does the School Use Road Kill in Their Sloppy Joe’s?* “I assumed you weren’t going to wait for me to begin.” She forced a light tone. “It wasn’t too bad. I combined my shower and morning commute.”

By his stern visage, the joke fell flat. “Driving through a storm is dangerous, and walking through one is worse. You could get in an accident or catch a cold. You should go home and change.”

She blinked. The man who had followed her hundreds of miles to investigate her, who accused her of the inexcusable, was *worried* about her? “I’m fine.” She smoothed down her sleeves. “Hardly wet anymore.”

A droplet fell on the floor with an audible plop. His eyes darkened in dissatisfaction, yet before he could order her to write “I will not drive through a storm” fifty times, she pressed forward, “I need more information for my article. Would you like to meet this afternoon?”

He hesitated a moment more, clearly unsatisfied with her refusal to listen. Was he going to demand she leave? Finally, he gave a curt nod. “Yes, I would. I’ll pick you up at one.”

Laura exhaled slowly, relief and dismay tangling at his quick acceptance. Why did it feel like she’d just invited the fox to the hen house? “I live in the Pine Ridge Manor Apartments, on the corner of...”

“I know where you live,” he interrupted in smooth tones. “Among other things.”

She clamped her mouth shut. Of course, he had investigated his prey. She could chastise him, demand privacy, but the practice would be futile. What Aidan Bancroft wanted, he got. Hopefully the digging would end before it unearthed her little ray of sunshine.

She needed to get out of there, away from the wily nemesis who was also her child’s father. Yet as he turned to another adoring female fan, she couldn’t look away. For just a moment the likeness to her precious Jeanie was so striking, so clear, that she realized she could never hate or even dislike him. Albeit unknowingly, he had given her the most treasured part of her life, and deep down she would always be grateful. But something beyond that beckoned her, something she couldn’t explain. Some force at work that had nothing to do with Jeanie.

It took her a moment to realize that Aidan was staring back. “Is there something else?” he asked quietly. “Something you’d like to tell me?”

Her breath caught in her throat. Maybe she should just tell him, get everything out in the open. Let the truth forge their path. Compelled by his unspoken command, the urge was nearly insurmountable. “Yes,” she choked on the admittance. “There is... something.” As the people around them drifted off to the refreshment tables, she swallowed her fear. They stood in relative privacy, with no one close enough to hear.

He watched her with uncanny perception. “Tell me.”

“I... That is...” She stopped. How do you tell a man he’s a father? Someone this powerful, strong and intelligent? Someone you just met?

“Just say it,” he prodded softly. “I can tell it’s troubling you. Tell me, and I’ll take care of everything.”

Laura steeled herself. This was it, the moment of truth. Aidan Bancroft was about to discover he had a long-lost daughter. She opened her mouth, yet couldn’t move, as if tangled in a spider’s web. The air suffocated her, heavy pressure smothering, restricting, choking. What had he said? *Tell me, and I’ll take care of everything.*

No.

Her mind reeled. She couldn’t tell him, not before she learned his true motivations, before she ensured he wouldn’t hire a million dollar lawyer and whisk Jeanie away. Not before she made certain he wouldn’t seize control of Jeanie – and her.

Far too quickly, she shook her head, backed away. “I’m sorry, I was mistaken.” Without another word, she pivoted and strode out of the room, away from her child’s father, the man who would seize control if she allowed it.

Perhaps he already had.

SHE HAD NOT BEEN MISTAKEN... and neither had he.

No, Laura Blake had something to tell him, something significant, something vital. What had stopped her from revealing the secret? Had his response triggered a reaction? Was it because there were too many people? She seemed frightened, panicked even. Did she think he would believe her secret suddenly vanished? No, something lurked between them, something that could change lives.

He would discover everything.

When she'd first entered the room, he'd forgotten his halfway uttered sentence. Preposterous, when he hadn't flubbed a presentation since he made his first million, yet somehow she stole his attention and infiltrated his thoughts. The sight of the striking woman glistening with water droplets was almost too much to handle. She thought he was mocking her when he called her beautiful, yet every word had been sincere.

Something far beyond appreciation for her lovely features had sparked, an emotion that transcended objective observation. He hadn't expected his emotional reaction or the deep concern to her being in danger, the need to demand she take care, or actually the desire to care for her himself. Of course, she'd resisted.

Of course, that made him all the more determined.

What was happening to him? Their connection belied their short acquaintance, ascending in spite of his investigation. If he felt this way after a few short meetings, what would happen when they actually spent some time together?

Soon, he would find out.

THANKFULLY, the rain eased as Laura navigated the wet roads home, as she pushed aside thoughts of Aidan a mere four hundred and fifty-two times. Unfortunately, four hundred and fifty-two of those times his image returned. After she arrived at the apartment, she moved in mechanical motions, showering and changing into a no-nonsense teal pants suit. Crafted of soft yet durable cotton, the tailored suit was chic and well-fitting,

showing off her curves. Laura surveyed herself in the mirror and nodded. At least she looked like her old self again.

The same could not be said of her home, as she emerged from her bedroom to the disaster formerly known as her kitchen. She hadn't time to clean the apartment, so she made a mental note to meet Aidan at the door so he wouldn't see the mess. She had enough to lie about as it was.

She quickly drove to the office and wrote her latest story on the collaboration, before departing for the preschool. She embraced a smiling Jeanie and had just turned to leave when Ms. Caspian, the school administrator, stopped her. "Ms. Blake, can I have a word with you?"

Laura hesitated. It would take five minutes to get home and ten minutes to get ready for Jeanie's tee-ball game. Then it would take fifteen more to drop Jeanie off at the game where she would spend the afternoon while Laura met with Aidan. She had just a few minutes to spare. "Certainly. Jeanie, why don't you play with Sasha for a minute? Mommy will be right back."

Happy for a few more minutes with her friend, Jeanie bounded towards the waiting child. Laura followed Ms. Caspian into the office. "Is anything wrong?" she immediately inquired.

"Oh no," Ms. Caspian reassured her. "I called you here because something is very, very right. I'm not sure how much you've noticed, but Jeanie is very intelligent."

Laura's grin widened. Her daughter absorbed information incredibly fast, but she didn't know exactly how accelerated her progress was. "I know she's smart."

"Not merely smart," the older lady interjected. "Really, really smart. I've been working with kids all my life, and it's rare to find a four-year-old with an ability to learn like Jeanie. She has a great gift, Ms. Blake."

"Really?" Motherly satisfaction swelled, but she had to give Aidan due credit. Jeanie's father was widely considered a genius.

“Absolutely,” Ms. Caspian confirmed. “Which is why I wanted to tell you about an opportunity. Pine Ridge has a very skilled educator who has worked with gifted children for decades. Sue Johnson runs a special class for young children with an advanced capacity for learning.”

“I’ve heard of her.” The paper did a story on her a few years back. Utilizing innovative techniques such as hands-on demonstrations and computer-based learning, Ms. Johnson had cultivated scores of successful children, in a curriculum both adults and kids adored. Each year, hundreds of parents tried to get their children into the program, but because Ms. Johnson insisted on individualized classes, she only accepted a handful. Laura’s smile faded, however, when she remembered why she hadn’t tried to enroll Jeanie in the first place. “The price...”

“Is expensive,” Ms. Caspian admitted. “She charges a lot for her classes, but if you can afford it, the benefits are well worth it. I didn’t know if you could handle the cost, but I wanted to mention it to you. Jeanie would have a great chance at getting in.”

Laura pursed her lips. Jeanie may get in, but she could never afford it. Thanking the lady for her time and promising to think about it, Laura left the office and called to Jeanie. The little girl raced to her, and hand in hand they walked to the car.

Not even her daughter talking sixty miles a minute could lift Laura’s spirits as she drove home. Would she be cheating her child if she didn’t reveal the truth to Aidan, who could easily afford to give Jeanie all the opportunities in the world? Would she be depriving her of not just a father, but her birthright? It was yet another reason to tell him.

Laura forced away her ponderings as they arrived home. The time had grown late, and they would have to hurry. As she ushered Jeanie into the house, her phone beeped with a missed voicemail, and her smile gave way to a grimace. The call had come in hours ago. The antiquated phone didn’t seem particularly concerned about giving her messages in a timely message. She dialed into voicemail, put the phone on speaker and placed it on the table as she jogged into Jeanie’s room to

retrieve the tee-ball outfit. “Ready to get dressed?” she asked her laughing daughter.

“Nope!” Her daughter playfully took off across the room. “First you have to catch me.”

Despite the tumultuous day, Laura laughed. These were the precious moments that made everything worthwhile. “Here I come!” she said in a dramatic voice, but her progress was suddenly stopped by two words drifting in from the living room:

Tee-Ball

And

Cancelled.

Laura raced into the living room and pressed the repeat button on the phone. The coach’s lighthearted voice belied the disastrous message. “Ms. Blake, this is Coach Dave from Jeanie’s Tee-Ball Team. Today’s game has been cancelled due to the weather. Sorry for the late notice, but the field is soaked. See you next week.”

Laura sank down to the couch. How had she not realized the game would be postponed? She’d been so preoccupied with the businessman she hadn’t anticipated the obvious. Now Aidan was due to arrive in forty minutes, and unless she could think of something quick, he would be greeted by his long-lost daughter.

“Is everything all right, Mommy?” Jeanie skipped into the room.

Laura opened her arms for her rosy-cheeked daughter. She smelled of cinnamon and love. “Everything is fine, honey, except your game has been cancelled. Mommy has to work today, so I’m going to find a baby-sitter.”

“All right, Mommy.”

Laura’s heart sank as her daughter’s eyes turned glassy and she blinked back sadness. She was trying to be a big girl, but she had been looking forward to that game. “I’ll tell you what. Remember that big sticker album you picked out for your

birthday? I'll let you play with it now, even though it's not your birthday yet."

Immediately, the smile returned, pure happiness restored. In an instant she was gone, intent on a thousand and one stickers. Laura wasted no time, grabbing the phone and commencing the arduous task of finding a babysitter on negative thirty minutes notice.

Her mother had a doctor's appointment and Candace was working, so those were not options. Laura swiped down her address book and called every person she trusted with her child, but after six phone calls, four answering machines and two denials, she was no closer to success. The clock read 12:35, and disaster loomed nearer with every second. Although she was seriously considering telling Aidan the truth, he couldn't find out on his own. If he met the little girl, he might notice the resemblance.

She had only one more name to go. If this call was negative, she would have no other option. Dialing the number, she waited as the phone rang and rang. She was just about to hang up when a voice answered with a friendly, "Hello."

"Nancy!" Laura greeted her teenage neighbor, a friendly seventeen-year old who babysat when her normal sitters weren't available. Laura asked if she could come immediately, offering twice the normal rate. She would pay twenty times if necessary. She literally jumped in joy when Nancy said she'd be there in ten minutes. Laura thanked her and hung up the phone.

She took a quick detour to check on her daughter. Jeanie was happily sitting in the middle of her room, placing stickers on every piece of furniture and on the walls. She could only focus on one disaster at a time, so she slowly closed the door and let the girl have her fun. She raced to the kitchen to write out a list of information for the babysitter, cringing at the mess. As soon as Nancy arrived, she would attack the disaster in whatever time remained before Aidan's arrival.

Everything would be just fine.

AIDAN PAUSED outside the simple pine door, stopping to gaze at a handmade wreath of fabric pink flowers and plastic purple hearts. Gold glitter paint proclaimed, "Welcome to our home," in childlike sprawl, accompanied by an array of hearts, stars and flowers. He couldn't stop a small smile as he admired the creative craft. Although simple, it was impressive, especially since Laura's daughter was only four years old. Didn't children usually learn to write when they were older?

He had learned when he was three.

A ruckus from inside the house broke into his wonderings, footsteps pounding, feminine mutterings. His smile widened as he imagined Laura racing around, getting ready for their meeting. He made her nervous, that was obvious, despite her attempts to hide it. So much more had been apparent, namely his undignified attraction to her. Hopefully further meetings would elucidate where it would lead... and what he would do about it.

He looked at his watch. A few minutes early, just as he planned. Until she shared everything with him, he intended to keep her off-balance. He wanted to catch her when she least expected it. He would start by discovering if she was hiding anything in that quaint little home of hers.

He stood tall, unable to stop the anticipation at seeing her again. Time for another round, and this time he anticipated victory. He gave three swift knocks to the door.

CHAPTER 5



She knocking was literal music to her ears. As Laura crisscrossed the house like an out-of-control pinball, preparing food and activities for Jeanie and the babysitter, she said a silent thank you that her teenage rescuer had made it, and without a moment to spare. She stuck her head into Jeanie's room. "Honey, Nancy's here."

Jeanie, who was a big fan of her "honorable big sister," hopped up with a squeal, then bounded after her mother in the living room. Laura ran to get her keys. "I'll be right there, Nancy."

"Who?"

Laura froze at the voice that resonated through the door.

Because the voice did not belong to the babysitter.

Nor to any of the million people she would not have minded seeing...

Including the boogeyman...

No, the man right outside, separated by only a thin door from the daughter he'd never met, was none other than Aidan Bancroft.

"It's Aidan. Aren't you going to let me in?"

Breathe. Don't panic. It's going to be okay. She sucked in a breath of heavy air, whipping around like a fox cornered by a hungry wolf. She needed to think rationally to come up with a plan, and she had about fifteen seconds before Aidan became

suspicious. Heck, he probably already was suspicious. Then... an idea formed.

It was foolhardy. It was risky. It was unlikely to work.

It was all she had.

“Aidan, you’re early. Give me two minutes?” she called out.

“Can I wait inside?”

“No!” she yelped. Now *she* sounded like the bogeyman. She calmed her voice. “I mean, I’ll be ready in just a minute. Hold on.”

Laura faced her daughter, who had been observing the whole situation quietly. “Is it a game?” the girl asked.

Although she hated lying to her little girl, this wasn’t the sort of situation you could explain to a four-year-old. *I’m sorry, sweetie, but I don’t want your exceedingly hot daddy to meet you before I properly vet him.* “Yes, it’s a game,” Laura agreed. “And this is how we’re going to play. I want you to go into your room.”

“Like hide-and-seek?” Jeanie jumped up and down, eyes wide with excitement. “That’s my favorite.”

Right now, it was her favorite, too. “Exactly, like hide-and-seek. Now be very quiet. The game is to not let my friend see you. Then Nancy will come over, and you can play hide-and-seek with her. Sound like fun?”

“Sounds aww-some!” Jeanie smiled brightly as she spun around and bounced towards her room.

“But remember, unless it’s an emergency, you can’t let him see you, okay?” Laura called after the rapidly disappearing girl. “I won’t leave until Nancy comes.”

“I know, Mommy,” Jeanie replied in an insulted tone. “I’m a big girl.”

Even in the dire circumstances, Laura chuckled at her daughter’s indignant comment. Breathing in courage, she made her way to the door. She turned the silver lock, poised

for the performance of her life, when suddenly she stopped, and slowly pivoted. Two dozen photographs of Jeanie stared back at her, on every corner and wall, every table and countertop, with likenesses bearing a clear resemblance to Aidan. He might not recognize her, but if he did...

With desperation-fueled movements, she sprinted from the door, swiping up picture frames and photo mugs, personalized plaques and photographic mementos, tearing them from walls and removing them from mantles. She didn't have time to go to every room, of course, but hopefully she could conceal all the obvious evidence in the main room.

"What's going on in there?" Aidan called from the door. "You started to unlock the door a moment ago. Did you change your mind?"

The amusement in his voice buoyed her. Perhaps he would forget to be suspicious. *Yeah right.* The man suspected every move she made. "I'm not leaving," he confirmed. "You can't get rid of me that easily."

When he found out the truth, she would *never* get rid of him.

When everything and anything with a likeness of Jeanie had been stashed in the closet, she surveyed the room. It looked somewhat odd, with picture-less nails protruding from walls and random empty spaces on shelves, but hopefully he wouldn't notice. She returned to the door, and undoing the latch, finally opened it. And unwittingly...

Her world halted.

Leaning against the doorframe, the tall and handsome Aidan Bancroft was larger than life and sexier than the last actor to win the best actor nod. He wore a dark button-down shirt and a rugged pair of blue jeans, stretched tight over well-defined muscles. The sleeves were pulled up, revealing powerful arms and corded biceps. His chest was solid and expansive, his stance strong and determined. He towered tall, with a body that was just... perfect.

His eyes, mysterious like the deep blue midnight sea, darkened as he stared at her. A slight noise from Jeanie's room broke the spell, and Laura shook her head. "Come in."

Aidan, however, didn't move. "It's strange, isn't it?" he said quietly.

Laura gulped from a mouth suddenly like sandpaper, resisted the urge to squirm under his perusal. "What is?"

"This thing between us."

"I don't know what you're talking ab—"

"Don't bother denying it, not to yourself and certainly not to me. I can tell by the way you look at me you feel the same thing."

She swallowed. "So we're attracted to each other. It's lust. Happens every day between millions of men and women. It doesn't mean anything."

"If it doesn't mean anything, do you mind if I try something?" He didn't wait for an answer. He didn't explain.

He kissed her.

A tender caress, a gentle demand for surrender, the kiss was a sweet delicacy, a treat to savor. Laura melted into the man before her, losing herself as the emotions of the last few days assaulted her in blinding succession. The kiss was the language she used in a catharsis of emotion, an unspoken connection that transcended earthly bonds. A rock solid expanse of muscles pressed against her, his hardness an electrifying foil to her softness. Inch for inch, breath for breath, their skin touched, intimate pressure in intimate places. Then...

Reality hit.

It took all her willpower, but Laura pulled away from the kiss. Her cheeks flamed with heat, her skin the same, as they locked eyes with a million unsaid words. "That was a really bad idea." Her voice wavered with emotion she couldn't hide. "There's too much between us."

His eyes narrowed, his control regained, his expression unreadable. “What things?”

“No things... I mean nothing.” And *no one* he could know of, at least not yet. “I meant there can’t be anything between us.”

Challenging eyes belied every word. He may have rights to his daughter, yet he had none to her. Only his power blazed, staking a claim. “There’s some reason behind your confusing behavior, some logic that will make everything clear. I can’t see it yet.” He lowered his voice. “But I will.”

He just might. She fought not to retreat as he stepped toward her, his gaze sharpening as he glanced behind her into the home. “What are you hiding?”

“I’m not hiding anything.” Now she stepped back and gestured him forward, into the small apartment that had been his daughter’s home her entire life. Precisely three seconds later (a.k.a. three seconds too late), she remembered the morning’s mess. “Wait!” But it was too late. Aidan blinked at the disaster of a kitchen, pausing on the egg-covered wallpaper and ceiling, the flour coated furnishings and the still damp floor.

He opened his mouth. Nothing came out. She opened her mouth. Nothing also came out. She had to come up with some explanation. “Have you heard of the bogeyman?”

Yeah, she actually said that.

“I’m sorry, did you just say—”

“I did not.”

“But I heard you—”

“Exactly.”

So, now he thought she believed in the bogeyman and liked to paint the ceiling with pancake batter. In other words, *unhinged*. As a distraction, it wasn’t half bad.

Rustling suddenly sounded from Jeanie’s bedroom. Aidan pivoted, his mirth vanished in an instant, his posture traded for a warrior’s stance. She’d read on the Internet he’d gotten his

black belt in three forms of martial arts. “Is someone else here?” He scanned the surroundings, his gaze catching on the scarred, pictureless walls. “Didn’t you say your daughter was at a sports game?”

Laura’s heart stopped. Momentarily. “Yes, I did, and, yes, she is, but I didn’t hear anything.”

This time the rustling was accompanied by a light gasp. His gaze sharpened, as he turned to the source of the noise, his *child*. “Is someone else in the house?”

Her heart made up for the momentary stumble by slamming into her chest wall. No way would he believe that was the bogeyman. “Of course not. Well, maybe there is. Yes, of course. It’s the... um... the cat.”

Aidan stared. “The what?”

“The cat. That’s what the noise must have been.” She leaned against the arm of the sofa, jumped up when something yellow and gooey smeared the underside of her legs. “She’s always scurrying around.”

“Is she also responsible for the kitchen?” Aidan squinted at the counter. “Wait a moment. Is that batter spilled in the shape of a heart?”

“She’s a very creative cat.” She closed her eyes, opened them to stark incredulity and blatant suspicion. At least the cat was better a better excuse than an unlikely tale that involved the bogeyman’s time at Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts. Of course, she could say it was Jeanie, however the less they spoke of their daughter, the better. Thankfully, he extrapolated a plausible, if unlikely, culprit.

“I see.” Aidan stepped forward, his shoes booming on the tile floor, as he perused the smorgasbord of scattered food. He placed his hand on an open cookbook lying on the counter. “No wonder your cat made such a mess.” He smiled. “She tried to make pancakes.”

Perhaps now would be a good time to attempt the bogeyman story. Laura forced her lips into a smile. “Don’t be ridiculous.” She not-so-discreetly wiped the counter with a

napkin, mostly managed to spread the goo instead. “This might seem a little strange, but there’s a perfectly reasonable explanation.”

“I’m sure there is.” He folded his arms across his chest. *Perfect.* Apparently, he was under the impression she had that perfectly reasonable explanation.

“Which is...” What could she say? “It was... it was me!”

Aidan halted. Just stood perfectly still. She may have broken him. “Excuse me?”

It was time for Nancy to arrive like her knight in shining jeans. She stammered on, “I mean it was me who was cooking. That’s it. I was going to make pancakes. Had all the ingredients out, and Jeanie came and got it everywhere. That’s what happened.”

Laura froze. Had she just mentioned her daughter’s name? The daughter that was supposedly out?

Yep.

“I thought Jeanie was at tee-ball, and the cat did this.” Aidan was now viewing her as if she were the bogeyman. “You seem to be having trouble keeping *your* story straight.”

Clearly, he knew she was lying. Might as well dig herself in a little deeper. “I meant Jeanie the cat.”

He rubbed his jaw. “Did you just say Jeanie the cat?”

Yup. It seemed so.

His lips twitched. “Let me get this straight. Both your daughter and your cat are named Jeanie.”

She tried to chuckle, sounded like she was choking on eggshell-filled cake batter instead. “I really like the name.”

He peered at her like she’d grown a few extra heads, one of them a cat. Time to steer the conversation to more neutral matters. “So now that that’s settled, Mr. Ban – Aidan – why don’t I ask you some questions about Bancroft Enterprises?”

“I don’t think so.”

She swallowed. Perhaps she hadn't gotten away with anything.

"I never discuss business on an empty stomach. First we eat, then we talk."

She exhaled relief. Of course, he wouldn't forget about the disastrous conversation, but at least she'd earned a temporary reprieve. She took a step towards the door, but halted. What was she thinking? They couldn't leave until Nancy arrived. Now how was she going to explain that? "I'm not really hungry."

He shrugged. "All right. Let's go for a walk first."

Time for equally-unlikely-to-work plan B. "Why don't we just talk here?" she suggested.

He glanced at the egg-covered sofa and floured chairs. The buttery table and sugar-splattered floor. He must think she was as nuts as the almonds pooled in the toaster. Should she offer him the seat with egg yolk or ask if he preferred the egg whites for a lower-cholesterol option?

"Laura?" His soft voice did nothing to hide the power underneath. "Why do I get the feeling you're trying to keep me here?"

She laughed. "Don't be silly. Why would I want to do that?" In an instant, she catalogued and discarded a dozen hopeless excuses, then a dozen more. She froze, as movement caught the corner of her eye. The door to her daughter's bedroom, closed a second ago, now stood wide open. And tiptoeing out, right in back of Aidan, was the daughter he didn't know existed.

She couldn't move. Couldn't speak. Her daughter grinned in precocious mischief, and when she saw her mother, put her finger to her lips in a "shhh" motion. This was worse than the pancake debacle. Jeanie was playing hide-and-seek.

"What are you looking at?" Like a horror movie slow motion reel, he started to turn...

"Stop!"

He hesitated, but only for a second. Luckily, the delay was enough. Jeanie slid into the hallway unnoticed.

The man, however, was not to be deterred. He stepped toward the corridor, bringing him inches away from his tiny doppelganger. In a moment, he would come face to face with his child.

No. Every motherly instinct propelled Laura forward. She lunged to the towering man and grabbed his hand. Immediately he grasped her back, turning from captive to captor, prey to predator. Her daughter soundlessly dashed from the corridor and crawled under the coffee table mere feet away.

“What’s going on?” His eyes flashed fire. “Is someone there?” He didn’t turn... yet. In another moment he would scour the entire house, discovering his daughter and the truth that would redefine their lives. If only there was a way to distract him. Unless...

Angling around so that her – their – daughter could not see them, she pressed her lips to his.

The kiss was neither hesitant nor shy, neither tentative nor cautious, but bold and brave, courageous and daring. She rubbed her hands over thick muscles, as he seized control, his lips caressing her own, warm, soft and oh-so-inviting. Passion flared like a shooting star, fervor given and received. Pure strength enveloped her, white lightning as he boldly grasped her waist. Throughout her body, cells fired with heightened sensuality and excitement. It was as if she could read his emotions, his confusion, his struggle for understanding, the same feelings tormenting her. But more than anything, the kiss was *delicious*.

A noise sounded, a chiming breaking through the rapid drumming of her heart. The doorbell, she realized a second and eternity later, giving her the control she so easily lost around her child’s father. She pulled back and murmured through swollen lips, “Simple lust.”

His eyes burned passion, challenge and *suspicion*. “No.” He moved forward, crowding her and asserting his control.

“Not lust and not simple, and, despite how you’re acting, not illogical. Before this is over, I will understand.” He focused on the lips he had plied moments ago. “*Everything.*”

Her breath hitched. With every minute, exposure was more likely – whether she wanted it or not. Without looking back, she walked stiffly to the door and opened it to reveal her slightly tardy savior. Nancy smiled brightly in a concert t-shirt and blue cut-off jeans. “Ms. Blake, I am so, so sorry,” the young girl spoke before Laura could stop her. “I was just about to leave, but I couldn’t find my keys, and then...”

“That’s all right.” Laura held up her hands to stop her before she said anything *more* incriminating.

“Where is...”

“The supplies you need? Everything is on the counter. Instructions as well as emergency contact numbers. I am available 24-7.” Laura cast a sideways glance at Aidan. He studied her in pensive silence.

“And where is?”

“My most treasured possession? Under the coffee table. Don’t ask. Any questions – call me. Bye!”

With that, Laura took Aidan’s hand and tugged him toward, through and *out* the door, before Nancy could ask if he’d yet met his long-lost daughter. He allowed it, since she wouldn’t have budged him otherwise. As they exited the home and then the building, choices and chances returned, yet her relief soon died. Wearing a tight expression, Aidan stared straight ahead, his determination as powerful as the hand now gripping her. That had been disastrous. What lie was she going to tell to get out of this one?

WHAT LIE WAS she going to tell to get out of this one?

Aidan gazed at the woman before him, amidst endless mystification, confusion and suspicion. She’d lied about nearly everything in the last few minutes, but why? What was she hiding?

The kisses were even more confusing than her nonsensical actions. They piqued emotions he couldn't hide, far beyond desire and attraction, a connection transcending the physical. She claimed lust, but that bode a stark understatement. Despite their confusing interactions, he wanted to spend more time with her.

Mine.

Wait, what?

"I suppose you're wondering what happened back there," Laura called back casually as she galloped down the stairs. She seemed desperate to flee her apartment and the past, both futile endeavors. Didn't she realize she couldn't escape him?

He didn't say a word, just nodded. Best to let her say *too* much.

"Well..." She paused, her scheming obvious as she concocted a story to hide the truth. "Nancy is my... my housekeeper. She comes once a week to clean the place."

It took iron discipline to hide his laughter. She'd hired a teenage groupie to be her maid? He didn't think so. "Really?"

She licked dry lips, which brought his attention to her mouth, which made him remember the kiss, which made him think about what else he'd like to... He forced his gaze back to her face, as she continued her *story*. "Well, she's a student, too. She just cleans for extra money."

"All right. Let's say that part is true." He said it in a tone that clearly stated *he* didn't believe it was true. "What did you mean about your most treasured possession being under the coffee table?"

"Why the floor, of course."

He choked back laughter. "The floor?"

"Well, the apartment. My most treasured possession is my home. So where do you want to go?" They had reached Laura's car, and the little tale-spinner was clearly eager to change the subject.

He wasn't about to let her. "Wait a minute. I would've thought your most treasured possession would be your..." He stopped at an impossible thought. No, it couldn't be. It couldn't have been...

Her daughter.

But it must have been, he realized, as she stared at him with eyes as wide as the saucers that had been scattered around her kitchen. And now everything made sense. Her daughter must have caused the mess – she had said as much when she accidentally said her name. And that teenager wasn't the housekeeper; she was the babysitter. Laura had done it all to avoid him meeting her daughter. But why?

He studied her, for once without anger-tinted suspicion. And without the resentment, her emotions became clear, her motives obvious:

She was terrified.

She was a mother protecting her child, a parent desperate to safeguard her baby. Though he resented that she shielded Jeanie from him – he would never take his anger out on a child – a hesitant respect bloomed. The anger he had built like a wartime fort cracked. "Do you think I would hurt your child?"

A thousand emotions fluttered across her face: shock, denial, resignation. Without words she confirmed his accurate guess.

"Laura, I would never hurt a child. Never." He drew a deep breath. No matter what had transpired, he couldn't let her believe her family was in danger. "You can't hide her forever. I'm staying in town, at least for a little while. At some point I'm going to meet her."

She paled, closed bright eyes. Opened them and swallowed heavily. "I know you wouldn't physically harm her. It's just you're so furious. You might say something, confuse her..."

"No." He shook his head curtly. "I would never do that. Even though I'm not a fa..." His voice trailed off, and he looked into the fathomless sky. "I know what's appropriate to say in front of a child. If I saw her, I would've ruffled her hair

and told her to get to work on that kitchen at once.” Before conscious thought, he added, “Then I probably would’ve offered to make pancakes with her.” At Laura’s surprised look, he stopped, and memories started to swirl, memories of the plans he had once made. His hopes, his dreams, his *baby*. He cleared an acrid throat. “Now that it’s settled, I expect Jeanie to greet me at the door next time I visit. Got it?”

Her eyes widened with pure fear. It elicited an unexpected twinge of guilt, towards this woman who wasn’t nearly as heartless as she first appeared. Yet her secrets still threatened him. “As I’ve promised, I will find out anything involving me, including the real reason you visited my home and the mysterious source who shared my deepest secret. Are you sure there’s nothing you want to tell me?” This time she hesitated before shaking her head. He was getting to her. “Come on then, I’ll give you a break from driving.”

Together they walked toward the guest parking lot. “Do you like to drive?” she asked into the uncomfortable silence.

“Yes, but not today.”

Before she could ask him to elaborate, he stopped in front of a long black limo, gleaming in the sun. When she hesitated, he leaned down and whispered, “Don’t worry, my dear. I don’t bite. However, if you’d prefer, I can do my investigation without your cooperation.”

Her eyes blazed in challenge, but they both knew the truth. What he wanted he got.

He was beginning to realize what – or rather whom – he wanted.

CHAPTER 6



There was no choice.

If Laura didn't agree, no doubt Aidan would follow her home and meet his long-lost daughter. So she ignored her uneasiness as a crisp, suit-clad man opened the door to a luxurious vehicle that cost more than some houses, and climbed into the billionaire's gilded world once more. She sank into a plush row of butter leather seating, surrounded by a tempting concoction of new car scent and Aidan's spicy aroma. The cherry wood cabin glittered with blue ambient lighting, amidst multiple HD screens and a mini-bar filled with hundred dollar bottles of wine. At any other time, a limo ride would have been a rare treat, but now it only served to heighten her nerves. Was it part of a strategy to intimidate her so she would submit to his interrogation?

Or did he want her to submit in other ways?

The mutinous query burned as memories of the passionate kiss flooded her senses. She pushed it away and turned to her host. She needed to direct the conversation. "Thank you for the ride. Any ideas on where you want to eat?"

"I was going to ask you for suggestions. You're the local – anywhere worth exploring?"

My lips. My neck. My–

She cleared her throat as white-hot heat sizzled against blazing skin. Did he realize what he did to her? "What are you in the mood for?" *She knew what she was hungry for: Aidan Bancroft.*

What in the world was the matter with her? Was she having some sort of delusional episode brought on by stress? Had she truly lost her mind?

“Do you want the truth?”

Unwilling to risk another word, she nodded.

“I’m usually showered with so many glitzy restaurants and expensive meals, I can’t identify half of what I eat.” He gave a soft grin. “What I could use right now is some good old-fashioned pizza.”

Laura relaxed. “That sounds perfect. Delicious, simple and quick. And you’re in luck. Pine Ridge happens to have the best pizza parlor in seven states.”

“I knew the people of this town were harboring a deep dirty secret.”

He had no idea.

In Pine Ridge, nothing was far, and they arrived at Wild Harry’s Pizza Parlor in less than ten minutes. Aidan got out of the car and helped her disembark, eliciting a shiver as he captured her small hand in his large one, hesitating for a moment before releasing her. The afternoon was bright and brilliant, as they surveyed the small but colorful restaurant. Crafted of sturdy red bricks but covered in paint of all colors, it looked more like a circus tent than a diner, but looks were deceiving. She had truly never tasted better pizza.

Her guest studied the restaurant with a dubious expression, but she boldly grabbed his arm. “It’s not how it looks,” she promised as she led him forward. “Just sit down and wait to be amazed.”

He looked down at where she grasped him, but didn’t say a word. She let go, smoothing her hands on her clothing. What had gotten into her? When they joked, somehow she forgot they were rivals, at least for the moment. He was determined to uncover the secret she desperately needed to keep, at least until she determined the path forward. Thus far he seemed honorable, but she needed to learn more before giving him the power to change her life.

They entered a brightly colored dining room with round Formica tables and puffy red cushioned chairs. The carpet was the same as when she'd been a kid, a bold mix of neon yellow, bright orange and purple, and the walls were covered in hundreds of snapshots of family and friends, in a cornucopia of mismatched frames. Country music played softly from an old-fashioned jukebox in the corner, and the room smelled like freshly baked bread.

A sign directed patrons to seat themselves, so they found a booth in the corner, next to windows that showcased the parking lot, a quilt shop and a small Pinball arcade. Aidan held out her chair, then sat down on the opposite seat. A teenage waiter wearing a red shirt and a foam pizza on top of his head presented them with menus. Aidan's lips curled up, but he graciously made no mention of the preposterous headgear. With a promise to be back soon, the waiter left.

Aidan chuckled. "The best pizza in seven states?"

"Don't let the hat fool you," she warned. "This place might be a little strange on style, but the pizza is a masterpiece. I bet none of your fancy restaurants have pizza hats."

"Unfortunately not." He put down his men, and his expression turned sly. "Do you think they'll sell me one?"

"They might," she replied seriously. "If you're good, maybe I could help. I know people."

They both laughed. She opened her mouth to say more, but their conversation was interrupted by two young girls with curly red hair and bountiful freckles, walking shyly to their table. "Mr. Bancroft?" the older of the girls, clearly sisters, inquired.

"That's me." Aidan gave the children a friendly smile. "What can I do for you?"

"I...we were wondering if you would give a quote for our school newspaper," the taller girl started with a slightly flushed face. "We're doing a story on your company, and it would be really cool if we actually had something from you. I

know you're really busy answering questions from real reporters, but, well, do you think you would mind?"

Laura stayed quiet as Aidan interacted with the girls. More than anything, she needed to see his actions, especially around children. With a kind smile, Aidan nodded warmly. "It would be an honor to give quotes to the two *real* reporters before me." He asked if they had any specific questions, and not only did he answer every one, but expanded beyond. He thanked the girls, and minutes later, they left with broad smiles.

She liked what she'd seen. A lot. As a reporter, she dealt with many celebrities who were arrogant and self-consumed, and not very patient with children. Point one for Aidan. One conversation could not elucidate his fathering ability, however, thus it was time to start asking questions. The girls provided the perfect opportunity to enter this difficult topic. "You get along well with kids."

He looked up sharply, but before he could respond, the waiter returned, carrying a bowl of steaming rolls smothered with thick pieces of roasted garlic and fresh Parmesan cheese. Laura grimaced at the poor timing as the waiter pulled out a pad and asked for their order. She quickly conversed with Aidan, and they ordered a large pizza with tomatoes, onions and extra cheese and a pitcher of soda. When the waiter left, Laura looked expectantly at Aidan.

She did not need to repeat the question. Briefly, he answered, "Yes."

She waited, but he did not elaborate. She'd have to tread lightly on this sensitive subject. "Do you like children?" she asked casually.

The expression on his face became unreadable, his eyes deadly serious. The playfulness of earlier disappeared, all traces of levity gone. "Yes," he said quietly, "I like children." For a brief second he closed his eyes, as if fighting to keep control.

A wave of guilt paralyzed her. Was he was remembering his lost child, the one taken from him at nearly the same time of Jeanie's conception? How could she uncover his feelings

toward children and not overwhelm him with painful memories? Perhaps a different approach would work.

“I was a goody two-shoes when I was a kid,” she confided. “But sometimes it got me into trouble, like the time I decided to paint the den because my mom’s favorite color was blue. I snuck downstairs in the middle of the night, armed with my entire art set. When I ran out of blue, I didn’t think she’d mind if I added in some – well, all the other – colors. I was six.”

The pain in Aidan’s expression softened. “Was she impressed?”

Laura smiled at the memory. “As much as you’d expect, especially since washable paints weren’t popular back then. But she didn’t even punish me.”

“She knew you were trying to do something good. It makes sense.” He shrugged. “If it had been me, I probably would’ve signed you up for art classes.”

She smiled at the perfect answer. Many would have called for severe punishment, despite the intentions. Instead, he would’ve encouraged her talents.

“I assume you get along well with your family,” he asked before she could pose the next question.

She meant to respond with “fine,” instead gave the far more honest, “Sort of.” He cocked his head to the side, and without conscious thought, she elaborated, “Actually, I get along great with most of the family. It’s just my dad. He doesn’t quite get me.” She stopped. Why had she revealed so much? At least she hadn’t shared the real reason for the discord – her decision to have Jeanie on her own. She pressed forward, “What about yours?”

Aidan’s lips lifted in a warm smile. “My family is great. Big and boisterous. I’m one of eight.”

“Wow.” Laura sipped her ice water. “One of you is pretty impressive. I can’t imagine seven more.”

He chuckled. “We’re a handful, but really close. Most are married with kids now.” He shook his head, a sliver of sorrow appearing and disappearing in an instant. It spread to her,

sadness for his great loss. It was joined by something else, however, equally as strong. He might not know it, but his dream had already come true.

He was a father.

She was about to pose the next question when her phone vibrated. Her hand hovered over the silence button when her parents' number flashed. "I'm sorry, I have to answer this." When he gestured for her to go ahead, she accepted the call and turned away. "Hi Mom, what's going on?"

"Actually, it's Dad."

She parted her lips. Her father hadn't called in months. With Aidan listening to every word, she held the phone closer, "Hey, Dad, is everything okay? How are you feeling?"

"As well as can be expected, I suppose. I hate you ask you this, but I have an appointment tomorrow morning at the hospital and was wondering... well, could you take me? Your mom usually does it, but an old friend is coming to town, and they hoped to see that new play at the community center. You can just drop me off, and Mom can pick me up when she's done. I wouldn't ask but it took a month to get this appointment."

It was the first favor her dad had asked for in a year. "Of course. I could visit the volunteer office at the hospital while I am there."

"Thank you. I appreciate it." He gave her the appointment information and then paused. Was there something else, something to bridge the chasm between them? A second later, the phone clicked dead. So much for a bonding family moment.

But, still, it was a start.

"Sorry about that." Laura returned the phone to her purse. "I'm helping my dad with something."

For a moment Aidan didn't say a word, studying her as if trying to solve a puzzle. He clasped his hands together. "You volunteer at the hospital?"

Laura flushed. “Yeah, a couple of times a week.”

“What do you do?”

She waved her hand. “Nothing too vital. I spend time with patients, play cards, read, that sort of stuff. Now tell me about—”

He didn’t let her finish. “You underestimate just how vital those things are. That includes helping your dad, even though you don’t get along.”

Her flush deepened. “It’s not a big deal. Our relationship isn’t really that bad, and now I’m hoping...” She stopped. “Never mind.” The questioning had gone far enough, especially amidst the unbidden urge to share all with him. If she let something slip, it could be disastrous.

Unfortunately, he switched to an even more sensitive topic. “I’m surprised there’s no Mr. Laura.” His eyes shone. “At least I assume there isn’t from the peck on the cheek we shared back there.”

Forget the flush. Now she was as red as the marinara sauce on the pizza. “Peck on the cheek? Is that what that was?”

His lips tugged up. “More or less.”

Actually more. Much, much more. “I would have to disagree with that classification.”

“Should we repeat it to see who is right?” he drawled. “All in the name of journalistic integrity, of course.”

A hundred “yesses” boiled her blood. Thankfully before she could jump over the table, bend him back and plant what was definitely not a peck on the cheek, the waiter returned, and this time his timing was perfect. She departed the land of what-ifs and focused on the oversized pizza pie on the table, steaming with the aroma of fresh mozzarella, basil and oregano. When he left, she answered with a simple, “Definitely not.”

He chuckled, smoothly cutting slices, first for her, and then for himself. “You seem like the type of woman who would

have men lining up at the door. Tell me the truth. Is it Jeanie?" Laura stiffened, but his gaze didn't waver. "You know, the culinary cat?"

That difficult, conniving, handsom... um... man. "You figured it out. They're intimidated by a pancake-making cat who whips up a mean soufflé." She smiled slightly, twisting the piping hot dough in her hands. "But actually, I just haven't found Mr. Right."

"And what do you look for in Mr. Right?"

With every question, he delved deeper into the personal life he didn't know they shared. Why was he interested? Why did she care? "Smart, kind, caring. Why do you want to know?"

"It's something people always ask me." He shrugged as he bit into his pizza. "Don't tell me you weren't going to ask."

"All right," she replied, nerves sparking courage. "What do you look for in a woman?"

"I thought I already showed what I prefer. However, maybe I need to clarify things." His expression, and voice, turned pure predator. "I'm used to getting what I desire, Laura. I want this information from you, and rest assured, I will get it. But now, I'm not so sure I don't want something else as well."

Her heart accelerated. This man got what he wanted. Was he saying he wanted her?

She needed to change the subject... now. "I'm assuming from our... kiss... there is no serious lady right now. And of course, it goes unsaid that a million women would love the position. Is the great Aidan Bancroft looking?"

He grinned, and a lock of golden brown hair fell across his forehead. She resisted the urge to touch the silky locks. "Not looking," he responded, "no matter what social media says. However, I'm always open to possibilities."

Her heart fluttered at the suggestion, the *possibilities*. She wouldn't acknowledge unspoken implications, neither in fervent denial nor in enthusiastic acceptance. "So tell me more about the manufacturing processes of your newest hardware."

He laughed softly, recognizing the distraction for what it was. “You won’t escape forever.”

No, she wouldn’t.

She was grateful when he answered the question, turning the conversation to less personal matters. She could only ask so much in one night without spooking him, and his sojourn into her life was dangerous. Fortunately, even small talk could give some insight into the man behind the billions.

As they talked over the pizza, which Aidan admitted was the best in *eight* states, her tension eased. They discussed dozens of subjects, from local affairs to large international matters. As expected, Aidan was intelligent and knowledgeable, but also unexpectedly humorous and witty. The conversation flowed like fine wine, and they never ran out of things to say. Despite their obvious differences, they held the same views in many areas, with similar opinions, especially on important matters. It seemed mere minutes had passed when the clock ticked hours.

She tried to pay the check, standard for reporter/subject meals, but Aidan grabbed the bill before she could get it, refusing to even let her see it. After trying for a full five minutes, she finally gave up. He settled the lunch, and the pair stepped out into the hazy late afternoon sun.

She flexed muscles stiff from sitting for so long. “Now that I’ve proven my pizza-finding powers, I need more information for my article. Where would you like to continue the interview?”

Aidan stood too close *and* too far. “I’m open to anywhere. How about my hotel or your home?”

“No!” Her denial was immediate, and just a little too enthusiastic. Jeanie would be at her house, and the prospect of being in the business mogul’s hotel room just felt... dangerous. She didn’t need another complication in the treacherous situation. She moderated her voice. “There’s a coffee shop I sometimes take colleagues to...”

“What about bowling?”

“Bowling?” Once more, he surprised her. She’d love to do something physical instead of sitting for hours, especially after the pizza, however he seemed more at home in a ritzy gala than a bowling alley.

As usual, he anticipated her thoughts. “Don’t I seem like the type of person who goes bowling?”

Not in a million years. An exotic Parisian café – absolutely, a svelte charity ball – of course, an exclusive club – why not? The *Times* had even reported he visited a royal palace last year. But a bowling alley? Nope.

Before she could give a lighthearted denial, he leaned in. “I lived most of my life as a middle-class, fun-loving albeit overachieving kid. Would you like to go bowling during the interview?”

To a surprising extent. “All right,” she agreed. And somehow she didn’t complain when he took her hand.

After another quick drive, they reached the alley, a modest size mom and pop operation with two dozen gleaming wood lanes. It didn’t have any of the fancy features of the city lanes – you had to keep score with paper and pencil and there was no automatic buzzer to say you fouled – but it was well maintained and brightly decorated. Decades of bowling team pictures and shirts lined the walls, in between gold and silver trophies and plaques. The air was cool and comfortable, and it possessed a slightly musky, but homey odor.

They travelled to the counter, and before she could stop him, Aidan paid for a lane and two pairs of shoes. When the clerk asked for their shoe sizes, Aidan looked directly at her. She couldn’t help but tease. “I don’t believe it. Is there something you don’t know about me?”

He grinned wickedly. “Not for long.”

Like the time at the restaurant, the hours at the bowling alley flew by. She threw question after question at him, which he answered with thoughtful eloquence, although this time they focused mainly on business. While she needed to garner personal information, she had promised her boss a detailed

article by the next morning, plus Aidan might get suspicious if the entirety of the questioning covered children and relationships. He responded in kind, although his questions were of a more personal nature, stopping just short of insolent. They played two surprisingly pleasurable ten frames, and by the time it was over she had all the information she needed. That was, for her article.

The ride back home was quiet, but it was comfortable. Perhaps too much. “Thank you for an educational night,” she said when they pulled into the parking lot of the apartment complex. She grasped her purse, ignoring stark dissatisfaction that the night was coming to an end.

“Educational?” Aidan lifted an eyebrow. “That’s the first time a woman has ever accused me of that. Of course, *People Magazine* did name me as one of their 50 Most Educational People in America, but most women just don’t appreciate it.”

She suppressed a smile. “Thank you for the *lovely* night.” She gazed into sapphire eyes, fought not to lose herself in their captivating depths. If she didn’t leave now, she would do something she would regret, or worse, not regret. She quickly opened the door and climbed out of the limousine. Only... Aidan followed.

Uh-oh. “It’s not necessary to walk me up.”

“Not walk a lady to her apartment? What kind of man do you think I am?” His tone said “non-negotiable.” She hesitated, but only briefly. A protest would raise suspicions, and the exercise would be futile. Jeanie should be asleep now anyways, so as long as he didn’t come in, she should be fine.

Together, they walked up the stairs, then crossed the corridor to her apartment, attraction flaring with every step next to the powerful man. She needed to get inside – and quick. He didn’t say anything as she swiftly unlocked the deadbolt. “Well, goodnight.”

She pulled to open the door, but it didn’t move. His hand rested against it, seemingly relaxed, but with enough power to trap her. He moved closer, yet not close enough. “I haven’t had a chance to ask my question.”

Her heart stuttered. Had he somehow discovered her secret? Was he about to confront her with the truth? “You asked a lot of questions tonight. What else do you need to know?”

“Do you want a kiss as much as I do?”

Oh, yes.

He did not hesitate, and neither did she. He swooped in and captured her. She tried to resist her own traitorous desire, but the soft strokes of his lips and its sensual tenderness forced her surrender. He tasted of spices and nature, of power and strength. She relaxed as he wrapped his arms around her, as he supported them both as passion took hold.

She closed her eyes, yielding to his administrations. He pulled her against his hard and heated body, her petite softness splayed against 6’3” of pure muscle. His touch was everywhere, tracing her curves, branding her as his. How would she ever escape?

It would have been impossible... until he suddenly pulled back. She stared at him, and he at her. He was the first to move, and she stood motionless as he pushed the door. In slow motion, it opened wide, and wider still, until it came completely ajar, its contents for all to see. “Well, look at that,” Aidan said in a whisper.

She couldn’t stop a gasp as she swung her head towards the door. Was it Jeanie? Had he seen his daughter?

But no, the room was blessedly empty, albeit still a mess. She relaxed until he leaned in, his gaze pure desire and *suspicion*. “No matter how you deny it, there’s something between us, and it’s making me even more determined to discover your secrets. I’m going to find out what you’re hiding.” Then he leaned back, and with the grace of a predator, turned and strode away. The world stole her breath as she stood motionless, as he walked downstairs and into the limo. And she continued to watch as he drove away.

I’m going to find out what you’re hiding. Standing out there in the cool night, the words echoed in her mind, without

a doubt, true. Only one question remained:

How long did she have?

CHAPTER 7



“*R*ise and shine, Mommy!”

Laura opened heavy eyes, squinting into a room lit by artificial brilliance. Her wide-awake daughter hovered above her, a beautiful vision with a beaming smile and rosy cheeks. The tiny cutie proudly proclaimed, “Don’t worry, Mommy. I’m not going to let you sleep too long this morning.”

Laura suppressed a groan. Of course, she wouldn’t want to suffer the indignity of sleeping past – what was it – yes, five thirty in the morning. “Honey, it’s not even six. We don’t need to be up quite this early.”

As her daughter’s lower lip jutted out, mommy guilt reared its head. “But I’m proud of you for trying so hard. Would you like to cuddle?”

Her smile renewed, Jeanie scrambled into bed beside her mother, wiggling excitedly under the down comforter. Laura laughed as the precious imp disappeared under the blanket, then popped her head out so only her little face was showing.

She had hoped her daughter would fall back to sleep, but unfortunately four-year-olds, or at least her four-year-old, never slept in. “Are we going to the carnival today, Mommy?”

“We sure are.” Laura smiled as her daughter squealed and clapped. The carnival was a special treat for the children of Pine Ridge. “You’re going with your friends from preschool, remember? Mommy has to work today, but I’ll see you for sure tonight.”

“Promise?” Jeanie held out her pinky.

“Promise.” As Laura pledged on the oh-so-solemn pinky, inwardly she cringed. She had spent more time away from her daughter this week than ever before, a necessary but heartbreaking precaution. Tonight would be all about her and Jeanie. The carnival today, however, would be a complicated endeavor.

Jeanie had been scheduled to go with her preschool, but unfortunately Aidan was also due to attend the day’s festivities as honorary VIP. In a town this small, the chances of him running into Jeanie were anything but miniscule. Although it was impossible to predict what would happen when he set eyes upon his daughter for the first time, she was not yet ready to take that chance. Thus, she planned to accompany Aidan to the carnival, sticking to his side as if her life depended on it, as it very well may. Hopefully, she would be able to steer him clear of Jeanie’s group.

Jeanie and Laura stayed in bed for an hour more, talking about serious topics such as the tastiest ice cream topping of all time (the consensus was ten thousand cherries) and the best way to source ten thousand cherries (the consensus was a pink bulldozer, naturally). As always, Laura inserted educational tidbits into the conversation, which her daughter, always thirsty for knowledge, picked up with ease. At six-thirty, they got out of bed and finally cleaned the kitchen, by now a much more arduous task due to the twenty-four hour delay. Jeanie tried to help, and only managed to slightly lengthen the process. Laura didn’t mind. They spent most of the time laughing.

After the room was returned to some level of decency, Laura asked her daughter if she wanted to make pancakes, for real this time. After an exuberant “Yes!” they had a wonderful time creating fluffy heart-shaped cakes. Moist and buttery, with all sorts of mixings like blueberries and chocolate chips, the pancakes soon filled the house with their sweet aroma. They enjoyed it with fresh Vermont syrup.

They finished their breakfast and headed to the preschool. Laura dropped off Jeanie, then drove to her parents’ house.

Her dad was waiting outside when she arrived, supporting himself heavily on a cane. She helped him into the car.

He didn't bother with a good morning. "You can drop me off in front of the building. The office will send a nurse to help me up."

Laura pulled onto the street and turned towards the hospital. "I don't mind helpi—"

"It's not necessary." He breathed deeply, almost as if restraining himself. "A ride is more than enough."

She clutched the steering wheel tighter. Why couldn't he see she wanted to help? That she wanted things to be better between them. *That she wanted the man who was her first hero to accept her.*

She wouldn't give up. "I never mind helping, Dad. You always went out of your way for me when I was a kid." It invoked precious memories, yet he didn't respond. She pressed on, "Remember the time I lost my baby doll in Pine Ridge Lake? I still can't believe you waded into that green murky water to get it."

A smile, possibly the tiniest in the world, tugged the older man's lips. "What could I do? You cried for hours about little Lulu. Said you'd never sleep again."

"And I meant it," Laura deadpanned.

This actually brought a recognizable smile to his face. "I reckon you did. You always formed deep attachments, especially to things in your care. I remember you talking to your pet goldfish like he could hear you."

"Goldie." Laura smiled at the fond memory. "He was the best goldfish in the world. Remember that time I filled his tank with Evian?"

Now her father actually laughed. It was short and restrained, but it *was* a laugh. Something warm snuggled against Laura's heart. "I nearly burst a gasket. Your mom talked me into buying it for some fancy dinner party and you gave it to the fish. I couldn't believe it."

Laura chuckled, too “Goldie did lead a pampered life.”

“That she did. You always needed to take care of something. The doll, the goldfish, the neighborhood cats. It was in your blood.” They stopped at a red light, and Laura turned. She froze at his expression, without his usual anger, without his typical frustration. He looked as if he was truly trying to see her... and understand.

“I’ve always liked taking care of things,” she said quietly. “I guess it’s just part of me.”

They weren’t talking about a doll anymore, not a goldfish or a stray cat. They were talking about Jeanie, her beautiful daughter, and the decision to bring someone into her life to care for, the most amazing someone in the world. It was the perfect segue, the ideal time to discuss why it had been so necessary to have Jeanie, even if she hadn’t yet found her soul mate. Only she couldn’t bring herself to voice the words, couldn’t take away the small bit of camaraderie that had formed. Thus she didn’t say a word more, nor did her father, as the light turned green, or as they travelled the remaining minutes to the hospital.

Someone was waiting for him outside the door, and in seconds he was whisked into a waiting wheelchair. He gave a gruff thank you as he left, and for a second he just watched her, contemplating, observing. She smiled ever-so-slightly. “Goodbye, Daddy.”

He nodded and was gone.

She felt strangely joyful as she stopped by the volunteer office, like some heavy load was a sliver lighter. Her dad hadn’t looked at her like that in years. Maybe he was finally trying to understand her, to share her perspective. For the first time in endless moments, there was a chance to reform the relationship she believed perished so long ago. She smiled as she made her way to City Hall. Perhaps the impossible was possible after all.

AIDAN WAS PLEASED.

Like an early holiday present, she was there when he arrived, fresh and lovely and more tempting than a fifteen thousand dollar bottle of Henri Jayer Richebourg Grand Cru. She was sitting tightly in the spindle back chair, her eyes unfocused, absently twirling a soft ringlet. How he longed to run his fingers through her hair, to have the right to get close, to comfort her.

Down boy, he commanded, as he approached his skittish quarry. He needed to stay focused, keep his eye on the ultimate goal. First, he needed to discover the secrets she so clearly hid. Then he could figure out why she affected him, and more importantly exactly what to do about it.

She seemed to instinctually know when he took the seat next to her, bringing a surge of satisfaction. He was glad he wore the Armani when her eyes widened. She licked her lips; he resisted the urge to taste them.

“Good morning,” he greeted.

She smiled a hello, and her skin heated to an adorable pink. In stark contrast to the wild and sexy look of the day before, she wore a tame and sophisticated pale pink outfit. She was probably trying to be conservative and had no idea the silk blouse and knee length skirt outlined those delectable curves to perfection.

“I see you’ve gone for a different look today,” he commented. “I liked yesterday’s quite a bit, although you, of course, look stunning in both.”

Her cheeks stained red at the compliment. “You like the I’m-Running-Ridiculously-Late-and-Got-Caught-in-a-Hurricane Look?” She scrunched up her nose.

He laughed. “I thought of it more as a free-spirited look. It suited you.”

“Hi, you two.” They looked up to see Candace, bestowing a smooth smile. Aidan nodded and Laura grinned a greeting, as the mayor placed a hand on the reporter’s shoulder. “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

Laura nodded and rose. As she turned to follow Candace into the hallway, he called after her, “You’re accompanying me to the carnival this afternoon, aren’t you, Ms. Blake?”

Snorting softly over his use of her last name, she nodded. “For the story, of course.”

“Of course.” He forced himself to stay still as Laura accompanied Candace out of the room, taping his foot with uncharacteristic impatience. He was eager to resume his questioning and discover her secrets. For a minute, he waited, pretending to study notes he had long since memorized. He truly liked the people of Pine Ridge – they were a kind and honest lot – but right now all he could think about was Laura. How long should he give her?

What was he thinking? He shouldn’t give her any time. She had sensitive information about him, and right now she was having a secret conversation with a close friend. There was a reasonable chance the conversation would pertain to him and his secret. Maybe this was the opportunity he had been waiting for. He got up.

As he crept casually towards the hallway, he pushed aside an unexpected pang of guilt. He wasn’t doing anything wrong. She had crash landed into his home, invaded his personal life and trespassed into his world, so why couldn’t he take a dip into hers? Of course, if the conversation had nothing to do with him, he would turn around and leave; it’s not like he was interested in her personal business. Well, perhaps if the conversation could further his knowledge about her in general, or if she needed help, or... well, hell, he was going to listen no matter what it was about.

It didn’t take long before snippets of conversation drifted through the hall. The women were speaking in hushed whispers and could only be heard thanks to the sound-carrying properties of the narrow corridor. Aidan stopped around a corner and pretended to read his papers.

He heard the middle of Laura’s sentence. “...told you everything?”

“Yeah, she did,” came the muffled reply. “Honey, are you all right?”

“Hanging in there.” In stark contrast to the playful defiance she showed him, now she sounded frustrated, overwhelmed. It brought fresh guilt, and the urge to help in any way he could. “I just want this to be over. I have to decide whether to tell him, if I even have a choice.”

He stiffened. Tell him what?

“Are you leaning one way or the other?”

She was silent for a second. “I still need more information...” Her voice trailed off, continued after a moment, “But unless something changes, I can’t hide the truth. He... they... deserve to know.”

Taut muscles clenched and unclenched. Who was she discussing? The identity of the person who shared the information? Someone else? By her tone, it seemed like something far more significant, far more life-changing.

“How do you think she’ll take it?”

She’ll?

“She’ll be ecstatic. Not that things aren’t great between us, but she has such a big heart. She’d love the opportunity to wrap someone else around that tiny pinkie of hers.”

Okay.... This conversation was getting stranger and stranger. He moved a step closer. Who else was she holding out from? Was it related to his secret? *Related to him?*

“Has he seen Jeanie?”

What did her daughter have to do with anything? He moved closer still.

“You don’t think she’ll freak when she finds out that...”

“Mr. Bancroft, so good to see you!”

Aidan closed his eyes, forcing away anger at the well-meaning yet devastatingly timed interruption. The jovial town councilman smiled as he continued down the hallway on his way to the bathroom. The ladies’ conversation didn’t resume

once he left, however, proof they didn't miss the loud greeting. It was time to confront his clever prey.

“Actually I have met Jeanie,” he proclaimed as he turned the corner.

Both women jumped, and Laura stared at him. Her eyes were wide, her lips parted in an O, her expression terrified. Did she wonder how much he had heard? The answer: not nearly enough.

But he would.

However, he wouldn't share that, because otherwise she might not let her guard down enough to let more information slip. The unmistakable urge to ease her fears hit, to vanquish her fear and fright. To make her understand he was not her enemy, that he could be something far different. Something personal.

Perhaps a little teasing would help, a little twist on Laura's earlier claims of a culinary-challenged cat named Jeanie. “Or at least I saw what she did. Made a mess of the whole apartment. Little scoundrel, her.” He shook his head. “I had a rascal that did that once, and she spent the night outside. She never did it again.”

Candace's eyes grew as big as saucers.

“Sometimes you have to use a little tough love,” he continued. “Of course, I left some food on the doorstep and an old towel for a bed. I just couldn't leave her without anything, you see.”

Candace blinked.

“Okay, I admit it.” He grinned good-naturedly. “I let her in after a couple of minutes. But she did learn her lesson.”

By now, Candace looked ready to faint dead away. Or call the police. Or both.

Laura laughed loudly, a little too loudly, having clearly caught on to his joke. “He's just joking, Candace. We had a little misunderstanding.”

“That’s right,” he confirmed. “About whether Jeanie was a child or a cat. It’s easy to get confused, you know. Ask Laura.”

She shot him a warning look as Candace breathed in clear relief. “Umm, sure, right. Well, I’d better get back. Mayor and all. Let me know if you need anything.” As if insanity was catching, she hurried away, leaving the two of them alone.

Laura and Aidan stared at each other. She had to be desperate to discover what he heard but didn’t ask for fear of giving something away. “Is there anything you’d like to tell me?” he said lowly.

She shook her head curtly.

He should have left it at that, walked away without a word more, but something inside him compelled him to continue, “Our association is not going to end with your secrets.”

She paled, and this time did speak, “What do you mean?”

He tried to soften his features, to not scare her. “There’s something between us, something beyond the secrets and the past and business. Something raw, something powerful. Don’t tell me you don’t feel it. I can see it in your eyes. It will be easier to explore once everything is out in the open.”

“Explore?” she squeaked.

He resisted a smile. Did she know how absolutely captivating she was?

Just then, an official called for everyone to return to the conference room, just as well since she was much too guarded to share more. Without a word, he took her hand and escorted her back to her seat. Yet as the speeches began, his thoughts were on the final question of their furtive conversation, “You don’t think she’ll freak when she finds out that...”

What filled in the blank?

CHAPTER 8



Clasping frigid hands, Laura stayed still as an ice sculpture as Aidan spoke of the collaboration of his corporation and Pine Ridge. What a close call it had been, if that's *all* it had been. He might have heard the entire conversation and guessed the ending to that sentence. He might already be making plans to take control.

Don't panic. She forced her mind back to the meeting, its information necessary to complete her article. With his usual passion, Aidan orated wonderfully, this time naming financial figures and specific timetables. Audible gasps and low murmurs greeted the numbers that flashed on the screen. This was no small collaboration as she had first imagined. The figures could mean a lot for a small town like Pine Ridge, but risk ran rampant, financial liability carried almost solely by Bancroft Enterprises. For Aidan, a longtime billionaire, the money would barely dent him.

The businessman's power encompassed far more than monetary wealth. She had read about it in articles and now seen it firsthand – he was a natural leader and a born predator. Now that he had chosen her as his prey, did she really have a chance? He wouldn't stop chasing her until he was satisfied he knew the truth. Now, it looked as if her secrets weren't all he was chasing.

Was she his next quarry?

Suppressing a shiver, she returned to the present, surprised that Candace was now speaking, and Aidan gazing at her with knowing eyes from his perch on the stage. Did he know she'd

been thinking about him? A sly smile told her the answer. Her cheeks heated, and she turned away.

Laura tried (mostly unsuccessfully) to focus on the meeting. It ended early, at eleven, since nearly the entire town planned to attend the carnival. As soon as they adjourned the meeting, she raced to Aidan before he was enveloped by well-wishers. “I have to run to my office to submit my story, but I’ll meet you at the carnival.”

“Would you like me to pick you u-?”

“No!”

His eyes narrowed, and she clamped her mouth shut. She didn’t want him anywhere near her home. She took a deep breath, started again. “I mean, no thank you. It’s easier for me to drive myself.”

“It’s astounding, really.”

“What is?”

He leaned in close. Real close. Her body temperature rose at the nearness of his smooth, muscular skin. “You expect me to believe your excuses. Are you sure you’re not ready to get everything in the open? It’s going to come out eventually. I promise to make it as painless as possible.”

“I have nothing to hide.” *Just my daughter. Who is also your daughter. Have I mentioned I can’t get you out of my mind?*

He clearly didn’t believe a word of the misdirection. “Don’t stand me up today. You’ll just make me come after you. You know you’re mine.”

What?

“I mean it’s your exclusive job to cover me.”

Cover him?

“At the newspaper.” He sabotaged already shattered senses. She mustn’t let him see how much he – and his words – affected her.

“Of course, I’ll be there to cover... uh, write a story about you,” she retorted stiffly. Dozens of people pressed forward, waiting to talk to Pine Ridge’s newest hero. Thankfully, they had stayed beyond hearing distance during the semi-scandalous conversation, providing a good opportunity to escape. With a quickly muttered farewell, she turned and strode away, slipping out a side door and the overwhelming man’s presence.

In mechanical motions, Laura drove to her office, as Aidan and his “promises” reverberated with every bump. She wrote her story in rapid pace, an article based entirely on business with few personal details. She submitted it to the editor and set off for home.

As soon as she arrived at the apartment, she hurried through preparations, changing into crisp blue jeans and a white button down shirt that tied at the front. She didn’t want to be merely early to the carnival – she wanted to be *very* early. Grasping her curly hair, she pulled the tendrils into a sweeping ponytail, not stopping to fix several wisps of auburn that escaped. She grabbed her purse and raced out the door, on her way in twenty minutes flat.

She arrived at the carnival a full half hour before the festivities were due to start, as the volunteers were placing the final touches on the whimsical surroundings. Rainbow-colored tents dotted the emerald green landscape, billowing booths featuring everything from fine paintings to face painting to finger painting. Rides promised exciting thrills, from merry-go-rounds to jewel-colored spinning swings, crowned by a roller coaster five stories tall. Chance games and stuffed animals ranging in size from a mouse to a small elephant made up a corner of the fairgrounds, while stages of all shapes and sizes took up another, ready to welcome a variety of singers, dancers, clowns and more. The scent of cotton candy and crispy funnel cakes drifted through the fragrant air.

She was so deeply entrenched in her own world, it seemed like only a moment had passed when a voice startled her from behind, “Is this the Pine Ridge welcoming committee?”

Hampering down a healthy serving of awareness with a side of desire, Laura turned to face the man who was upending her senses and her life. Aidan wore dark black jeans and a royal blue button down shirt rolled up at the sleeves, revealing powerful biceps. Once again, an involuntary shiver seized her. Would she ever get accustomed to the powerful billionaire who fathered her child?

She would show none of her discomfort. “Absolutely,” she replied smoothly. “Ready?”

He held out his arm. “Ready.”

Laura allowed him to help her up. His fingers were long and warm, and he grasped her longer than necessary as he led her from the bench. Yet when he finally released her, it didn’t seem nearly long enough.

The preschool children would be busy in the kids’ tent for a few hours, which gave her a little time and a big advantage in her quest to keep the two most poignant people in her life apart. Had the kids been wandering around the scarcely populated first minutes of the carnival, they’d be easy to spot, however, in another hour and a half, the carnival would be densely packed. Hopefully, it would be enough.

Laura clasped her hands together. Their next conversation would not be light-hearted, simple or easy, however, she needed information before she could further consider him in their lives. “How serious about this are you?”

He gave her a sideways glance. “How serious am I about what?” She halted, and so did he, slowly turning around. “Serious about what?” he repeated lowly.

A million answers beckoned. How serious was he about life, about her, about *children*? She offered the only question safe enough to ask. “The collaboration between Bancroft Enterprises and Pine Ridge. Is it for real?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Of course, it’s for real. Don’t you realize the cost if we go through this whole process only to have it fail? Your city has already invested thousands.”

“I understand the consequences.” She held his gaze. “But do you?”

He shook his head. “I’m a businessman – of course I do. You seriously think I’d harm an entire town? Why?”

She didn’t think that, but she needed to know for sure. “Because of the real reason you’re here. What you admitted the other night.”

He exhaled slowly. “I’ve always been honest about the reason I came, and it’s still true. I need the truth – the entire truth – of how you knew about the clinic and why you came to see me. However, the offer I’ve proposed to Pine Ridge is real, as is the plan. I’ve been planning to expand to a rural location for several months. When you came, I saw a dual opportunity to find out who betrayed my secret and secure a profitable business deal. I have no intention of backing away from Pine Ridge, even if I don’t get the information I want.” His eyes glinted sapphire steel. “Fortunately, I have no doubt both my quests will succeed. My ventures always do.”

She tightened. He wasn’t going to get the response he wanted, at least not yet. “I don’t have anything to tell you,” she said firmly.

He gave a curt nod. “Any more questions, or are you ready to enjoy the fair?”

“This whole afternoon is about questions.” She softened her response with a lighter tone. She wouldn’t get any information if they played enemies, plus she missed their normal camaraderie. “We’re here because I’m a reporter and you’re my subject, remember?”

His lips curved into a smile, and his stance also relaxed. “You mean this isn’t a date?”

No. But it could be. It really should be. Stop! She wiped clammy hands together. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Bancroft.”

“And we’ve even regressed to formal names,” he drawled. “If I wasn’t so self-assured, I might take that the wrong way.”

Ready for our strictly professional, completely businesslike, adversarial visit to the carnival?”

Laura smiled, as the mood quickly turned from somber and secretive to light-hearted and fun. She hated seeing him as her rival, especially since they shared such a beautiful link. “Adversarial?”

“I’ll take that part out when you share all your secrets with me.”

Indeed.

Side by side, they strolled back towards the heart of the carnival, threading through colorful tents, around juggling clowns and past giggling tots. She didn’t bother trying to free the hand he so possessively grasped, and she most certainly did not notice how strong, tall and delectib... *ahem*... he was. In a few minutes, the number of patrons had doubled, and people were streaming in through the front gate, many of them staring at her and Aidan. As a reporter, she was used to being with local celebrities, but she had never been with one as famous as Aidan.

“Are you all right?” Aidan’s low tone showcased genuine concern. “Everyone is looking at us.”

The scrutiny was unnerving, but not nearly as much as the man grasping her. “Looking at you, you mean.” From shy sideways gazes to obvious outright glares, they were the most popular attraction at the fair.

“Not just me,” he protested. “Do you think the men are ogling me? As beautiful as you are, it’s a wonder they notice me at all.”

She blushed. Normally she was immune to flowery words, but the sincerity deep in his voice made her actually believe it. Did he know how much he affected her? “If you think I’ll go easier on you in the article if you flatter me, you’re wrong.” She tried for lightheartedness, instead her voice emerged breathless and sultry.

“Actually, I was impressed by your attempt to keep everything between us completely professional.” He shrugged.

“You’re not succeeding, but it’s a valiant effort.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she sniffed.

“No?” He squeezed her hand. At the familiar tingling awareness, she flexed her fingers. “Do you feel that?” he whispered.

“Of course, I feel it.” Unbidden desire made her voice raspy. “It’s your hand. Are you planning on letting me go?”

He did no such thing, instead leading her to a small space hidden between several tents. She stopped and faced her would-be nemesis. How would she convince him she wasn’t feeling what he so accurately guessed? “Please stop saying this is something more. It can’t be.”

His eyebrow arched with uncanny perception. “Are you certain?” He leaned forward, whispered, “Tell me. What do you want me to do?”

The words provoked crystal clear imagery, pure desire flashing in her mind’s eye. He would run his hands through her hair, caress her curves, grasp her— *No!* She couldn’t afford to fall for her daughter’s father. “I don’t want anything,” she lied.

“No?” Aidan piqued an eyebrow. “Do you remember what they said about me? I never back down from a challenge.”

Heat surrounded hers, tangling with his spicy scent. His lips were sensual, plump, inviting. Suddenly, she was leaning forward... forward... forward.

Then *she* kissed him.

He swallowed her gasp as he caressed her, tasting her swollen softness. She tried to hold back, but after seconds she was lost, and could only return the sensual dance move for move. At her surrender, he deepened the kiss, and his tongue coaxed her lips to allow his entry. Her breaths became his and his hers as they parried back and forth. Heat raced through her body as Aidan brought his arms around her, holding her pressed close against him. He was pure muscle, with a rock solid body of controlled power. She snaked her hands around his back, kneading taut muscles as thick arousal pooled in her

blood, sensitizing her. Her breasts ached, as tender muscles begged for his touch.

Somewhere a child laughed, an antidote to break the powerful spell. Chest heaving, muscles aching, she wrenched back, standing silently, shaky on unsteady legs. That he appeared as affected was her only consolation. She hadn't a clue what to say.

He apparently did. "Tell me that didn't affect you."

If only she could deny it. The most gifted actress in the world couldn't lie after that response. "We can't do this. I can't do this." She raked her hands through her hair. "It can't happen again."

"Why?" He crossed corded arms. "We're both unattached. We're responsible, consenting adults. Why shouldn't we explore it?"

Why indeed? She couldn't think of anything reasonable to say, at least not something that wouldn't give everything away. She opted instead for silence.

He narrowed his eyes, standing up to his full impressive height. "It's because of your secret, isn't it?"

She hesitated for only a second. *Too much.*

"Yes, it is." He leaned down. "I might not know what you're hiding, but I'm going to find out. It can be now, it can be later, but it will happen. And then, when everything is out in the open, we'll explore this."

"It's impossible!" Laura clamped her mouth shut at her sudden outburst, forced herself to continue at his sharp gaze. "All right, I'll admit there's a force between us. But it's nothing more than lust. You have the body of a Greek God." *Ummm, had she just admitted that?!* "And I'm a warm-blooded woman. There's nothing to explore, because you see, I don't do casual flings."

He smiled, the slow widening grin of a lion. "This is far more than simple lust. I'm not into short-term flings either, and there *is* plenty to explore. But now, we're clearly at an impasse. Would you like to rejoin the carnival?"

How could she possibly enjoy the carnival after the kiss? Yet beyond the will-shattering conversation, it was the only path forward. “All right.”

Did he know her casual reply hid untold desire? Sparkling eyes said yes as he put his hand on her back and led her from the hideaway. “And by the way, do you really think I have the body of a Greek God?”

This was going to be a long day.

THEY WALKED IN SILENCE, but Aidan didn't mind. It gave him time to study the feisty reporter who had unbalanced his world. He had been with enough women to know that was no ordinary kiss. This was no ordinary *woman*.

Why she intrigued him so, he didn't know, but it was there and it was strong. And it was going to be explored. A connection like that didn't come often, and he couldn't give up this chance.

The pair passed the information booth, and Laura stopped to get a festival program. He watched the guests stroll by as she leafed through it, halting at the sight of a young family. The father was giving a piggyback ride to a girl while her two younger siblings raced behind, eager for their turns. A sudden sting of sorrow sliced through his chest, so sharp and poignant it felt like a knife pierced his gut.

His child would have been the same age as that little girl.

It could have been him giving piggyback rides, doling out cotton candy, holding his baby as she fell asleep in his arms. It could have been him playing tag, reading stories, holding hands. If only he hadn't fought with Leanne, if only he hadn't caused her to... No, he couldn't go through this again. He breathed deeply, fighting for calm. As Laura turned to face him, he swiftly donned a wall of indifference.

“What shows would you like to...” She stopped suddenly, her expression turning hesitant. “Hey, are you okay?”

Rare speechlessness stole his next words. How had she seen through his mask? How did she know he wasn't okay, that he was never truly okay, would never be okay? Was it another sign of the connection they shared?

"Can I join you?" A third voice spoke.

Grateful for the interruption that allowed him to avoid Laura's question, he turned toward its source. He winced when he recognized Angie Sammons, Pine Ridge's own runway model. Tall and thin, willowy and graceful, she possessed stunningly beautiful looks and legs that ran from Pine Ridge to New York. Half the men in town chased after the blue-eyed, golden-haired beauty, and the other half would have if they weren't married. She was an aspiring model, and having landed a few significant campaigns, actually had a promising beginning. Now, however, she gazed at him with undisguised interest.

He felt... nothing.

How strange. Even without a connection, he still usually felt some physical attraction to a beautiful woman. Right now, all that energy was expended on a certain small town reporter whose eyes narrowed at their conversation interloper. How about that? The little spitfire who denied even the slightest of emotions was jealous.

"Good afternoon." He held out his hand. "Aidan Bancroft, ma'am."

She gave it a soft shake, holding his hand a little too long. "I know. I'm Angie Sammons." She smiled brightly and completely ignored Laura.

Her rudeness annoyed him more than he expected. He would extricate himself as quickly as possible from the exchange. "It's nice to meet you."

"I'd love to show you around the carnival." Angie gave an exaggerated wink, before she finally turned to Laura. Her expression turned down, as if she'd sucked on a particularly sour lemon. "I'm sure Ms. Blake has her hands full, with the

paper and Jeanie and all. I just saw her little one with her preschool a few minutes ago.”

Next to him, Laura visibly tensed at the mention of her daughter, her face paling until it turned as white as the coconut ices a nearby vendor was peddling. Was she still afraid of him meeting her daughter? Her fear was both unfounded and burdensome. It was bound to happen, especially if something... developed. He needed Laura to understand he would never hurt a child, no matter what the circumstances. Only one thing could solve this, easily and painlessly.

Before they left today, he would have to meet Jeanie.

For now, he turned back to the model. “I’m sorry, Ms. Sammons, I’ll be busy all day with Ms. Blake. You see, our relationship is just getting started.”

He left it at that, leaving the two women to interpret themselves. Angie looked furious, and Laura managed to pale further, until he worried she would faint. He placed a hand on her back. If she needed him, he would be there.

“Well, another time, then.” Angie got herself under control real quick. She even winked at him before stalking off. “Ta ta,” she threw over her shoulder.

He turned to Laura, relaxing into a genuine smile. “It’s funny. I wouldn’t have taken you for the jealous type.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she pursed her lips. Said through gritted teeth, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He just laughed.

Just as he was about to tease more, Aidan caught sight of something – or rather, someone – behind her. All at once, annoyance replaced delight, indignation extinguished joy. “Damn,” he muttered as an eagle-eyed woman bounded toward them, in a flurry of determination and challenge. Behind her strode a black-garbed man carrying a very expensive and very professional video camera.

Laura turned and blinked. “Do you know them?” Tiny furrows appeared in her brow. “The woman looks vaguely familiar.”

“You probably saw her on television. They’re reporters.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Only not just any reporters. Ms. Carol White and her cronies, the royalty of gossip. I guarantee we’ll be all over the Internet next week.”

The annoyance grew sharper, until... an idea formed, a way he could finally solve the mystery, once and for all, so he could stop reliving the past and focus on the future. Yet second thoughts demanded hesitation. It wouldn’t be nice. It wouldn’t be fair. But it would get him the answers he’d been seeking.

Laura was not going to be pleased.

She studied the determined pair a moment longer before turning back to him. Her expression froze. With their connection, she knew he was up to something. “Aidan?” she said slowly. “What are you thinking?”

He took a step toward her. “I’m sorry, but you’ve left me no choice. I need to know.”

“Need to know what?” She was no longer smiling. “What are you talking about?”

“I need to know the truth of how you found out about the clinic. I hope you understand why this matters so much – if someone discovered your most precious treasure, you would do anything to safeguard it. That’s what these secrets are to me. That’s why you need to tell me how you knew about the clinic. Or else...”

“Or else what?” she whispered.

“Or else I’m going to tell the Gossip Queen of the World, and effectively the entire world, that you and I are an item.”

Guilt flared as she glared pure fury. Of course, he wouldn’t actually do it, but she didn’t know that. She did know being linked to him would thrust her into the spotlight. Her entire life would be altered by the one simple declaration. But he needed to know the truth.

Besides, his so-called threat might become the truth very shortly.

He waited as she glanced at the rapidly approaching woman, now less than a minute away. She had only moments to make her decision.

He leaned in and whispered fateful words, “What’s it going to be, partner? Full disclosure or my girlfriend? You have thirty seconds to tell the truth...”

CHAPTER 9



She was captured.

There was no escape, no reprieve, from the two invading forces: Aidan so close and stoic, and the reporter chasing them down like a gleeful hound intent on a poor fox. Desperation led Laura to grab Aidan's hand and pull him away from the approaching reporter, yet where could they go? Searching for somewhere, anywhere, to hide, she ducked into the tent holding the nearest ride, ignoring the call to stop from behind. Aidan let himself be dragged – she couldn't have budged him if he hadn't – but remained silent. She needed a few minutes to think, and a ride would be the perfect place where the reporters couldn't get to them. Not realizing what ride she had chosen until too late, she hoped the "Love Cruise" didn't give the reporter too much information.

She jumped into a boat about to sail, dragging the scoundrel behind her, willing the vehicle to move quickly enough to elude the reporters. By fate's grace, it did, and they were already well started through the "Tunnel of Love" when the reporters entered the tent. She had exactly three minutes to figure this out.

She turned toward her Love Cruise partner. In stark contrast to her panic, he looked relaxed and comfortable. "Is the 'Love Cruise' your way of telling me you want to be my girlfriend?" he inquired with a smile.

She folded her arms over her chest, resisted the urge to toss him into the "Sea of Love." Was he telling the truth or merely bluffing? She had two minutes and forty-five seconds

to ascertain the truth or he would discover hers. Below plastic red hearts and dangling Styrofoam cupids, she speared him with her most dangerous expression. “I can’t believe you’re doing this,” she snapped. “Every time I think you’re a nice guy—”

“I am a nice guy,” he interrupted dangerously, “but I’m also a very powerful man. If someone with lower morals gets this information, my entire life will be back in the news again. I can’t take that chance. Tell me the truth.”

She wouldn’t give in to his demands, at least not in two minutes and thirty seconds. Desperately, she tried logic. “Your blackmail doesn’t even make sense. If you tell them I’m your girlfriend, we both lose. You value your privacy, yet you would confirm your love life on National Gossip Television?”

“They’ll gossip about me whether I like it or not. If I say you’re my girlfriend, I can later say it was merely a joke. My life won’t be significantly changed, but yours will.”

She clutched the sides of the boat as it rocked from side to side. Deep down she understood he was defending himself, to protect what he held most dear. *So was she*. “You’re not being reasonable.” She hated what she was about to say, but she had no choice. “I know something that would interest Ms. White even more – the truth about the fertility clinic. How do you know I won’t use that if you blackmail me?”

Expecting fury, she was shocked when he merely lifted a shoulder. “You wouldn’t do that,” he remarked simply.

He was right. Mentioning the clinic would put both her and Jeanie in danger, yet beyond that, she could never hurt a man who had lost so much. But how did he know that? “Why are you so sure?”

“Two reasons,” he replied calmly. “One, doing something like that would get you fired from your job, since I’m your main subject.” She hadn’t even thought of that, although of course it was true. He continued, “And two: I just know you wouldn’t do something so spiteful.”

She longed to protest, but it would make no difference. She would never carry out the threat, and he knew it. One minute and thirty seconds left. Sitting back upon the plush velvet seat, she grasped and discarded a dozen hopeless solutions. Aidan sat silently, his expression fathomless. Then, the atmosphere *changed*. It was inappropriate and inopportune, yet she suddenly became aware of the powerful frame relaxed against the cushions. He straightened, capturing her in his deep blue gaze.

What would it be like if they boarded the boat for the right reasons, as two cozy lovers looking for a moment of solitude? In that instant, the problems of the outside world vanished, her focus solely on the man next to her. Her breathing hissed an uneven staccato, set to the rapid beating of her heart. One force seized all attention – Aidan Bancroft.

Watching the man watch her, Laura sat frozen under the neon lights. The attraction was far more than physical, beyond the simple. He drew her in a thousand ways, his personality, his fire, his cleverness. And despite his current scheme, the goodness she knew resided in him. Then imagination became truth and fantasy, reality, as Aidan leaned closer. A whisper-soft touch graced her cheek, and he leaned closer... and closer... and closer... Then, a touch to start a firestorm.

The kiss was even sweeter than before, in the soft darkness of the ride. As they floated through fog covered caverns and dimly lit chambers, Aidan massaged her in tantalizing circles. He caressed her lips, and she, his. At first, everything was gentle, yet soon the warmth turned to heat, then the heat to an inferno, set to passion she couldn't resist.

She gripped muscular arms as he grasped her tightly. Nameless emotion streaked through her, heightening every sense. It seemed it would never end, in their world within a world. Until, suddenly it did, as light brightened the dimness, piercing the fog. She jerked back, gasping rose scented air, as the tunnel brightened, signaling the ride's imminent end and the reporters' certain presence. She recoiled as she gazed at Aidan, her breathing heavy. Yet in that second, something else changed. Her fear vanished, all indecision disappeared. There

was no decision to be made. As certain as she was of anything, he was bluffing. “You’re not going to tell them.”

He gazed at her intensely, his expression darkened with desire. “How can you be sure?”

She placed her hand on his cheek, tracing barely-there stubble. His features were chiseled strength, just like him. “Because you’re an honorable man,” she whispered, “and just like I would never hurt you, you would never hurt me.”

He didn’t have time to respond, as the rising light gave way to full-fledged brightness, as the pair emerged from the darkened tunnel into the bright afternoon sun. As expected, the reporters were poised and ready, the camera already pointed and rolling. Laura tightened, queasiness tilting her stomach like the tiny boat rocking in the manmade canal. One telling word could give them away.

“And so the financial risk will be lower than expected, because we’re using existing resources.” Aidan started talking, as if in the middle of a long-drawn-out conversation. “As you can see, the startup costs will be quite negligible once we transfer the computer equipment from Albuquerque.”

The ride attendant gripped the boat, stopping the movement. Ever the gentleman, Aidan helped Laura off first, before disembarking himself. “Do you have any more questions about the financial implications of the collaboration between Bancroft Enterprises and Pine Ridge?” He turned, and with an expression of surprise that would have convinced even the most skeptical, he greeted the reporters. “Carol White!” He gave his most polished, businessman smile. “What are you doing here?”

The reporter, clearly miffed that her quarry emerged in the throes of financial positions and not compromising ones, quickly stepped forward. “Mr. Bancroft. Tell me, who is this lovely lady?”

Laura spoke for herself, boldly reaching out to shake hands with the reporter. “Laura Blake, ma’am, fellow journalist. I work for the Pine Ridge Press, and Aidan was just sharing the intricacies of his financial strategy.” *And a lot more.* “I’m sure

your viewers would love to hear about this. Aidan, tell her about the ability to minimize sunk costs and maximize resource management under a vertically-based system of manage...”

“Actually,” the reporter broke in, her icy tone like nails across a chalkboard, “I’ll leave that sort of news to the Pine Ridge Press.” She made a cut signal to the cameraman. “We deal with more exciting news.”

“What’s more exciting than sunk costs?” Laura grinned. “Come on, Aidan, you can tell me all about your employee assistantship program as we walk to the circus. Good-bye, Ms. White. It was a pleasure.”

Muttering farewell in a manner that succinctly conveyed it had not been *her* pleasure, the reporter let them go. Laura walked side by side next to Aidan, casually strolling down the grassy path past the bumper cars and giant slide. When they finally traveled beyond sight of the venomous gossipmonger, they broke into laughter. “Bravo!” Aidan applauded. “You are a master.”

Laura grinned. “You weren’t half bad yourself. Did you see the look on her face?”

He laughed again. “I sure did. Of course, we’ll have to be careful, because Ms. White is not easily deterred. Likely she’s still suspicious. For now, though, we’re safe.” He slowly sobered, his thoughts clearly no longer on the wayward reporter. At least not *that* wayward reporter. “I want to apologize. I never meant to hurt you.” True regret laced sincere words. “I was hoping to get everything out in the open. I never would have carried out the threat.”

“I know.” Laura softened. “I understand why you did it, and why you couldn’t do it. You truly are a good guy, Aidan Bancroft.”

“You have secrets. At first, I wanted to know because of how they affected me. But now...” His voice drifted off, as he shook his head. In the next moment, he was completely controlled. “It is something to discuss later.” His voice was again powerful and deep, his tone confident and assured, as he

stopped in front of the rainbow-colored tent that housed the carnival circus. She longed to demand he finish the sentence, but stopped herself. Was he as confused as she was?

He led her into the tent, where a group of laughing children sharpened her focus. She had allowed herself to get distracted, but now she had to concentrate on keeping Aidan far away from Jeanie. Fortunately, the children were slated for a later performance, so she was safe – for now.

A red-coated master of ceremonies summersaulted onto the stage, and the entertainment commenced. Despite her anxiety, the acrobatic wonders, death-defying stunts and an astounding high-flying trapeze family managed to distract her, while sweet, melt-in-your-mouth cotton candy and the scent of buttery popcorn brought her back to her childhood days. Still, she cast continuous gazes at her partner, as he chuckled with unbridled humor. The man never did anything halfway. If only she could share in his joy, in his laughter and fun, but the anxiety over her daughter's proximity grew stronger by the moment. What would happen if they accidentally met?

Finally, the circus ended. As they filed out of the tent, Aidan asked Laura how she liked the circus. She remarked that she liked it. He then asked how she knew she liked it since she was watching him the whole time. She remarked that he was an arrogant scoundrel, to which he replied she was “one strange lady.”

They emerged into a sun-splashed clearing surrounded by stands offering sizzling funnel cakes and foot-long pretzels. Holding her hand to shield her eyes from the bright afternoon sunshine, Laura swiftly glanced around, but thankfully there was no sign of Jeanie's group. As expected, the park had become densely populated, and countless people wandered around.

“Looking for someone?”

Laura bit her lip at the low question. Aidan was studying her in that suspicious sort of way he always did. Perhaps ESP and not business acumen had gotten him so far. “Not at all,”

she denied. “I was just thinking about what a nice time I had today. Do you want to go out to eat now?”

“But we just got here,” he spoke slowly, “and seen a total of two attractions. The activities run all day.”

“It seems like we just got here.” She pointed to her watch. “But it’s been a full hour and a half. I’m exhausted.”

“You don’t look tired.” He folded his arms across his chest, flexing his biceps. “Why do I get the feeling you want me to leave?”

She laughed nervously. “I have no idea.” Yet her actions said *exactly* that. She glanced again at the crowd. If they had to be at the carnival, then standing out in the open, with so many people milling about, was the worst place to be. Because if Jeanie caught sight of her, the little girl would come a-running. Since she was clearly not going to convince Aidan to leave the fair just yet, she needed to get him out of sight.

He placed his hands low on his hips. “As usual, I can’t decipher your motives, but I don’t want to leave. Unless you have a good reason...” He stopped as understanding brightened his eyes. “Hey, this wouldn’t be because...”

He continued to speak, but Laura could no longer hear his words. Because at that moment, in the not-so-far distance, her good reason appeared. Fifty feet away, along with thirty giggling four-year-olds, stood her daughter, *his* daughter. Jeanie was looking the other way, and, thankfully, had yet to see her mother. But a slight turn, and it would all be over.

“Roller coaster!” Laura suddenly shouted.

Aidan stopped mid-sentence. “What?”

She took a deep breath, fought for calm. “Would you like to go on the roller coaster?”

He just shook his head. “You realize you’re only delaying things, right?”

Yes, she did, but thankfully, he sighed and nodded. She didn’t hesitate, grabbing his hand and tugging him through the crowd. She jogged through the packed path, hopping over

twigs and passing through swirls of smoke that carried the savory scent of kabobs roasting on the grill. Finally, they had travelled half the fair, and a quick glance back showed no sign of her daughter. She relaxed, yet tightened as they arrived at the roller coaster, a giant metal track of steep drops and loop de loops. One tiny detail loomed as tall as the monstrosity before her:

She was terrified of roller coasters.

Aptly named “The Coaster of Doom,” the roller coaster was hailed as one of the scariest of the traveling fairs. With frightfully long drops, upside down loops and speeds in excess of sixty miles per hour, the ride was a beast. She jumped as a car slid by, its inhabitants screaming and clutching the rails, as they went by a blur. The tiny taste made her nauseous. Only how could she avoid it now?

“Are you all right? You look a little pale.” Aidan looked from her to the roller coaster and then back. “You’re not afraid of coasters, are you?”

She laughed nervously. “Of course not.” Yet her shoes turned to concrete as she trudged to the entrance and handed the attendant two shiny tokens. She stepped into a fire engine red car (of doom), wincing as the door (of doom) closed with a resounding click (of doom). She fastened the seatbelt, checking no less than five times to ensure it was secure (it probably wasn’t). Through it all, Aidan remained silent, although he watched her closely.

The ride jerked to a start, and Laura jumped. Aidan’s expression transformed from confusion to concern. “Are you all right?”

She squeezed her eyes shut as the car ascended rickety tracks, opened them and blinked. “Perhaps I’m just a little nervous.”

Aidan didn’t ask why someone so obviously uncomfortable with roller coasters would ride one, nor did he mention the fact that she suggested it. Instead, he brought his arm around her. “Don’t worry.” He gave her a tight squeeze. “You’re perfectly safe. If you get scared, just hold on to me.”

As they made it to the top of the incline, she sat back against his chest, and her heart slowed ever-so-slightly. Finally, the cabin curved over the crest, the angle turning to a sharp descent as they picked up speed. A moment later, they raced through twists and turns like a silver sphere in a pinball machine.

Aidan's arms tightened around her as they journeyed through the whipping wind. They sped this way and that, over peaks and under tunnels. The wind spun her hair like an F5 twister, its howls playing bass to metal screeching against metal. Aidan screamed over the raging symphony, "Are you all right?"

She nodded and was astonished to find it was true. She was all right. Even more shocking, she was actually enjoying the thrilling ride. Her heart beat thunderously against her chest and adrenaline raced like lightning through her body, but with Aidan next to her, it was actually fun.

Suddenly, the ride slowed, and she looked around, waiting for the next twist or turn. Instead, the car pulled up to the front gate. Wait... the ride was over?

"Does that smile mean it wasn't too awful?" Aidan hopped out of the car and held out his hand.

She took it and disembarked, and although a little shaky, managed to walk, as if she hadn't just conquered the *The Coaster of Doom*. She had done it, and without fainting, screaming or falling out of the carriage. "I actually liked it." Her voice betrayed the surprise she couldn't hide.

He laughed. "I hope so, since you're the one who suggested it. I don't suppose you have a good explanation for that, do you?"

She shook her head, yet her smile remained. She hadn't been on a roller coaster since she was ten. Even the reminder of her subterfuge couldn't dampen the mood.

He led her away from the ride, past smiling people and laughing kids. "Want to try the pirate's ship?"

She stopped at the huge boat-shaped ride hanging precariously on a thin, shaky beam. As the pole moved back and forth, the ship rocked, until it actually went *upside down*. Her mouth dried, but this was the best strategy for the day. If they stayed at these rides, where the preschoolers were sure to avoid, maybe enough time would pass to satisfy Aidan, and they could leave. She nodded nervously.

Clearly aware her fright, he laughed. "I'll never understand you. But don't worry, you'll have fun. If you're scared, just hold on to me."

Yes, please. Yet she said nothing as they walked hand-in-hand to the ride, paying and then entering the already rocking cabin. And during it, she *did* hold on to him, as she did in each of the six thrill rides they subsequently rode. And with each scary ride, she became more comfortable and less frightened, happy and excited she had overcome a fear held since childhood. By the time they were done, her hair was wild and her lips chapped from the wind, but she had enjoyed every second. They even went on the roller coaster a second time.

They were sitting on a bench, relaxing after the last ride. "Want to go on more?" She tapped him playfully on the shoulder, sending a wisp of hair over her eyes. She moved to scoop it away when he did it for her, brushing her face in a touch so innocent and yet so intimate. Untold emotion surged, as they locked gazes.

What was he thinking? If only she could see into his mind, discover his hidden desires. At the beginning, she longed to know so she could judge his fatherly abilities, but now it was more than that. She couldn't decipher her emotions, but if they had met as strangers, she would be interested in seeing what could develop. With her life-changing secret, could there ever be a *them*?

The sound of children jerked Laura back to the present. She couldn't consider this now, not when her independence was at risk. Now she had to get Aidan Bancroft out of this carnival. "I'm thinking..." she paused, considered potential plans. Found one. "That I'd love to go bowling with you again. How about it?"

He frowned, and her chances dimmed. Hours had passed, but it was still early, and a major part of the carnival remained explored. Her suggestion just didn't make sense.

Clearly, he agreed. "How about later? Right now, I'd love to try some of those games."

Laura grimaced. Unlike the thrill rides, the amusement area was definitely fair game to the four-year-olds, however according to the agenda, they would be at the circus right now. If Aidan was satisfied with just a few rounds, it could work. "All right," she agreed. "Let's go."

They stopped at the first booth, a ring toss. "Three chances each." Before Laura could stop him, Aidan handed the attendant a few dollars and took the offered rings.

"You don't have to pay for me," she protested as she accepted the scratchy red hoops. "This isn't a date, after all."

He didn't agree, held back his ring, and with the swift agility of an athlete, threw the disc towards the pole. It landed dead center. "I forgot this outing was solely for *business*." He waved away the stuffed animal the attendant offered, indicating he wanted to try for the bigger prize.

"What do you mean by that?" She took her ring, and with an easy toss, also hit the goal. She, too, declined the prize in favor of continuing.

He held up his next ring. "With the exception of the two sentences we spoke for the sake of Miss Carol White, this excursion hasn't seen a sliver of business." He raised his eyebrows, daring her to disagree. Unfortunately, she couldn't. She had meant to throw in some collaboration-centered questions, but had been so preoccupied with Jeanie, she had forgotten. He was now calling her on it.

Without winding up, he easily tossed the second ring onto its goal. She turned to him. "Just because I'm not asking questions doesn't mean I'm not gathering information for my article. This is a very thorough story. I always spend time with my subjects as I craft my profiles." With that, she threw the

ring haphazardly, surprised when it also reached the pole. They both declined the prize to try for larger.

“Do you normally get this close to your subjects?” he challenged as he threw the last ring, landing right on target. He took a large teddy bear, which he immediately handed to her.

Her cheeks heated at memories of the kiss in the Tunnel of Love. Of course, she'd never gotten *that* close to her subjects before. But then again, none of her subjects had been quite like him: intelligent, smart, powerful, the father of her child. She didn't answer his question, instead she just threw the last ring. She smiled when it reached the target and gave her purple, polka dotted, stuffed giraffe to Aidan.

He laughed. “Wait till my housekeeper gets a load of this. And I'll take your silence as a no, you don't get this close to them.”

She ignored the comment. “Ready to go?”

He laughed and shook his head. “Not yet.”

She swallowed a groan as they moved to the next game. Every second that passed signified more danger. The time of the circus's ending came and went, but despite her subtle and not-so-subtle hints, Aidan insisted he wasn't finished. Finally, they played all the games, several twice and one thrice. Aidan turned to her, and with welcome words, announced he was finally ready to leave. She just managed not to jump, pump her fist in the air and yell “hip, hip hurray!”

Unfortunately, the games were located at the far end of the carnival, thus they would have to traverse the entirety of the fair to reach the car. If she made it through the next few minutes she would be free. They walked quickly, Laura setting the pace through the throngs of people, workers and booths. She kept a close lookout for her daughter, and by fate's mercy, did not see the precious little girl.

They were almost at the exit when Aidan suddenly stopped. “My cell phone.” He frowned as he patted down his pants. “I had it in my back pocket, but it must have fallen out during one of the rides. I'm going to run back for it.”

“No!” Laura screeched.

“Laura—” He shook his head. “I know you want to leave, but...”

“No, I mean of course someone should go back, but let me do it. I’ve been trying to get more exercise anyways. I don’t mind the extra steps.” Either of them going posed a threat, but if someone had to go, it should be her. He would probably stroll while she would run, plus he had less of a chance of running into Jeanie by staying in one spot as opposed to roaming the whole park. At this time, the preschool group could be anywhere.

“I’ll go with you,” he offered.

“It’s better if you stay in one spot,” she immediately denied. “That way if someone knows who has the phone, they’ll be able to tell you.”

He nodded at the illogical logic, which even she didn’t understand, as she pivoted towards the rides, at first with a hurried gait, then with a fast jog and finally with an all-out run. She checked with the attendants at the roller coaster and pirate ship, then with all the other rides, but the cell phone was nowhere to be found. She was about to head back when a small reflection gleamed in the grass. She grinned as she picked up the state-of-the-art smartphone, relief loosening the vise squeezing her chest. Placing the device safely in her pocket, she set out for the exit at a rapid pace.

She rejoiced when she saw Aidan, standing there by the front gate. She made it! She picked up speed, then... she froze. He was not alone. Five teachers and thirty preschool kids surrounded him. And standing next to Aidan was...

Jeanie.

Father and daughter turned toward her, identical expressions of recognition animating identical features. “Laura,” he greeted in his normally friendly tone. “Look who I found.”

She knew exactly who he found. *Did he?*

“I saw him standing there and thought it would be nice for the kids to meet the man who was investing so much in their town,” one of the teachers spoke, a blush staining her features. “He’s been sharing his childhood adventures.”

Every would-be response caught in Laura’s throat. Obviously, he didn’t know... yet. Could she escape with the secret intact? Aidan grasped her hand, bringing her to stand directly in front of the kids. “Kids, I’d like you to meet my friend, Miss Laura.”

Laura blinked down at Jeanie, and the little girl started to giggle. Aidan smiled at the child he didn’t know was his. “Aren’t you a cutie? What’s so funny, sweetheart?”

Jeanie held her hand to her lips, but the giggles wouldn’t stop. “That’s not her name, silly.”

He inclined his head, just the slightest. “Well, if that’s not her name, what is?”

“Mommy.”

CHAPTER 10



*H*e had known it would happen.

Had known he would meet Laura's little girl, see the child she so fiercely protected, and hopefully today. Yet never in his wildest dreams could he have expected the effect it would have on him – the impact of one little girl.

Time stopped. Movement ceased. As if one little word could distort the very boundaries of space and time, the universe advanced in slow motion, every minute detail being played in dramatic suspense. Jeanie giggled again, her face a picture of joy, blissfully unaware of the turmoil around her.

Why this meeting affected him he didn't know. He looked closer at the girl, and suddenly, it was like when he saw the little girl playing piggyback on her father's back – amplified a thousandfold. A razor-sharp wave of grief hit him, of loss and yearning for what could have been. His muscles tensed, his breathing shallowed, as he took in the beautiful girl.

Perhaps it was because she looked like what he imagined his little girl might. The same shining blue eyes, the same long blond hair and wide smile. Of course, there were differences – she didn't have his late wife's angular face or her olive skin, not her pin straight hair or rounded chin. Yet still, there was something about her... something familiar... something powerful.

Laura's secret couldn't involve her, could it?

And yet what if it did? Suddenly a million thoughts swirled, paint on a conspiracy theorist's canvas. The little girl

truly resembled his imaginings of the last five years. Laura knew about the fertility clinic. What if somehow she had found his child, if somehow this was the child he thought he'd lost? For a moment, his heart soared with hope.

A second later, it crashed in fiery glory. It couldn't be – there was no way she could be his little lost girl. No chance the child could have somehow survived the crash. The pregnancy was too young, the crash too severe, the report too thorough.

What was he thinking? He had seen reports of the crash, everything positively identified. Proof this child could not be his. The little girl had brought back the grief from losing his unborn child, giving fodder to a grieving imagination. His child might have looked like any of the little preschoolers surrounding him. He needed to focus on the here and now, and especially on the little girl whose mother he was considering for a much more important role in his life. Perhaps one day this child might be more to him, but it would be through a family relationship, not through blood.

“Hi Mommy!” Jeanie jumped through the crowd and latched on to her mother. Kneeling down, Laura embraced her daughter in a bear hug. The scent of pine needles and cotton candy sweetened the air. The little girl even smelled adorable.

“Hi baby.” Laura stood up, but kept protective hands on her child. Aidan also rose, staring back and forth from mother to daughter. Ahhh, now he could see the clear resemblance between them, same nose, same chin. Clearly this was her biological daughter. How could he have ever thought...

“Well, we have a show to go to,” the preschool teacher spoke, wearing a bright smile that showed complete oblivion to the fireworks erupting. “Children, say good-bye.”

Adorably bidding an all-encompassing farewell, the children started off. Jeanie smiled politely at him. “Good-bye, sir.”

His lips lifted at the little lady's sweet voice. “Good-bye, sweetheart,” he said, his voice emerging strangely husky. His earlier grief must still be affecting him.

Turning to her mother, Jeanie asked, “Mommy, can we have pancakes again tomorrow?”

Aidan couldn’t stop an intense gaze when she nodded. “Sure, honey.”

With a smile that could brighten any day but today, Laura’s daughter bounded away to join her group. He took a moment and a breath, then addressed Laura. “Let’s walk to the car.” The words were wooden and hollow, the product of what should’ve been an innocuous encounter.

She paled, her countenance as besieged as his tightened lungs. Was she scared something would happen now that he had seen her daughter, that it would somehow change things? It affected him more than expected, but that had nothing to do with Laura and everything to do with his overactive and overstressed imagination. Still, he couldn’t help but wonder at her over-protectiveness.

Perhaps it was time to research the child’s father.

For now, he turned his attention back to Laura. He had arranged to be dropped off, thus they would be riding home together. They walked through the crowds, not a word breaking the uncomfortable silence, until they reached the relative privacy of the parking lot. “Why are you so upset?” More than upset, she seemed... fearful? “Are you still afraid I’ll hurt your daughter?”

She took a deep breath, clearly fighting for control. “Of course not.”

“Then why do you look like a mama deer fighting off a hungry lion?”

“I’m not a mama deer and you’re not a...” She hesitated. “Hungry lion.”

“Then why are you so upset?” he repeated. “Why have you kept us apart?”

She squeezed her hands together, until they were as white as fresh snow. Perhaps the situation did relate to her child, although how was it possible? “Because you threaten

everything.” She drew in shallow breaths, her eyes sheening with emotion. “I need to protect her.”

“Protect her?” He shook his head in jerky movements. “From me? How could I hurt a child I don’t even know? Do you think just because you tried to blackmail me about my child I would do the same to yours?”

“Please listen...” She held up her hand.

“No, you listen,” he interrupted, and like a broken dam, it all came flooding out. “I would never do anything to hurt a child. Never! Nor would I hurt a mother in a way that would impact a kid, not physically, not emotionally. Children are the innocents of this world, and must be protected. Every day I do everything in my power to ensure that. Do you know I run a million-dollar charity against child hunger?”

Without a word, Laura shook her head.

He should stop there, hadn’t even meant to say that much. He had set up the charity under its own name; no one even knew it was his. But she needed to understand. “I even volunteer at the Boys and Girls Club. But it isn’t enough. It’ll never be enough. It can’t ever make up for... for...”

“For what?” she whispered.

“For losing my baby.”

She gasped, and suddenly it was like his heart had been ripped from him all over again. He rubbed his face vigorously, forcing himself to calm. “Don’t you understand? I would never hurt little Jeanie.”

Her eyes glistened. “Aidan,” she spoke softly. “You’re not responsible for what happened. It was an accident.”

Grief brought caustic bile into his mouth. “It never would’ve happened if it wasn’t for me, if I hadn’t told Leanne what she could and couldn’t do, if I hadn’t been so damn overprotective. She wouldn’t have gone out, wouldn’t have driven while furious, wouldn’t have crashed, wouldn’t have...”

“Stop right there.” She grasped his arms. “You can’t carry this guilt forever. It’s not your fault. So you got into a fight – every couple gets into them. There’s no way you could have predicted the accident.”

Sheer grief threatened to overwhelm him. “I should have.”

“You couldn’t.” Liquid eyes fought a beseeching plea. “The crash wasn’t your fault. Your family’s death wasn’t your fault. Accidents happen every day, and that’s all it was – an accident. You had no reason to believe your actions would lead to tragedy, and no reason to think you caused it. You were just trying to protect her. What if the opposite had happened? What if you hadn’t tried to protect her and then something happened? You can only do the best you can with the information you have. Please believe me – you are not to blame.”

Aidan breathed hard. He wanted to scream, to shout, to hit something, but it wouldn’t change anything, not the past, not the future. But then he looked into her eyes, and suddenly something happened that had never happened before. For just the tiniest instant, and just a little...

He believed her.

So many people told him it wasn’t his fault, friends and family comforting him for so many years. So why now, with a woman who was harboring a major secret, would he believe it? And yet for some reason, he did. Could he truly let go of the guilt – could he truly be free?

“Aidan...” Sincerity softened her voice. “I’m sorry I’ve been acting this way. I know you would never hurt Jeanie.” She closed her eyes, as if crafting what to say next. “You’re a great man, Aidan Bancroft, and you deserve more than you’ve been given. I have a feeling that soon, you’ll get exactly what you deserve. But first, you need to believe the accident wasn’t your fault. You are not to blame.”

What did she mean? What did he deserve? A part of him wondered, but right now he could only focus on the woman who somehow soothed the harshest of his endless guilt. Her

gaze held a million emotions, as they drifted closer and closer and closer. Then... he brushed her lips with his own.

She was all that was sweet, like the nectar of a ripe spring flower. Her lips were soft, warm and inviting, and she sighed as he caressed them. The sounds of approaching families drifted through the air, then he caught something – or rather someone – out of the corner of his eye. *Damn*. Forcing the heavy emotions back, he pulled back. “We need to leave now.”

She blinked, her eyes glassy and unfocused. “What?”

He pointed towards the carnival’s exit. Laura moaned softly at Carol White, lumbering towards them, cameraman in tow. Thankfully, she had just turned a corner, and would’ve been too far to see their kiss. However, with the emotions of the last few minutes, it was doubtful they could withstand renewed questioning. Flushed cheeks and swollen lips would undoubtedly give them away.

Laura clicked the car doors open and hurried to the driver’s side, while he opened the passenger door. She revved the vehicle to life and pulled into the street, just before the reporter reached them. Aidan bit back a healthy sliver of satisfaction as the gossip queen stomped her foot and glared after them.

Next to him, Laura exhaled deeply. “That was close.” His would-be chauffeur stole a sideways glance at him. “Where are we going?”

He stared straight ahead. “Your place.”

She hesitated, but didn’t say anything. He had shared much of himself – too much – and now it was her turn. He kept his eyes straight ahead, so he didn’t see her expression when he said, “It’s time to share your secrets.”

It’s time to share your secrets. The words echoed in Laura’s mind a hundred and one times as they drove in renewed silence. The man next to her didn’t know the extent of her deception, which grew deeper every minute she hid the truth. A part of her – a large part – wanted to share everything, but

she couldn't yet. She needed just a little more time, a little longer to make sure he was as he seemed.

Then she had to figure out how to tell him.

Now they stood in her home, eyes locked in a makeshift staring contest. As she studied the father of her child, her pulse raced along an Indy 500 track, thumping to the rhythm of her apprehension. He stood tall and handsome and proud, arms crossed over his chest. "Now tell me." His controlled voice was all serious. "What are you hiding from me?"

"I have nothing to say." She held her head high. "I was being overprotective, but I don't get why you're so upset about this."

And she honestly didn't. It was different when she thought her secret had been compromised. He had looked at the child with such emotion, that for a second it seemed certain he had guessed the truth. But then he calmed down, and she was safe, at least for the moment. Now, she wasn't so sure.

"Of course, I was affected by it. Because I don't understand anything about you." He edged closer. "When we met, you were this cruel woman ready to ruin a man's life for an article. Then I came to Pine Ridge and you were nothing like I thought, a little quirky, but caring and kind." He stepped forward yet again, now only a hairsbreadth's distance away. His presence filled her world. "And the worst part is..." He leaned closer yet. "I can't get you out of my head."

Then his lips were once more upon her.

At once, Laura melted into him, powerless to resist not only his desire, but her own. The passion-filled kiss was a frantic joining of two people desperately searching for answers, as she wrapped her arms around his muscle-bound back, as he encircled her waist. He caressed her, traced her lines to twine his hands through her hair. Unreleased tension exploded, raw emotions fighting to be heard. The kiss deepened, however it was not enough. Not nearly enough.

She wanted more.

Suddenly, the kiss became even more frenzied, more desperate, as they pressed closer yet. He peppered sweet kisses upon her face and neck, tantalizing her every sense, bringing heightened awareness to ultra sensitive spots. Her heart beat rapidly, her breathing grew shallow, as he overcame her senses. And then, for a brief second... he pulled away.

She licked swollen lips. He had not stopped, but merely hesitated, the questions darkening sapphire eyes. This time was different than the others. Those kisses had been both a beginning and an ending, but this joining was not over.

It had only just begun.

She knew what she wanted. Confused over the man, debilitated by the situation, she clutched one certainty in a world of uncertainties. She wanted to be close to him, as close as two people could be. Share with him her innermost secrets and hidden desires. No matter what the future brought, no matter what her decision must be, now was about him and her. She wanted to make love to Aidan.

She stepped boldly forward and touched him with a slightly trembling hand. "I want to be with you," she whispered, her voice proud and strong.

His expression melted into pure desire. She awaited his response, clutching clammy hands. Did he want what she so desperately needed? The answer was clear in his eyes. "Are you sure?" he all but growled.

His words made her even more so. By his hungry expression, he wanted this as much as she did, but as an honorable man and a true gentleman, he would make sure she was certain. She gave her response not as a word, but by gesture. Taking his arm, she gently nudged him toward the bedroom. His nostrils flared. He had his answer.

In one swoop he lifted her in his arms, as if she weighed nothing at all. He carried her gently yet firmly in his grasp, surrounding her in his unrelenting, muscular hold. He entered her room, a masculine force invading the feminine world, and softly lowered her on the shimmering sateen sheets. He joined

her immediately, covering her lips and stealing her breath once more. Then... fireworks.

Deep passion defined the kiss, and something far stronger, something instinctual, elemental, pure, rendering both powerless to control their own fates. Heated inch by heated inch, they pressed together, as he covered her limb for limb. His muscles were solid strength, his skin firm and smooth. The kiss deepened as they explored each other, but it was still not enough.

She wanted more.

Aidan caressed her, sending tingles that swelled sensitive areas, making them ache with desire. His touch was electric, his moves heated, as he stroked her back and arms, her legs and her stomach. She boldly returned with her own ministrations, delighting when strong muscles contracted under her hands. Images sent shivers down her spine, but it couldn't compare to the sensations of pleasure as he brushed her chest, as he flicked sensitive nipples.

Arousal pinkened secret spots, as she plucked open the buttons to his crisp shirt, unfastening the clothing that hid him, as he uncovered the barriers that could hide her no longer. There was no talk, only desperate swiftness, as the soon-to-be lovers worked in concurrent rhythm. When he removed his shirt, she gasped. The man was perfection defined. His smile was just a little wicked and all *possessive* as he removed her shirt. He splayed a hand boldly on her chest. "So lovely."

Her cheeks flamed at the unbridled desire flaring in eyes like the midnight sea. He caressed a tender breast, igniting white hot fire that belied the gentle motion. What was happening to her? She opened her arms, and he accepted the invitation, stretching above her, his muscular body meeting hers skin to skin, his breath hot upon her tender neck. Once again, she closed her eyes, and reality was *lost*.

It was the most beautiful joining Laura ever had, or could ever imagine. When the last barriers between them vanished, she stared at endless muscle, power far beyond apparent. Then the sensations turned to touch, as those muscles pressed

against her. Sighs escaped her lips, moans and gasps, as he whispered words of endearment, so much more than simple attraction or lust. Caring and goodness, compassion and depth, he held her as if she were the most important person in the world, and he treasured nothing above her.

Frantically, they explored each other's bodies, tantalizing with gentle and frenzied touches, both desperately rapid and impossibly slow. Then when the time was right, and she could wait not a moment longer, he entered her, and the world around them disappeared. As he became part of her, she knew nothing but this man, this togetherness. The physical sensations were intense, but the mental ones soared beyond imagination, reality lost as all control slipped from her grasp. No longer were they two people, now they were one, united.

Finally, when she could take no more, the storm broke, sending never-ending pleasure through her. Nearly unbearable satisfaction fired in powerful waves, heat enflaming every limb, and the bare skin he covered. She gasped for air, and he did the same, holding her tightly, as if he would never let her go. Perfection.

Time passed and her heart returned from the stratosphere, her breathing evening, but she just lay there, as reality slowly returned. She might have been with men before, but it had never been like this. The minutes progressed, yet they remained, as if they could reside forever in the stolen moment. A new reality beckoned – she had made love with the father of her child, and it had been the most beautiful experience of her life.

Yet conflicting emotions broke through the sensual haze, first as a sliver and then a widening chasm, as unnamed emotions tangled. How did she truly feel about him, and how did he feel about her? She must sort through her emotions – and *soon*.

She could have stayed in bed for hours, but a quick glance of the clock told her Jeanie would be home soon. The real world, and its responsibilities, choices and burdens, demanded her return. Slowly, she pulled back from Aidan's powerful form. He stopped her by tightening his arms, capturing her in

his commanding hold. As desire flared once more, she fought for the strength to resist. “Jeanie will be home soon.”

“The cat?” He smiled seductively, his voice calm and content.

Relief surged. His jokes proved he was no longer angry. “No, the child.”

He nodded as the humor, but not the contentment, departed his eyes. “Laura, I need you to know – what just happened, what we shared, has nothing to do with my investigation. It was just... just...”

“What we had to do,” she finished. His lack of understanding was understandable, for this force that lurked between them. Whatever it was, it was strong, and wouldn’t be denied. *Just like him.* “The same is true for me,” she shared softly. “I didn’t do this for any story and certainly not to use against you. In truth, I can’t comprehend what is happening between us.”

“One thing is inescapably clear.” He painted swirls on her skin with the pad of his finger, eliciting tiny shivers. “It was breathtaking. *You* are breathtaking.”

Pleasure tugged the sides of her lips. She hadn’t been the only one awed by the lovemaking. She tried to move away, but as she was about to slip off the bed, Aidan placed a firm hand on her arm, gently but firmly stopping her. “We’re going to have to figure this out.” His expression was serious, his gaze searching. His strength had been intense before, but now... it threatened to overwhelm.

She softly disentangled her arm, and he let her go. She had no misconceptions her escape was only temporary. A whisper followed her as she walked from the room. “I will uncover all of your secrets.”

No doubt.

Quickly, Laura showered. The strawberry soap was silk against her skin, the warm droplets soothing sore muscles and skin still flushed from lovemaking. By the time she finished and donned a flowery, orange sundress, only fifteen minutes

remained before Jeanie's expected arrival. She entered the living room where her *lover* waited. "You're dressed." Somehow the clothing didn't diminish his power. She had now seen the muscles that lurked underneath, *touched* them. Covered or not, his power was unparalleled.

He cocked his head to the side, lightened his expression with a smile. "Of course," he rumbled. "I wasn't going to stay naked."

"Of course not." *But, really, darn.* "Obviously you aren't going to stay naked." *Although it would be quite fashionable, tantalizing and just plain enjoyable.* "Getting dressed makes sense." *But did it really?*

Heat brought a flush to her face. Thank goodness he would soon be leaving. Though she unwittingly yearned for him to stay, she needed separation to refocus on her mission. And obviously, to regain her wits. Before she asked him to get naked again.

Focus! "Jeanie will be here any minute." She ignored the slight awkwardness at casual conversation after so tremendous an experience. "I'll see you tomorrow at the morning meeting."

He forked his hands through his thick hair. "Of course, but what are we doing tonight?"

"Tonight?" Her heart stuttered. Though he hadn't discovered the truth at first sight of his daughter, it didn't mean they were safe. The resemblance was uncanny, with similar features even a stranger would notice. Only his belief it was not within the realm of possibility kept him from suspecting the truth. Once he deduced it, an hour's research would provide confirmation.

Perhaps a different tactic would work. "I'm spending time with my daughter tonight. I haven't been with her as much as usual, and I promised to take her to the arcade."

"Sounds great." Intelligence glowed in sparkling eyes. "I haven't been to an arcade in years."

Was this some sort of test? Was he daring her to refuse him? He would then probe more, and by the time they finished, Jeanie was sure to be home. If she argued with him, it would raise suspicions of why she would still shield her daughter when he clearly meant no harm. On the other hand, if she allowed him to come...

He could figure out the truth.

Of course, her own life-altering decision loomed – whether to reveal the secret herself. More and more, she was sure she would, yet she needed a little more confirmation. What better way to see if he would be a good father than to have him actually spend time with Jeanie? Of course, the risk was there, but if they got along well, it would only be a matter of time before he knew everything. It led to a single decision. Jeanie would have her first night with both mother and father.

“All right,” she agreed. “You can come.”

Surprise lit sapphire eyes. “All right then.” He nodded and smiled, and with good timing. A knock sounded from the door.

With Aidan close behind, Laura strode to the door, nerves making her fingers tingly. Even that couldn't stop her amusement when a tiny voice drifted through the wood. “Open up, Mommy. It's me, Jeanie!”

She opened the door and grinned. So did Aidan, widely, as the little girl happily skipped in. Waving good-bye to the teacher's assistant, Laura picked up her daughter and gave her a butterfly kiss on the cheek. “Hello sweetie.”

“Hullo, Mommy!” Jeanie wiggled around to look at Aidan. “Hi.”

“Well, hello there, young lady.” His eyes sparkled as he held out his hand and playfully shook hers. “A pleasure, ma'am.”

Jeanie giggled at the gesture. “Not like that,” she chided. With a boldness only a child possessed, she moved his hand so only his pinky finger stuck out. She hooked it with her own. “Like that,” she instructed in a teacher-like tone.

“Ahhh.” Aidan nodded in utmost seriousness. “Thank you for showing me the right way. I’ll be sure to use my pinky from now on.”

Laura grinned at the image of Aidan going to one of his international business moguls and presenting him with a pinky shake instead of a handshake. So far, so good.

“I remember you,” Jeanie talked rapidly. “You played hide-and-seek with me.”

Well, so far, it had been good. Laura scrunched up her nose as Aidan gave her a knowing look. He turned back to the child. “That was a very fun game.” He winked. “I didn’t even know you were under the table.”

“I know.” Jeanie giggled again. She turned back to her mother. “Can we go to the arcade now, Mommy?”

Laura ruffled Jeanie’s silky locks, as she gently lowered her to the floor. “We can, as soon as you clean up your bedroom like you promised.”

Jeanie didn’t say another word as she spun like a top and raced to her room. Two seconds later, the sounds of speed cleaning reverberated through the apartment. Laura grinned wider and pivoted back to Aidan, yet her smile faded at his harsh expression. His own smile was gone, both from his lips and his eyes, melted into stark soberness. She stood frozen, afraid to breathe, afraid to talk. Something had caused a very rapid, very severe change in his mood. What was it?

Then he spoke...

And she closed her eyes...

Because he said,

“I know why you did it.”

CHAPTER 11



Laura stood perfectly still, unable to move, even to breathe. She could only stare at the man before her. “What do you mean?”

“I know why you visited my home.” His intense demeanor was heavy but unreadable. She fought to maintain a calm expression. Had he actually deciphered the truth, or had he come to the wrong conclusion? Was he trying to deceive her into revealing it herself?

“Please don’t play innocent.” He folded his arms across his chest. “It’s so obvious. How could I have not seen it before?”

“What do you think I did?” Clunking came from the bedroom, indicating her daughter would soon be out. Whatever happened had to be now.

“I believe you did it for Jeanie,” he murmured, “which is why I’m not as furious as I’d be if I thought you just wanted the money for yourself.”

“Money?” Laura echoed. “You think this is about money?”

“I know it’s about money.” He shook his head. “You somehow found out about my visit to the clinic and thought I would pay to keep the information out of the papers.”

She shook her head vehemently. “I would never blackma—”

“It was for Jeanie, wasn’t it?” he broke in, pinning her with guarded eyes, almost as if willing her to say yes. “You did it for your daughter?”

Laura exhaled slowly, careful not to betray relief at his mistaken conclusion. He thought she planned to ask for money in exchange for silence, however he believed she had done so for her daughter. She was grateful for the benefit of the doubt, although it was dismaying he still thought her a criminal. “Everything I have done has been for Jeanie,” she replied honestly.

He nodded. “I shouldn’t believe you, but I do. Don’t get me wrong, I’m still mad – furious even. I do not look kindly upon those who would steal from me. However I understand the love a parent has for a child, the measures you’d take to give that child a better life. But, Laura, don’t you know Jeanie would be best served if you can be completely honest with her?”

She simply nodded, for if she spoke, she could somehow give away the truth. Honesty had not played much of a part of her life of late.

“I just don’t understand why you didn’t accept the money I offered in the first place.” His gaze speared her. “I assume you had an attack of conscience at the last minute.”

With no alternative, she nodded again.

He opened his mouth to speak more, but thankfully, the conversation ended as Jeanie bounded into the room, her bright hair flying behind her. She stopped in between Laura and Aidan, unaware of the tension thickening the air. “All clean, Mommy!” she declared proudly.

“Already?” Laura rubbed her hands together. They were clammy and cold, just like her heart. “Then it’s time to go to the arcade. Just get your coat, sweetie, and we’ll leave.” Jeanie disappeared from view, and Laura turned to Aidan. She only had a few seconds. “Do you still want to come?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

She nodded, a surprising burst of relief loosening her limbs. “Let’s go then.”

Jeanie skipped back into the room full of energy. She was wearing her coat, carrying Laura’s black everyday jacket and

holding onto something else – a bubblegum pink concoction of chiffon ruffles and lace frills. Peering closely, Laura recognized it as the fairy princess cape of one of her old and very ridiculous Halloween costumes. “Honey, what have you got there?”

“I brought your jacket, Mommy.” Jeanie handed her mother the black coat, as the trio started to the doorway. She turned towards Aidan. “I didn’t know where your jacket was, so I brought you one of Mommy’s. I picked out the prettiest one.” She handed the bright costume to Aidan.

Laura couldn’t stifle the smile as Aidan examined the pink hot mess in his large and powerful hands. He, too, was obviously trying to hide his amusement. She ruffled her daughter’s hair. “Honey, Mommy is proud of you for remembering Mr. Bancroft, but that really isn’t his style.”

The little girl’s face fell. Laura hated to disappoint her, especially when she had been so responsible to think of Aidan. With a stricken look, Jeanie faced Aidan. “You’re not going to wear it?”

Laura looked towards Aidan. This was the sort of interaction she was interested in – the type that would reveal what kind of father he would be.

“Why, of course, I’m going to wear it.” Aidan bent down until he was at eye level with the little girl. “Thank you very much, young lady.”

Laura stared in shock. She’d wondered whether he would be kind or curt when he refused the cape. She never expected him to accept it! The sunshine returned to Jeanie’s eyes as she blinked at Aidan with newfound admiration. Laura’s heart stopped, as father and daughter shared a moment, completely unaware of their true connection. Their eyes were focused solely on each other, and she was sure, somewhere very deep down, they knew the truth.

“Well, let’s go then.” Laura donned her jacket, then looked to Aidan, gesturing to the pink fabric.

“Right then.” His voice was a little less confident. Carefully handling the feminine piece of cloth as if it could combust at any moment, he brought the costume around his broad, muscular shoulders. This time, Laura could not squelch a smile.

“Is something the matter?” His voice was completely serious, but humor danced in his expression.

“No, nothing at all,” she managed, trying to calm herself. “It’s just... well you look so... princessy.”

He narrowed his eyes, and she laughed again. “Okay group, time to go!”

Laura opened the door, and she and her daughter strode out. Aidan hesitated, obviously not pleased with the idea of going out in public. But then, with his head held high, he strode through the door. Jeanie, always anxious to go to the arcade, skipped ahead while Laura and Aidan strolled side by side behind. As they traveled, Aidan kept glancing to the left and right.

“Is something wrong?” Laura whispered. “If you want to show off your new look, we could knock on some doors...”

He turned to her, a dangerous glint in his eye. “Are you enjoying this?” he asked in a low voice.

She nodded, wearing a broad grin. “Immensely.” She didn’t want to tease him too much, since he had been extremely generous to wear it for the sake of her daughter. “I appreciate you doing this for Jeanie,” she said sincerely.

He glanced at the little girl, and his features softened. “When I saw the look in her eyes, I couldn’t say no. However, don’t think your kind words will get *you* off the hook. Too little. Too late.”

She wasn’t worried. She was enjoying this little exchange. “Off the hook for what?” She placed as much innocence into her voice as she could muster. A little too much.

“For making fun of my... my...”

“Princess costume,” Laura suggested.

“No, my...”

“Fairy cape,” she prompted.

His eyes narrowed. “Okay, fine, cape. Don’t think I’m not going to get you back.”

Heat streaked through her blood. “How do you plan to do that?”

“We have ways of dealing with such insolence.”

She gasped as he reached out and tickled her sides. Jeanie turned around, and seeing what fun they were having without her, raced back and commenced tickling her mother as well. With two against one, and everyone laughing hysterically, Laura finally begged for mercy. The tickling finally stopped, and the three continued on their walk.

For a moment, they were truly a family.

AIDAN HAD little experience with children, but it was easy to entertain the adorable little girl. One simply had to listen and she would talk up a storm, sharing tidbits of her day, life and little family. Some people thought children had nothing important to say, but he believed the opposite. It was amazing what you could learn when you looked at the world through those innocent eyes.

It also took so little to connect with the little sprite. When he showed appropriate enthusiasm to the baby ducks from the park, she became his friend for life. He was almost sorry when they arrived at the arcade.

“You can take the costume off now,” Jeanie suddenly said. She smiled at him, her blue eyes shining. “Mommy was right – it isn’t really your style.”

He smiled softly. Not only was the child sweet, but she was perceptive and considerate. “I appreciate you getting it for me,” he replied sincerely, taking off the pink crime against fashion. “That was very kind.”

Laura, however, was not done with the mischief. The little minx leaned in and whispered, “Mr. Bancroft, are you sure you

don't want to wear it. For me?" She batted her eyes playfully.

"Just wait until I get you alone," he growled lowly so only she could hear. Satisfaction rose at her sweet blush. Was she replaying their lovemaking of earlier?

"That's not fair," she whispered. "You're playing dirty."

He crossed his arms over his chest, and she returned the gesture before they were interrupted by a loud and exasperated voice, "Come on, Mommy. We're here!"

"So we are." She started towards the entrance, but the little girl tramped over to Aidan and took his hand. "Have you ever been here?" she asked, pulling him to the door.

"No, I haven't." He allowed himself to be dragged along by the little girl. "Is it a good one?"

"It's decent," she replied, and he chuckled at her adult tone. Such a little lady. "There's a bigger one in the next town, but the food here is better. So it just about evens out." Reaching the entrance, the little girl pulled hard to open the big door, waving off his hand when he tried to assist her. Just like her mother, she wanted to be independent. Finally, she hefted the door open, and they entered the boisterous, neon wonderland.

Consisting of two large game rooms, a dining area and bumper cars, the arcade boasted an underwater theme with fish decorations, marine life photographs and mermaid sculptures, which Jeanie proudly told him had been modeled by real mermaids. Flashing games and toddler rides were scattered about, including classics like Skee-Ball and air hockey. A small carousel took up a corner, and a row of pinball machines flashed along one side. Laughing families filled the space, which smelled like buttered popcorn and piping hot pizza. Ringing, dinging, banging and clapping echoed from every corner.

They took a booth in the corner with puffy red seats and a clear resin table with 3D clownfish and seahorses. A waitress with wavy blond hair gave him a menu and a coy look, but like the model at the carnival, it didn't affect him. The only

woman he desired was sitting across from him, biting the ruby red lips he so recently kissed, lips he planned on kissing again very, very soon. He forced his attention back to the menu. “Jeanie...” He regarded the little girl with an expression of utter seriousness. “Do you think we should order forty-five pizzas?”

She giggled. “I think that’s too much.”

“Ahhh.” He made a show of studying his menu once more. Putting it down, he inquired, “Forty-four?”

Jeanie giggled again. “I think you’re being silly,” she accused.

He held his hands to his heart, placed an exaggerated look of horror on his face. “Me?!”

Jeanie broke into a fit of laughter, enthusiastically bobbing her head up and down. “Yes, you!” she squealed.

He winked at Laura. “Seems like I’ve been found out,” he confided. “If we’re not going to get forty-four pizzas, then how about we share one? I like earthworms and frog legs on mine. What about you?”

“Ewww!” the little girl groaned, wrinkling her nose. Then, realizing she was being teased again, she laughed hysterically. The funny bantering continued – before the waitress returned, during the waitress’ visit when they ordered *one* large pizza *without* earthworms and frog legs and after she left. There wasn’t silence until the pizza came and they were munching happily. Even then, it was a comfortable silence, relaxed and natural as if repeated thousands of times before. The hungry group ate quickly, and soon the entire pie disappeared. It had been exactly the right amount.

“Mommy, can I play now?”

Laura smiled at her daughter. “All right, honey.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a roll of tokens. “Here you go.”

“Thank youuuu!” Jumping up, Jeanie raced to the first game.

Discomfort soured Aidan's stomach, even though Jeanie was only a few feet away and well within sight. It wasn't his daughter, so he really shouldn't say anything. Two seconds later, he asked, "You're letting her go off just like that?"

Laura turned towards him, but kept her eyes on Jeanie. "She's never out of my sight, and I only stay a few feet back. I move anytime she does." She rose and followed Jeanie as she hopped to the next game.

He exhaled lowly, as he also rose. He was definitely overreacting – they had a direct view of the little girl, and he could reach her in seconds if there was a problem. Why was he feeling so protective of a kid he'd just met? "She's a great kid. She seems quite intelligent."

Laura lit up as she told him about how the preschool teacher recommended a special program for gifted children, eliciting unfamiliar pride within him. He'd known right away she was smart, but hadn't realized how talented she was. Though he conversed with Laura, he always kept Jeanie in his sight. The same strange familiarity as before arose. "Why don't we join her? She looks so alone out there."

Laura smiled brightly, as if she'd been waiting for him to suggest it. "Sure," she agreed, and they walked over to the little girl. "Hello pumpkin." Laura playfully ruffled the girl's shimmery hair. "How are you doing?"

"Great!" The little girl threw a foam ball inside a rainbow-colored can. The lid moved up and down, a life-size mechanical clown peeking out from underneath. She squealed in delight as the lid moved faster, cheering every time she got a goal. The game finally ended, and she exuberantly plucked her winning tickets. "Let's play again!" she exclaimed. "Only this time you guys help me!"

Aidan winked at Laura. "Up for it?"

"Absolutely."

Laura never looked so happy or beautiful as she placed a token in the slot, and the game sprung to life. Grabbing balls as quick as they could, the trio vigorously lobbed them into the

target like an Olympic gold medal basketball team. Thirty seconds, twenty tickets and endless laughter later, they emerged from the game victorious.

“What’s next?” Laura asked Jeanie, who was hopping up and down like a little jumping bean. The excited child led them to the pinball games, where they took turns with the circus machine. After that, they tackled Skee-Ball, where his jackpot inspired an exuberant squeal, and the racing games, where they sped next to each other on a virtual Indy track. He actually held front row seats to the real race last year, yet somehow it paled to this moment. They traveled from game to game, from one joyful encounter to another. It was an unusual night of entertainment for him, but somehow more fun than the big society events and exclusive clubs he usually attended, bringing pure joy he hadn’t felt in a long time.

Not since he’d anticipated his own family.

They reached the air hockey table, and Laura inserted two tokens. A puck popped into the slot as swishing air hummed. Laura held the handle to her daughter, but Jeanie shook her head. “I want you two to play.” She pointed to her mother, then to Aidan.

He rubbed his hands together. “What about it, partner? If you’re scared, I understand.”

Jeanie giggled. “Mommy isn’t scared of anything. Right, Mommy?”

For a second’s sliver, Laura paled, proving there was at least one thing she feared. In the next second, she stood taller. “That’s right.” She handed him the disc. “You’re on.”

Aidan retrieved the puck and held it over the middle, where it drifted slowly on the currents of air. “Ready?” He leaned down, his muscles poised and alert.

“Ready,” she agreed, her arm in position.

“Then go!” He released the puck and, without hesitation, hit it with the advantage of his long arms. Laura jumped back just in time to deflect the speeding missile from her goal.

She narrowed her eyes. “So you’re going to play like that?” She aimed and hit, missing his goal by a mere inch.

“Don’t you know I always play to win?” He gave a quick jab. The puck resounded off the left wall, then flew neatly into her goal.

“Score!” Jeanie clapped her hands.

“Oh yeah?” Laura retrieved the puck from under the table. “Well, take this.” With a quick flick of the wrist, she set the circle flying, right into Aidan’s goal. “Yeah!” She pumped her fist in the air, as Aidan made an over-exaggerated, dumbfounded expression.

“It’s tied!” squealed Jeanie.

“Not for long,” Aidan predicted, taking aim with the puck. Laura returned the volley, and hence it traveled back and forth, speeding through the air-ridden table. She returned, blocked and aimed, but an unfortunate misdirection caused her to lose the turn. However, she took the next one. And thus it went, back and forth, one player and then the other. Finally they were tied, an even 6-6, and the game turned to sudden death.

“The next one to score is going to be the undisputed air hockey champion of the universe,” Jeanie declared.

He released the puck and with a swift hook, set it soaring across the pocked surface. Laura returned it with a deft backhand, and it flew between them in their longest volley yet. With her arm clearly tiring, Laura still kept swinging furiously, and he had to move quickly to deflect her. She must play regularly, he guessed, to make up for her smaller size and speed. As he moved to the left to block where he thought she’d aim, she flung the puck to the right instead. It flew flawlessly into the goal.

“Mommy won!” Jeanie jumped up and down. She gave her mother a bear hug, as if she had just won that Olympic medal.

Aidan groaned, but in truth, he hadn’t been this happy in... well, he couldn’t remember. It was like he was a kid again, before there were any commitments, any worries, any guilt. He held out his hand. “Good game.”

Laura grasped his fingers, eliciting the usual spark of electricity between him and his would-be opponent. “Good game.”

“As long as you had fun, it’s okay.” Jeanie gave him a conciliatory pat on the back. “You’re still a winner to me.”

His heart melted... just a little. “Thank you very much, young lady.” He blinked eyes that were a little watery, obviously from the dust. “I am going to need a rematch. What do you say, partner?”

Laura glanced at her watch and shook her head. It had gotten late, no doubt way past the kid’s bedtime. “I’m sorry, kids. Little girls need their beauty sleep.” She picked up her daughter and gave her a big hug. “We’re going to have to take a rain check, sweetie.”

“Awww, Mom,” Jeanie protested. “Do we have to go?”

“I’m afraid so.” Laura placed her back on the floor. As expected, the child grabbed her mom’s hand, but then grasped his, as well. “Let’s go then.”

Aidan parted his lips, but Laura just smiled. And as they walked out, he couldn’t help but think...

This is what it felt like to be a father.

LAURA WALKED AT A LEISURELY PACE, as her daughter chatted incessantly with Aidan. Her mind drifted back to the night, to their experiences and what she learned. Tonight had been great – no, not just great – wonderful, amazing, spectacular. Aidan had been all she could have hoped for and more, kind and patient with the little girl, taking the role of doting father to perfection. He probably never realized the wistful look in his eyes, nor the sadness, undoubtedly a reflection of his great loss. What would it mean to him when he discovered the truth?

She had been similarly pleased by Jeanie’s reaction to Aidan. The child had taken a special likeness to the man who would wear a pink frilly wrap just to make her happy. When

Jeanie asked Aidan to help her pick out prizes, Laura was shocked. She was even more astonished to discover she didn't mind – it actually felt nice to share her daughter. With Aidan's help, Jeanie chose a bright sparkling necklace and a small teddy bear.

Now they were almost home. Aidan had picked the child up a few minutes ago when she made a slight stumble, and now held her easily in his arms. The child's voice grew smaller and smaller until she failed to respond to one of his questions. He looked down, and then smiled softly.

“She's asleep,” Laura whispered.

He nodded, breathed deeply, pure contentment on his face. Tears threatened at the beautiful scene between father and daughter, the instinctual love they didn't know they shared. She kept her voice light. “I figured she wouldn't make it home. When she's awake, she's got more energy than a power plant, but all of a sudden, it catches up to her.”

“She really is something.” Aidan took another look at the sleeping form. “She's great.”

“Thank you.” Laura smiled. “I think so, too. She's everything to me.”

“Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

She bit her bottom lip. She didn't want to accidentally let the truth slip before she deciphered exactly how to tell him, but he'd probably just find another way if she denied him. She nodded.

“What happened to her father?”

Laura's heart skipped a beat. It was the perfect opportunity to tell him everything, but she just couldn't. Not now, on a busy sidewalk with her daughter asleep in his arms. “Her father is not part of the picture,” she replied vaguely.

He shook his head. “That's unbelievable. Does he know what he's missing?”

She released a deep breath of painful irony. “I don't think he does,” she replied simply.

“Do you think he’ll ever be part of his daughter’s life? She’s such a great kid, I can’t imagine anyone walking away from that.” Utter sincerity underscored genuine emotion, reaching deep within her.

“If you asked me last year, I’d have said definitely not.” She pulled her coat closer around her. “But now there might be a chance.”

“He doesn’t deserve her.” His gaze hardened. “If he didn’t see the need to stick around before, he’s not worthy of her now. She’d probably be better off with a stepfather should you decide to marry. No man should ignore his child.”

She swallowed through an acrid throat. What would he do when he found out that unwittingly and unknowingly, *he* had ignored his own child? She slowed as they reached the entrance to her apartment building, where a gleaming black limo stood next to the curb.

“I called while you took Jeanie to the bathroom,” Adain explained. “I figured you wouldn’t want me spending the night with her around.”

Just the mention of him staying the night snapped sensitive areas to attention. *Down, girl.* “Definitely not a good idea.” She tried for neutral, couldn’t stop the tinge of regret.

“Let me help you up with her.”

Laura nodded gratefully. Jeanie was growing larger every day, and a flight carrying her up the stairs was getting difficult. In contrast, Aidan effortlessly cradled her as they crept up the steps in silence. They entered the apartment together, as if a regular family, and she led him to the pink princess bedroom, where he gently placed the sleeping girl on the bed. Jeanie shifted, but did not wake, as Laura removed tiny shoes and whispered goodnight.

As she backed to the door, Aidan stayed, his expression filled with longing he couldn’t hide. “Goodnight, sweetheart,” he murmured. He reached down and gently tucked in the blanket.

Tears stung the backs of Laura's eyes. Now that she'd made her decision, she couldn't wait until he knew the truth. Aidan turned, and with a quick gesture, motioned for her to leave. Quietly, they snuck out of the room and shut the door. They stood chest to chest, gaze to gaze, eyes locked in a silent battle. Her breath caught in her throat, as she studied the man who played havoc with her senses. "What *is* between us?" she whispered, voicing the question tormenting her since she met the powerful man. It was unwise and risky, yet she couldn't stop it.

His eyes reflected a thousand emotions. "I don't know," he finally breathed. "I feel this force when I'm with you, something I've never felt before. I don't understand it, but I just can't let it go."

Her breath caught in her throat. Was he saying he wouldn't let *her* go? "It has to be lust." She waved her hand. "Simple chemical attraction." Yet even she could no longer believe the weak excuse. After their amazing lovemaking, it was anything but simple.

"You can't really think that." He flexed his muscles. "It's not just about sex, either, although I must admit, that was amazing. I look forward to... exploring you further." He smiled wickedly, as a blush warmed her cheeks. "But there's far more between us. I want to be with you, spend time with you. You're not like any woman I've ever met before. You're..."

"One strange lady?" she suggested.

He laughed. "Maybe that's it." He turned serious. "We need to figure this out."

She exhaled slowly. How could she make any decisions before he knew the truth? Would he welcome the news *and* her with open arms, understanding why she had waited to tell him? Or would he be furious she kept the secret for so long?

"No decisions will be made tonight." He spared her the responsibility of asking for more time. "Except one." He grinned with mischief. "How am I going to punish you for your comments about the wrap?"

Laura's heart quickened. "Did I hear you right?" She cupped her ear and leaned close, widening her eyes into an innocent look. "Did you say you wanted to keep the wrap?"

He chuckled. Then without warning, he grabbed her and pulled her into a tight embrace. Her body heated under the close contact, arousal flaring at the desire burning in his eyes.

"I'm going to like this payback," she whispered as his arms snaked around her. Then his lips took hers, and reality fled as she melted into him. Unlike the other kisses, this one was painstakingly gentle, and even as she pressed for more, he kept the kiss all the lighter. It was a sweet drop of forbidden fruit, a tantalizing taste of denied ecstasy. She asked for more, begged for it, but he refused, giving only enough so she could not leave, but so much less than she wanted. Finally, he pulled away... ever-so-slowly.

Laura watched with breathless anticipation, her need fiercer than ever. Desire and responsibility spared, but they couldn't go further, not with her daughter so near. "That was... well, it was..."

"Cruel?" he intoned, his voice deep with desire. "For me, too." He reached back, and with a full kiss on the lips, turned and strode from the desire, from the room and from the home. For a moment, she just stood there, a million thoughts, emotions and uncertainties tangling.

What was this man doing to her?

CHAPTER 12



The scene outside Aidan's hotel window was mother nature's masterpiece, emerald fields dotted with towering pine trees and wild hydrangea, rural land as far as the eye could see. What a difference between this and his once extravagant yet ordered life. The hotel room – Pine Ridge's finest – was comfortable yet simple, a one room abode with little furniture beyond a simple oak four poster bed and a diminutive writing desk. By contrast, his last hotel room boasted four bedrooms, six bathrooms, a fully furnished bar and gilded furniture. He couldn't live out of this tiny room much longer, but he kept stalling his departure. He told himself it was because of business, but the truth was, he couldn't even contemplate leaving. So yesterday he did what he needed to do.

He instructed his assistant to scout local homes for sale.

Three full weeks had passed since his arrival. Three weeks in a whirlwind, a seemingly lifetime of changes in mere moments of time, much of it due to one feisty reporter. From their first lovemaking, they had become secret partners, relishing in each other's company during the day and stealing intimate moments when Jeanie was away. They had done together all the things life could offer in Pine Ridge – ate at a dozen mom-and-pop restaurants, visited state parks, enjoyed the local drive-through – and although they were not his usual activities, he enjoyed them as much as thousand-dollar society dinners and exclusive political galas.

Best of all, they spent countless moments in the privacy of Laura's home, with and without precious little Jeanie. The little girl tagged along more often than not on their excursions, but he didn't mind. She was sweet and playful, intelligent and unfailingly adorable. Her smile lit up the room, brightening his mood and bringing a simple yet pure joy. He would never admit how he caved in to her little demands. So he had splurged for the jumbo popcorn and three different types of candy when they went to the movies? So he let her give him a makeover, complete with press-on nails and eyeshadow? He, the man who could take down the most fearsome corporate raider, could apparently be undone by blinking blue eyes. He would have to start holding back soon, but for now he was just enjoying life. For once, he let himself just imagine:

What if this really was his family? Laura his wife? Jeanie his little girl?

What if he simply refused to let them go?

Aidan and Laura still used the guise of reporter/subject, but ever-increasing stares and gossip foretold the ruse's imminent end. The proposed collaboration between Bancroft Enterprises and Pine Ridge was on the verge of fruition, progressing in daily meetings and countless negotiations. Detailed plans had been set, and all that remained were the final signatures. Those were planned for this very day, with the formal announcement to be made the following morning. Tomorrow night would be a large party, the grandest the town had ever seen, to celebrate the coming together of the two forces. After that, Laura's assignment would end, along with his excuse to be with her. Time had run out, and like the CEO he was, he made a decisive decision.

He wasn't ready for the relationship to end, not now, not ever.

"EXCUSE ME. Have you seen Aidan Bancroft?" Laura grinned across the narrow mahogany desk at the hotel receptionist. Today she was early – very early – on a search for her

formidable quarry. She hadn't called to surprise him, and he hadn't answered his door.

With a warm smile, the young blond clerk bobbed her head. Like most people in Pine Ridge, Laura had known the sweet woman for over a decade. "He headed to the gym earlier."

With a thankful smile, Laura set off for the hotel weight room, traversing a carpeted hallway with pink floral wallpaper and the scent of lemon pine cleaner. Her thoughts swirled around the events that transformed her life, the amazing man who transformed her. More than ever, she couldn't imagine her world without Aidan. She wanted to give him the greatest gift of all, a present she had already granted him, even if he didn't know. Every second, she longed to tell him, but still something held her back. The moment she told him, their lives would irreversibly change. She had to prepare for that.

Her mouth dried when she finally caught sight of her prey at one of the machines, surrounded by women. It should be illegal for a man to be that attractive. Wearing loose gym shorts and a tight fitting t-shirt, Aidan looked like an action hero testing his superhuman strength. His biceps bulged as he pushed the weights away in repetitive motions, his muscles rippling, his body straining, his power undeniable. Then he saw her, and his lips curved into a slow, seductive smile, as he set the weights back and removed himself from the machine. He graciously excused himself and walked over.

Aware of their audience, Laura hid her amorous feelings. "Mr. Bancroft," she intoned casually, "Could you provide an update on the business transaction before the morning meeting?"

"I would be happy to issue a statement for the paper," he returned in a professional tone. "Let me just retrieve my belongings."

She tried to hide her anticipation as he left and returned, and they walked together, discussing the business collaboration. Yet she could scarcely track the idle conversation at the powerful presence next to her. When they

reached privacy of his room, all talk ceased, and she walked into open arms.

He hugged her tight. "I missed you." He leaned back so he could see her face. "So very much."

A shiver streaked through her. She straightened her lips into a serious line. "Are you sure? You didn't seem lonely back there."

Aidan raised his eyebrows. "Do I need to prove just how much I longed for you?"

"It's only polite." She broke free and sat down upon the soft, velvet-covered bed, patting the space next to her. He strode over and removed his shirt to reveal six-pack abs. She reminded herself not to drool. *Repeatedly.*

"I don't give up my secrets easily." He gave a look of mock seriousness. "You're going to have to force it out of me."

With a seductive smile, Laura raised her lips to his...

And tried.

And although she wasn't able to retrieve the information, it was an absolutely breathtaking attempt.

THE REMAINDER of the day thundered by in a flurry of official events. The final papers were signed in front of an audience that even included national news stations. Afterwards, Aidan spent the afternoon in meetings and press interviews while Laura wrote her final piece on the businessman. As if her unconscious didn't want the formal relationship to end, she wrote slowly, dueling writer's block and endless distraction. Finally, it was edited, revised and submitted. It was over...

But something else was about to begin.

Perhaps that was why she lay wide awake in bed that night as a thousand thoughts tangled, revolving around the billionaire businessman, her family, *their* family. Why minutes and then hours passed, but she remained alert and poised. The time had come to implement her decision.

The decision that would forever change her life.

It really wasn't a choice. It hadn't been for a long time. With his kindness, honor and goodness, Aidan had long ago earned the right to claim his daughter, and she could no more keep Jeanie from him than from herself. Tomorrow he would learn the truth.

Though her decision had been made, sleep remained elusive. She tossed and turned, shifted, got up and down and drank warm milk, but nothing coaxed her to sleep. Finally, she gave up and invited the proverbial sheep jumping over the fence to ponder the culprit of her insomnia. Aidan had taken up permanent residence in her psyche, claimed it as his own and would not depart. The worst part was the longing – the intense desire, want, need, force to be with him. She wanted to feel his arms around her, holding her tight. She wanted to spend time with him, to playfully banter, to talk about any and every subject. If he had been here, no doubt she would have been asleep long ago, wrapped in his powerful arms.

The emotions originated from the very beginning, since the moment she first laid eyes on the enigmatic billionaire. Already the mysterious feeling had borne many names. At first, she thought it sparked from his connection to Jeanie. Later she had called it lust, and thereafter it had progressed to liking. But none of those names fit quite right, because they had been wrong, so very wrong. The true emotion blazed:

Love.

She hadn't believed in love at first sight before Aidan, but now fantasy became reality, a dream the truth. She finally admitted what she had known for so very long. She was in love with Aidan Bancroft.

With that sudden knowledge came peace. An involuntarily smile graced her lips as taut muscles finally relaxed, as contented sleep finally overtook her. A final thought of half-reality, half-dream drifted by...

Tomorrow, they would finally get their happy ending.

“TELL ME, do you believe in love at first sight?”

“Boy, do I ever. Don’t you?”

“I’m just not sure.”

“Then why don’t we let our listeners decide? Call 333-WRTT and tell us what you think.”

Laura stretched catlike, cracking open sleep-drenched eyes. Her lips tugged up as she emerged from the foggy morning haze, somehow well-rested despite the tumultuous night. She deactivated the alarm, and only a lack of time stopped her from calling the radio program to tell them about love at first sight’s newest convert. With speed resulting from anticipation and hope, she jumped out of bed, ready to embark on a day of new beginnings. She hummed softly as she strode into her daughter’s room. “Good morning, sleepyhead.” She placed a gentle kiss on Jeanie’s forehead. “Rise and shine.”

“I don’t wanna.” Turning over, Jeanie burrowed deeper under the covers. Only her little feet remained visible.

Laura’s grin widened. Jeanie reminded her so much of Aidan. “But we have to get up, sweetie.” She gently nudged the bump under the covers. “You don’t want to be late for preschool. Today is going to be a very special day.”

A little blue eye peeked out from under the covers. “Why?” she queried, childlike curiosity overshadowing the sleepiness in her gaze. “Is ice cream involved?”

Laura laughed and hugged her daughter. “It’s even better than ice cream. I can’t tell you now, but this is going to be one of the most important days in our lives. Now let’s get up and start it.”

The little blue eye disappeared. “Don’t wanna.”

Time for drastic action. “If you get up now, I could be convinced to make pancakes.”

No more convincing was necessary. With more energy than a pinball at the arcade, Jeanie jumped out of bed. Her hair was still mussed from sleep, her clothes wrinkled from bed,

but it didn't diminish her glow of pure excitement. Could the small child somehow sense what was happening?

Laura quickly made a pancake feast for herself and her daughter, with blueberries and strawberries and fresh whipped cream, and got them both dressed. Today she chose a soft silk dress, light yellow like the morning sun, with a sweetheart neckline, fitted bodice and lightly flared skirt. A wide tie in the back molded it around soft curves. She wore her hair long and free in beachy auburn waves. A sparkling solitaire on a thin gold chain completed the outfit.

The minutes sped by in a hectic rush. Laura dropped her daughter off at preschool and traveled through busier than normal roads to the county park. Since city hall would not hold the number of people who wanted to attend the collaboration announcement, an outdoor stage would provide the venue. The papers were already signed, thus it was more a formality than an official event.

It was a gorgeous day, the early morning dew moistening the air, crisp and fresh. Soft hills of rolling green created a gorgeous backdrop, punctuated by tall pine trees and soft wildflowers. Laura parked in the grassy field that served as overflow parking and trekked over the buoyant ground, greeting smiling friends with fluffy maltipoos and rambunctious cockaliers. In the distance, Aidan stood tall, as always, the center of attention. A smile surfaced as she approached. "Hello, Ms. Blake," he greeted formally.

"Mr. Bancroft, a pleasure as always." She winked widely.

His eyes sparkled. "Someone ate her sunshine cereal this morning."

"Actually they were sunshine pancakes," she corrected with a laugh. "I was just thinking if Pine Ridge had a currency, you would be on the hundred dollar bill."

He shook his head. "I'm not so sure about that." He studied her, and his expression turned contemplative. "Really, though. You seem... different."

Not only seemed, but *was*. She was a new woman, in love and sure of her choices. “I am different.”

“Oh?” Perceptive eyes sharpened. “Care to share what prompted this fascinating change?”

She gazed at her love, the father of her child. If only she could tell him now, reveal that he was a father. Would he jump for joy, embrace her and proclaim he was the happiest man in the world? But she couldn’t say anything in front of a hundred people and before a vast day of changes. After the announcement, festivities and formal ball, she would reveal the truth that would redefine their lives. “Not yet. Tonight.”

“I thought all secrets had been revealed. Do you have something else to share with me?” His tone was light, his eyes full of humor.

“Yes.”

Ever-so-slowly his humor faded. “Really?”

“Yes,” she repeated, even though it would not be good enough for him. No doubt he would cajole her into telling him, using his not inconsiderable skills to wheedle the truth. Fortunately, any attempt was cut short by the arrival of a dozen city officials bearing greetings, handshakes and congratulations. As they left, more arrived, signaling they would be afforded no more privacy now.

With a parade of official speeches, the ceremony began. Aidan worked the crowd like a master conductor, earning long standing ovations and endless admiration. When it was over, they mingled, enjoying finger sandwiches and miniature pastries filled with homemade preserves and sweet cream, as well as a slice of the largest cake Laura had ever seen. A dozen homemade punches kept everyone well hydrated.

Laura left before the event officially ended, to avoid Aidan pressing for information as the crowd thinned, and spent the rest of the morning and afternoon in the office. When she finished her work, she traveled home alone, since Jeanie would be spending the night at her uncle’s house. Time passed rapidly, and soon it was time to prepare for the evening. She

hadn't been to a ball in, well never, unless one counted the books she loved as a child.

This time, Laura already had her outfit selected. The exquisite gown represented her splurge of a lifetime, but it had been worth the expense. Crafted of fine lavender silk and sparkling sequins, the gown fell to the ground in glimmering waves, with ever-so-tiny sleeves of the sheerest silk and a sexy slit exposing one leg. Light as a cloud and soft as rose petals, it swirled gently around her as she moved. A brilliant golden choker shimmered brilliantly as an accompaniment, matched by sequin shoes and an embroidered silk bag. For her hair, sparkling rhinestone combs swept the sides in graceful waves. As she gazed at the reflection of the woman who was and yet could not be her, she smiled softly. She was ready.

She was the princess going to the ball to meet her prince. She felt like true royalty as she departed her apartment and floated through the carpeted hallways. She stepped into the parking lot, stopped as rustling sounded behind her. She pivoted ever-so-slowly to...

Aidan.

She could do nothing but stare. He was always handsome, always gorgeous beyond compare, but tonight... tonight no words existed. In a formal midnight black tuxedo, he towered larger than life, far too beautiful to be mere mortal. He stood tall and proud, muscular power and regal authority. With thick hair falling softly around twilight blue eyes and chiseled features, he was a masterpiece of beauty and strength.

And he had claimed her.

“You are a work of art.” He spoke first, his voice deep with desire. “So beautiful.”

Her heart stuttered. She stepped towards him, he matched it, and in two long strides, stood in front of her. Large hands encircled her waist, holding her still as he caressed the sensitive skin of her back. She moaned softly, fought not to submit to the spell he was weaving. “What are you doing here?” she whispered.

A curt headshake, as if even he didn't know the answer. "I know we're supposed to meet at the ball, to not raise suspicions about our relationship, but, Laura, I can't do this anymore. I won't let you pretend this is some simple fling." He cupped her cheek, possessively stroked tender skin. "I will be escorting you to the grand ball, Ms. Blake. I don't care what anyone has to say about it."

His expression was unmovable, his conviction undeniable. Arguing would be both futile and contradictory to her true desires. She planted a soft kiss on his cheek.

"I'll take that as a yes." His tone softened at her acceptance of her capture, with a look of promise that elicited delicious chills. He gestured to a waiting limo. "Your chariot awaits, madam."

She nodded regally. "Thank you, kind sir." Her heart fluttered as they walked past Aidan's Porsche, which was parked in one of the guest spots. The message was clear: he would be staying when the limo driver ended his shift, far beyond if she got what she wanted. Like maybe... a lifetime.

He held her close as the limo sped along the rural roadway, until they came upon *The Enchanted*, where the gala would take place. It seemed a lifetime ago she met Aidan there, their first meeting after her fateful visit. Although the hour was still early, cars had already started to line up outside the elegant three-story building. Aidan grasped Laura's hand as the limousine stopped in front of the tall, regal doors. "Ready?"

She inhaled deeply. "Are you?"

He answered with a firm nod. When the driver opened the door, Aidan disembarked first, and then assisted her. Like the princess arriving at the grand ball, Laura stepped out into a sea of familiar and unfamiliar faces. Conversation buzzed at their arrival, admiration, surprise, envy and good-natured smiles. Although they had worked together for weeks, it was the first time they were confirming they shared more than a business relationship. Her smile wavered, however, as reporters from the local media all the way up to the national networks fought for good vantage spots to photograph the famous Aidan

Bancroft and his new lady love. And, as they would soon learn, the mother of his child.

“Hello everyone,” Aidan greeted, as side by side, arm in arm, they walked up the steps. People stopped them along the way, friends offering congratulations, acquaintances joking and reporters asking questions. But then Carol White, the queen of gossip herself, appeared like a lotto player who had just matched all. “Mr. Bancroft, can you tell us about your relationship with Ms. Blake?”

Laura looked towards Aidan, deferring the snide question. How would he respond? Of course, their secret would be out after tonight, but she’d hoped it would be in a more dignified manner than on a gossip columnist’s show.

“Ms. White, how lovely to see you,” Aidan calmly responded. “I guess you haven’t heard the news. As I’ve already shared with the major lifestyle reporters, Ms. Blake and I are dating. If you check social media, you’ll probably hear all about it.” Aidan led Laura forward as the gossip columnist stared in shock. “We’d better move on. A pleasure, as always.” When they reached the building, they both laughed.

“That was wonderful.” Laura grinned. “Did you see her face?”

“I certainly did,” Aidan rumbled. “It was well-deserved. That woman has hurt so many people with her cruel investigations and outright lies. It’s about time she got scooped.”

“People like that give all reporters a bad name. But...” She narrowed her eyes. “You called the networks and told them about us?”

“Before you pounce, let me explain.” He deftly maneuvered her around a branch in the walkway. “I didn’t tell them until you agreed to come with me. Once you did, of course, there was no way to keep it a secret. Better I tell them than someone else.”

She slowly nodded. “All right. But how did you tell them after I agreed to come with you? I was with you the whole time, and you didn’t make a phone call.”

“Exactly.” Azure eyes sparkled as he hooked her arm and led her into the ballroom. “Right before I saw you, I told my publicist to alert the media unless I called back within fifteen minutes. Since I didn’t, she did.” He lowered his voice. “I didn’t want our relationship to be broadcast on gossip television.”

Laura softened. His thoughtfulness was one of the things she loved about him. “Thank you.” She opened her mouth to say more, but they reached the Grand Ballroom, and all words fled.

She had entered a fairy tale.

She’d never seen such a beautiful sight, not at a royal wedding, not in a movie, not in a dream. The room was an ethereal masterpiece, a magnum opus in whimsical design, with white chiffon lining the walls and twinkling lights covering nearly every surface. Lace-covered tables dotted the room, with Swarovski crystal vases and hundreds of pale pink flowers, above a deep cherry wood dance floor shimmering with polish. Rose petals dripped along the tables and on the floor, giving the impression of a fantasy garden, while enormous cut crystal chandeliers lit the room in fiery brilliance. “It’s beautiful,” she murmured, emotion swirling inside. “Enchanting.”

“And yet it pales next to you.” Aidan traced Laura’s neck with the pad of his finger. “You are the true masterpiece.”

The little touch sent shivers down her spine and awareness through her body. Her cheeks heated. “You’re going to have to stop complimenting me like that.”

“But it’s true.” His voice was raw, honest. “Every single word.”

She swallowed as the orchestra started a lilting melody. Her partner bowed and held out his arm. “May I have the honor?”

Laura actually curtsied. “You may.” She managed to keep some smidgeon of control as they walked to the dance floor, but when he put his arms around her, she was lost. Ever since the realization of her love, her feelings had increased like the waves of the sea. She relished in his nearness, adored the strength surrounding her, basked in his protective force. They swayed softly to the music, holding each other close. The attraction that existed from the beginning took a new, beautiful meaning.

The song ended and another began, but they didn’t move from their spot on the dance floor. They stayed there for song after song, until well after they should have joined the others. Finally they did, but they always stayed in close contact. Aidan never let go, whether he was holding her hand, encircling her waist or splaying his fingers on her back, he was always touching her, claiming her for all to see.

They enjoyed a four-star Italian feast of steaming lasagna smothered in vine ripe tomatoes and fresh mozzarella cheese, crusty rosemary bread with organic olive oil and chocolate ganache cake still warm from the oven. As soon as was socially acceptable, they retook the dance floor. There they stayed for the entire evening, wrapped in each other’s arms. She no longer cared about being linked with the powerful man – instead she was happy and proud to be with him. Now the town knew their secret, and soon Aidan would know hers. When midnight came, she was ready to leave.

It was time for Aidan to discover he was a father.

The drive home seemed but moments in length, the idle conversation forgotten as soon as it was uttered. Soon, they reached the building and stepped out into a night scented of lilies, roses and temptation. She pushed it aside as they walked through empty hallways and into the apartment.

“Today was magical,” she murmured, as she closed the door.

He smiled. “It certainly was.”

As her guest removed his coat, her heart quickened, for once not in response to the powerful man, but the conversation

that would shatter his world. How would he react? How would he feel about Jeanie?

Would it change how he felt about her?

As certain as she was about her decision, she was as uncertain of how to tell him. Should she start at the beginning, with her desire to have a child? Or should she just blurt it out and then backtrack? No matter her method, she had to make him understand she only recently discovered the truth and hid it solely for Jeanie's safety. Her love for him had nothing to do with her daughter.

"It's time." His expression reflected keen perception, as if he could read her very thoughts. "What do you want to tell me?" He walked closer, grasped her hands. His voice was soft, coaxing, commanding. "Tell me."

She should just say it. Should just tell him. Her mind thought the words, her brain formed her lips, but she just couldn't give them a voice. It was the right thing to do, but the very thought was beyond overwhelming. Perhaps she should start by talking about Jeanie. She glanced around the room, stopped at an old photo album. She broke off from Aidan and jogged to the book.

He watched her carefully as she retrieved the heavy volume from the shelf and lumbered to the sofa. She patted the seat next to her. "Before that, let's look at some of Jeanie's baby pictures."

"Okay." Aidan lowered himself to the seat next to her. His gaze was confused, but not distrustful. She opened the fabric-covered album and immediately relaxed at the first picture: Jeanie, one year old in a purple sundress with a matching bonnet and purse. Aidan's lips quirked up in a warm smile. Perfect.

She turned the page, smiling at more baby pictures. They perused snapshots of precious moments, neither speaking, neither moving. Undoubtedly, he was waiting for her. Whether he guessed the secret had to do with Jeanie was uncertain, but she couldn't stall for much longer. Finally, she looked up from

the book, smoothing out the old pages. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

He took a deep breath, set his jaw. She opened her mouth and then closed it, briefly shuttering her gaze. She could do this. She would just get it out, and then everything would be all right. Fortifying herself, she lifted her lashes, finally ready to share the long-guarded secret, but he was no longer looking at her. Storms blackened his eyes to darkness, as his piercing gaze searched the album.

What had he seen? Anxiety and confusion lassoed her lungs as she followed his thunderous gaze. He gripped the photo album, or rather a piece of paper protruding from it. Her breath caught in her throat, at the small paper that changed a destiny. She could not deny its significance. Or what it *revealed*.

Old and faded, yellowed and aged, the torn pamphlet was small, seemingly insignificant. Only a smidgen of it peeked through the pages of the album, but that was enough. Because written in large black letters, bright, clear and painfully blatant, were four telling words:

Peace Fields Fertility Clinic.

CHAPTER 13



The world around him faded, his senses dimmed to static. Noises ceased, sights diminished, scents vanished as the world – his world – focused on one thing and one thing alone: the Peace Fields Fertility Clinic pamphlet. Worn by age, tattered by time, the document signified something impossible.... something possible?

Like a computer, his mind worked, a mathematical psyche analyzing a lifetime of data in a moment of passionate momentum. Supporting and contrasting evidence filtered through possible and probable outcomes: Laura's knowledge of the clinic, her about-face, Jeanie's features, her age, the strange feeling of familiarity, the father who wasn't part of her life, but might soon become so, the *pamphlet*. It all came down to the improbable, the impossible, the unattainable.

The dream, the hopes, the prayers.

Could there be any chance, could it possibly be true? He allowed himself a second to consider, and that second grew to a minute and minute to minutes as he just sat there, as his world changed and he accepted the chance, the possibility...

That he was a father.

And like a blooming flower, that chance grew, cultured by promises, sustained by unlikely coincidences. Could he really be father to that beautiful little girl, that tiny ray of sunshine whose smile brightened an entire world? Could there have been a mistake, a mix-up, at the clinic, a life-changing error?

He knew Leanne's baby had been his, they had done genetic testing because of their fertility problems, but could another baby have been conceived? One for Leanne Jo Bancroft and one for Laura Jane Bl... his breath caught.

Aidan breathed deeply, as unlikely coincidence changed to likely truth, as an impossible vision turned to simple reality. As he realized...

His dream had come true.

His prayers had been answered.

He *was* a father.

And suddenly a million emotions poured through him, a million feelings so strong he could barely breathe. He was a father, a real father, to a beautiful child, an enchanting creature so lovely, so pure and innocent. He had given Jeanie life, brought into this world the most precious of gifts. He was a daddy.

The emotions came, fast and furious, and with so many names. Joy. Happiness. Elation. Hope. Delight. But one more than anything: love.

He had never imagined a love such as this, the love one has for another being, a love so pure and so perfect. He had already loved the little girl – how could one not – but suddenly it took on a new dimension, a new facet. All the pain, all the misery, none of compared to the beauty he now saw, the hope, the dreams. A wave of joy flowed through him, hope for the future. Tears stung his eyes as his heart squeezed and then expanded larger than he thought possible.

He had a daughter.

This time, no matter what, he would never let his child go. She was his, and no matter what it took, he would keep her. Since they had met, he had cared for her like a father, but he had always held back a little, knowing if things didn't work out he'd have to leave her. Never again. He was a dad, *her* dad, and no one would ever take that away from him again. With all the breath in his body, he would protect what was his. His little girl. His beautiful, little sweet darling.

He longed to be with her now, to hold her, play with her, tuck her in at night. He wanted to make up for the years he'd missed, the years he hadn't known about. He *would* make up for it, he vowed, he would be the best father ever. He would hold her hand and keep her safe, buy her ice cream, tell her she could never date. He would gladly have tea parties, play dress up, tell her every day how much he loved her.

He despaired for the time he had lost, the time so cruelly taken away. But he couldn't change that, couldn't get back the years that were gone. Fate took away his first chance to be a father, but this time was different. This time a person had stolen them.

He set his jaw, clenched taut muscles and looked at the woman who had kept his child from him. For the first time really looked. And if he'd had any doubts, her expression made it clear.

She knew. All along, for four long years of a cold, cold winter, she had kept his daughter from him, a child from her father. Then she pretended to care for him, but why? For money? For a game? Despair mixed with the joy in his heart; the gain of one love could not make up for the loss of another, in the long line of tragedies. He might not be able to stop caring for her, even in the wake of the ultimate betrayal, but he would not play the fool any longer.

For a second, he thought of accusing her right then and there, demanding answers, and yet something stopped him. First, although his heart knew the truth, he needed confirmation. At dawn's first light, he would travel to the clinic to get proof of the mix-up, undeniable evidence of his paternity. If they couldn't give it to him, a million-dollar lawyer would be on it by lunchtime. Second, he couldn't ignore how much he desired Laura, and not just physically. Despite her actions, he still longed to be with the mother of his child. Finally, as much as he wanted to keep Jeanie all to himself, he couldn't just rip her away from her mother. He had gone through the loss of a child, and he couldn't force that on another, even if it were legally possible, which it probably wasn't. However, he didn't want to be a part-time father.

Why should he give up anything?

Perhaps he'd just keep both of them. But it would be on his terms, with no secrets, no more lies. Laura would become his wife, giving him the family that should have been his from day one. She would grant him everything he wanted, but first, he needed space, time to figure everything out. Then he would take action.

“Aidan, I...”

“I have to go.” At Laura's words, he rose, turned and, without a syllable more, strode away. Away from the woman he thought loved him, away from what was supposed to be the perfect night, away from fathomless consequences.

For a moment, she just sat, frozen as if in a daze. A second later, she jumped up. “Wait!” Footsteps followed him, but it was too late. By the time she emerged from the building, he had jumped into his Porsche, and in a flurry of ominous dust, took off. His heart swirling with an unlikely concoction of unparalleled joy and untold heartbreak, he raced on into the night. Soon he would claim what was his.

Jeannie *and* Laura.

LAURA TRUDGED up the steps and into her lifeless apartment. Everything around her was dullness and gray, and even the air tasted stale and bitter. Finally poised to tell him the truth, instead her greatest fear had come to life. What was she going to do?

She still wore the fancy dress as she lay on the sofa, which only moments ago held two lovers. She closed eyes overflowing with liquid pain, daring to dream Aidan would come back. He wouldn't, of course, at least not tonight. She reached for the phone and called him, but it connected directly with voicemail.

She could drive to his hotel, but somehow she knew she would not find him there. He had been very determined, and obviously did not want to be found. Likely he had chosen another residence for the night. Yet he was not gone for good, that was for certain.

He would be back to claim what was his.

With no options left and no energy to consider the endless possibilities the future might bestow, she didn't travel to her bedroom. Time passed, and she lay awake, tortured by the memory of Aidan's shock. Finally, hours later, exhausted beyond reason, she fell into a listless sleep. This was not the night she imagined. Not even close.

LAURA AWOKE to crashes of thunder and the clattering of pounding rain. She stretched, wincing as sore muscles screamed in protest. The fogginess of sleep blanketed her, as she brushed against fabric scratchier than her normal nightgown. Why was she still in her evening gown? Why was she on the couch? A streak of pain pierced her temples as the events of last night rose in all too vivid clarity, like a nightmare from which she couldn't awaken.

Aidan knew he was a father.

He was thrilled. He was devastated.

She was shattered.

His reaction was a burst of a thousand emotions: at first incomparable joy, beaming, breathtaking delight. He'd looked like a man who had won the lottery, a gold medal and a Noble prize in the same day. Had he even felt the wetness on his cheeks? Yet then his countenance had hardened into pure fury. When he'd looked at her, it was as if she was a stranger, an adversary, an *opponent*. Did he believe she'd purposely kept Jeanie from him for all these years? Did he think she was toying with him? Had her deception destroyed any chance for them?

Had she lost her true love?

She burrowed deep into the pillows, yet a minute later forced herself to rise. *No*. This couldn't be over. She needed to find Aidan. Needed to explain. Needed to tell him how much she loved him.

She grabbed her phone from the counter and stared at it. How could it already be eight o'clock? The intensity of the storm outside almost completely hid the fact that it was day. This time she tried all of Aidan's phone numbers, but to no avail. Either he was not there, or he was screening his calls. She had no choice but to find him herself.

The seconds slid as Laura changed out of her gown and into a simple black shirt and a pair of blue jeans. Grabbing a granola bar for breakfast and an umbrella for the rain, she was cutting through the empty Sunday streets fifteen minutes later. As she swerved past a wide puddle, words and explanations tangled. What would she say to her daughter's father? How could she make him believe she loved him? This time she would not dawdle – she would explain everything. Her two most valuable treasures were at stake. She would fight for them both.

Laura turned into the hotel parking lot, yet neither Aidan's sports car nor the limousine was there. Still, with unwarranted hope, she ran to his room and knocked on his door. As expected, no answer replied, and she trudged back to the car. She didn't turn on the ignition, instead sat with her head in her hands. Where could she try next, when there were a million and one destinations? He hadn't been in town long enough to make close friends, and she certainly couldn't call *The Billionaires of Miami* for assistance. Perhaps Candace would have some insight. Maybe he had talked to the mayor about business and mentioned something that could help. She dialed the number.

"Hello?"

Laura said a silent thank you for the quick answer. "Candace, I need your help. Have you talked to Aidan today?"

"Actually, he texted me this morning to ask a quick question about the collaboration." Candace hesitated. "Hey, did something happen between the two of you?"

Every muscle clenched. "Why do you ask?"

"He's normally so calm, but even through texting I could tell something was wrong. He was curt and brusque, almost

like another person.” The voice on the phone wavered. “Laura, did you tell him?”

“I didn’t, but I think he knows.” There was no other explanation for his behavior. “I promise to tell you about it later, but first I need your help. Did he tell you where he was going?”

The line went silent for a moment. Then, “No.”

Laura clenched the phone tighter. “Did he give any clue? The slightest hint where he might be headed?”

“No, I’m sorry...” her friend started, then stopped. “Wait a second – that’s not true. He didn’t tell me where he was going, but he did ask if the highway had bad rush hour traffic.”

In spite of the desperate situation, Laura’s lips curved into a broad smile. Years of reporting had taught her that any lead, even a slight one, could prove invaluable. When she spoke, her voice had regained both strength and confidence. “That’s great. What highway?”

“Route 12.”

Laura’s entire body went numb. A small country highway, Route 12 didn’t lead much of anywhere, except... *Peace Fields Fertility Clinic*. “Oh no,” she whispered. “Aidan is going to discover the truth without me. I have to find him.”

“Hey, you be careful, all right?”

“I will.” Hanging up the phone, Laura gripped the steering wheel. With a flick of the wrist the engine soared to life, and she was off in a race with time. She needed to get to Aidan before he learned the truth.

Landmarks, trees and nondescript buildings sped by in a blur as she soared over the lonely roads. She studied every car she passed, hoping for a sign of an unlikely sleek luxury car, yet only rusty pick-ups and older, economical models rumbled along the path. As she neared her destination, she raced quicker, desperation and dread urging her toward the inescapable meeting. When the clinic came into sight, and in the very first parking space, Aidan’s personal sports car, she

resisted the instinct to turn around. She fortified her strength. She would do this.

She parked in front of the brick one-story building. With wide bay windows, rose-filled flower boxes and a wrap-around porch, the charming little structure could have easily been mistaken for a family home. Instead, life-changing events occurred daily underneath the simple facade. With state-of-the-art technology and a hidden locale, the clinic attracted clients from near and far. There were rumors it was a favorite of the famous and rich, which Aidan's presence confirmed. It held an especially warm place in Laura's heart. It had given Jeanie life.

She glanced at her watch. Five after ten – only minutes after the opening of the clinic. Perhaps he hadn't discovered the truth yet; maybe there was still a chance. With a huge breath and a silent prayer, she opened the door and walked in.

He stood with his back to her. A receptionist sat at the counter, the same bubbly lady who had divulged the secret to Laura. She was handing Aidan a thick manila folder, its contents as certain as its life-changing consequences. In a moment, Aidan would share the knowledge of Jeanie's paternity.

For seconds, she stood frozen. Aidan clutched the folder, twisting and turning its crisp orange sides, but making no move to open it. She inhaled a deep breath. Perhaps there was still time. "Aidan."

He stood straight at the sound of his name. Acid burned her stomach, as he pivoted, like a horror film in slow capture. His power was limitless, as he stood in all black, towering, muscles thick under the form-fitting clothing. His eyes were dark as midnight, his gaze challenging, as he pierced her with all the power he wielded. "Laura."

"Before you open the folder, we should talk." She took a step forward. "Please let me explain."

He gazed down at the papers in his hands, then straight at her. "Tell me the truth," he commanded, his voice deep with power and emotion. "Will this prove Jeanie is my daughter?"

Their gazes locked, her rib cage a vise squeezing the air from her lungs. The oxygen had disappeared, the world dimmed. *For her daughter, she had to fight.* She heaved in a breath of air scented with spice and power. Then she uttered a single word to change her world. “Yes.”

For a moment, silence reigned. Frozen in time, they just stared at each other, redefined by secrets and truth. His gaze remained strong, yet raw emotion blazed in their fiery depths. “I’m a father,” he whispered, then again, “I’m a father.” He beamed with such bright exuberance, pure joy, that nothing could deny this was the right path. “In my heart I knew it, but I needed confirmation. I really am a father,” he repeated softly, his eyes aglow with liquid emotion.

At once, relief loosened Laura’s muscles. Aidan was ecstatic, delighted at the greatest gift life could ever bestow. Yet relief descended to anxiety and anxiety to dismay as his expression turned hostile and his stare sinister. His voice was cold as he asked, “How long have you known?”

“Several months,” she admitted, her voice wavering a sliver. “I found out shortly before I came to visit you. When she was conceived, her father was supposed to be anonymous donor. I was happy to keep it that way until my dad had a heart attack and I discovered cardiovascular disease ran in the family. I found you to get your medical records.”

“That’s why you came to see me.” Realization dawned in his eyes. “You weren’t there to blackmail me. You weren’t there in the capacity of reporter at all. And that’s how you knew I frequented the clinic. You didn’t come here looking for my records – just the opposite. You came here, and then found my records. There was never another person involved.”

“That’s correct,” she whispered. If only she could read his thoughts. Now he was a closed book, a fortress hiding all emotion. “I didn’t know you weren’t supposed to be a donor. Not until you told me.”

“Then why didn’t you make me understand?” His voice grew louder, his gaze as intense as a summer storm. “You could have convinced me. Perhaps not that Jeanie was my

daughter, but at least enough that I would have done my own research to discover the truth. How could you keep her from me?" He was now yelling.

The blood drained from her face. "She's my daughter, too! And I didn't steal her from you. I was going to tell you yesterday, but you ran out, and I couldn't catch up to you. I called, and you didn't answer. I left messages, but none were returned. Aidan, I tried."

"You expect me to believe that?" he retorted. "You had dozens, hundreds, of opportunities to tell me. Yet you're only doing so now, when your secret is already doomed."

Adrenaline raced through her body, heat through her blood. How could she make him believe? "I had to make sure you were a good person. That you would be a good father to my baby. I had that child in a legally solitary way. Her safety was my only concern." She looked into his eyes, searching for understanding. None existed.

"Perhaps you had her legally alone, but she was created illegally from me. Which means she was *taken* illegally from me."

Laura drew in a steep breath. Was it a threat? "I know. That's why I wanted to give you the chance to build a relationship. Only first I had to be sure you wouldn't hurt her. And now I am. Despite how it looks, last night I was going to tell you the truth – before you saw the pamphlet. I want you to be Jeanie's father." She gazed into hard eyes. He stared back, but said nothing. Her confession was not over. He needed to hear everything. "There's more."

"Don't tell me you're taking Jeanie and leaving the country," he warned.

She shook her head curtly, shut and opened her eyes. Fought for strength. "I love you. Actually, I'm in love with you. From the first time we met, there was something between us, something strong. For so long, I didn't know what it meant, but now I do. I love you." She stood taller and awaited his response, captive in utter silence.

At first, his eyes widened and, for a brief moment, something akin to elation blazed within them. But the emotion was gone in an instant, replaced by the same guarded look as earlier. “Do you expect me to believe that?”

Her body went numb. “Believe it because it’s the truth. The way you look at me, it’s the same way I look at you. The way you touch me, the way you make love to me – it’s all the same. Don’t you feel it?”

He stood frozen, neither affirming nor refuting the life-changing words. “It doesn’t matter.” His voice was empty, haunted. “It was all a lie. I have to focus on Jeanie and making up for the years we lost.”

Tears flooded her vision. Whether he truly meant it didn’t matter. He didn’t believe her, and nothing she could say would change his mind.

“I need to see my daughter. Now.”

Laura hesitated. He was still clearly furious, yet how could she deny him? “All right,” she agreed quietly. “Follow me.”

She walked to the car in stiff motions, every step a painful journey. The urgency was gone, the enthusiasm disappeared, the hope vanished. She drove with the windows up and the radio off, silent in the small vehicle save for bumps from the rocks that stabbed the weathered tires. A fog surrounded her, numbing her thoughts, as she drove along the old highway. Soon, they were back in Pine Ridge and pulling into the driveway of her brother’s house. Parking her car, she tramped to where Aidan was emerging from his. “We’re going to have to be very careful.”

He glared at her through steel-filled eyes, and for a moment it seemed he was going to argue, but then he nodded. “It’ll be quite a shock.”

“Undoubtedly.” She clasped clammy hands. “Although she’s young, she understands a lot. She knows she doesn’t have a father. She understands stepfathers, but it will be difficult to comprehend attaining a dad in this manner.” A

fierce pang of loss slid knifelike into her heart. “We have to explain it very carefully.”

He nodded somberly. “I agree.”

She turned towards the entrance, and this time he didn't follow, as she knocked on a door with a cheery wreath, as two little eyes peered out of the window. In a minute, Jeanie sprinted out, her pink ballerina backpack bright on her tiny shoulders. She skipped happily, and her smile widened when she caught sight of her father. “Aidan!” She dropped her backpack on the grass and ran to him. “Hi!” she sang with a toothy grin.

Although devastation still hollowed her chest, Laura marveled at the happiness firing in father and daughter matching eyes, such elation, such purpose. Aidan gazed at Jeanie with complete and utter love, proving that no matter the consequences, this had been the right move. Not only for him, but also for Jeanie, who was gazing in adoration at the man she would soon call daddy. When he embraced his child, Laura had to hold back tears, and the glistening of Aidan's cheek betrayed his. He would make a wonderful father.

“Are you going to spend the day with us?” Big blue eyes blinked widely.

Aidan chuckled. “I sure am, sweetheart. We have a big surprise for you.”

“What is it?” With the patience of a four-year-old, Jeanie hopped from foot to foot. “Please tell me!”

“We'll explain when we get home,” Laura now spoke. This was going to take time and careful strategy, and could not be done on her brother's front lawn. She said farewell to her brother and drove home, somehow managing to provide reasonable responses to her daughters' queries. When they arrived at the apartment building, Jeanie grabbed both her parents' hands and practically ran up the steps. She fidgeted impatiently as her mother unlocked the door. As soon as they were in the apartment, she pirouetted to them. “Can I hear the surprise now? Puh-leaseeeee!”

Laura and Aidan locked gazes, and for the first time since last night, understanding passed between them. Neither knew how to tell Jeanie. Laura knelt down. “Honey, you know how it’s always been you and me, Jeanie and Mommy?”

Eyes wide, Jeanie nodded. This was clearly no ordinary surprise.

“And remember how your friend Tammy had no daddy, but then things changed?”

Jeanie again nodded.

Laura stretched her lips into a smile. “Well, that’s what’s happening to you, sweetie. You’re going to have a daddy. From now on, Aidan will be your daddy.”

Jeanie looked from her mom to her dad and back to her mom. Then her face broke out in a grin to rival the sun. She ran over to her father and pulled on his shirt, waiting until he leaned down to whisper, “Can I call you daddy?”

Wow. In a move as unexpected as it was meaningful, Aidan looked to her before responding, and she nodded the only possible reply. With an emotional smile, Aidan held his little girl. “I’d like nothing more.” His voice was thick with emotion, and Laura couldn’t stop a tear from staining her cheek.

Jeanie stood up, clutching Aidan’s hand like she would never let him go. “I’m so happy you and Mommy are getting married!”

A wave of pain crashed down like a tidal wave, stealing her breath and crushing her soul. “Sweetie, Aidan and I are not...”

“I became your daddy in a different way,” Aidan broke in suddenly, stopping her words. Laura looked up sharply. Why wouldn’t he let her say they weren’t getting married?

Confusion also marred Jeanie’s expression. “I don’t understand. How else can you get a new daddy?”

Laura searched for answers in Aidan’s stoic regard. How could she explain to her daughter what she herself did not

comprehend? Of course, she understood why Aidan was Jeanie's father, and how, but not why they couldn't be a family. Why he still believed she was going to keep Jeanie from him, that her declaration of love was meaningless. Why he wouldn't even listen.

"Because daddies come in many ways." Vaguely, Aidan answered Jeanie's question. "I've always been your daddy, but we didn't know, and that's why I haven't been around. So I'm not as much of a new daddy as a newly found daddy."

Her daughter still didn't understand, and it would be many years before she could, but there was no more to tell her now. "So, Jeanie, is this a good surprise?"

Jeanie's face returned to sheer brightness. "It's the best surprise I've ever had," she proclaimed. "Even better than when the lunch lady gave me *three* scoops of ice cream."

"I'm glad to hear it." Aidan chuckled. "If you'd like, we can spend time together right now. I'd love to hear about that project you did in school the other day. The one you were telling me about."

The little girl needed no more prompting. She took her father by the hand and led him into the living room, already describing the spaceship she had created. And just like that, Laura stood alone in the hallway.

The clock ticked the seconds, yet she did not move. A minute, and then two, and then three passed. Determined not to display her devastation at her daughter's beautiful day, she set to busying herself. She cleaned the kitchen, and cleaned some more, as minutes and then hours passed. The happy sounds of fun and laughter drifted in as Jeanie showed Aidan not one, but all of her preschool projects from the last year. They played games and read stories, surfed kid-friendly websites and did crafts, not emerging until lunch and then going straight back. Laura looked up as they reentered the room after hours more had passed, twin sets of happy smiles and glowing eyes. The resemblance was stronger than ever.

"Did you have a good time?" Washing her hands, Laura picked up Jeanie and placed her on her lap. "Did you have fun

with Aid... Daddy?"

"Yes!" Jeanie nodded widely. "Daddy said maybe we could go out for dinner, but we had to ask you first."

Laura glanced at Aidan. She supposed she should be happy he respected her enough not to make plans without her consent. "That sounds like a great idea. Why don't you have a special daddy-daughter dinner?"

At the suggestion, Aidan looked surprised and Jeanie confused. "You don't want to come with us, Mommy?" She blinked.

"Mommy just has a lot of work to do today," Laura offered the thin excuse. She had completed all her work at the office. "You and Daddy have a good time."

Jeanie looked towards Aidan, and he nodded. The child grabbed her coat, and hand-in-hand, father and daughter walked out the door. Slowly, Laura shut the door behind them.

It would have just been too painful, too devastating to pretend to be the family they would never be. So she ate a t.v. dinner that tasted like flavored cardboard and instead cleaned the rest of the apartment. She scrubbed and vacuumed, brushed and washed, in a hopeless attempt at distraction. Yet no matter how much she scrubbed or how hard she scoured, she could not clear the heartbreaking reality from her mind.

The hours passed in rapid succession, filled with burning pain. Laura had completed the common rooms and was just finishing Jeanie's when a soft knock sounded from the door. She opened it to admit Aidan, carrying a sweet sleeping child. Soundlessly he went to the little girl's room, emerging a minute later to shut the door behind him, not all the way, but just as Jeanie liked.

"She fell asleep in the car," he explained without emotion. He paused, as if searching for the right words, then breathed deeply. "I'd better go. If it's all right, I'd like to accompany Jeanie to her soccer game tomorrow."

She nodded her permission. Retrieving his coat, he turned, but before he could leave, she called, "Aidan, wait."

He stopped, but didn't look back.

“Please... let's talk.”

He still did not turn around. What should she say to him, what *could* she do to make him believe her? Taking a deep breath, she said it simply. “Everything I said was the truth. Every single word.”

For a second, he hesitated, and hope flared. In the next, he stated quietly, “I wish I could believe that, but it doesn't change anything. Our future is set.”

Then he was gone.

She shut the door. What had he meant by the cryptic words? What future was set? So many questions, and only a single certainty:

This was happened when the billionaire took control.

CHAPTER 14



In the span of a hummingbird's flutter, nearly a week passed. Every day was the same, every routine exact in Laura's world. Aidan visited daily, and the bond blossomed between him and his daughter. A stranger would be hard pressed to find any evidence indicating the two had only recently found each other. Although she still loved him with all her heart, she saw no indication of what they once shared, except for long looks when he thought she couldn't see him. Obviously, he still didn't believe her. Yet he made no move to end matters between them. A few times he cryptically mentioned the future, as if her – their – path was already determined.

As if he had no intention of letting her go.

How everything else would change was still uncertain. Aidan had not mentioned any personal or legal matters, nor had he spoken of Jeanie's custody. Just in case, she had contacted a lawyer. Because of the highly unusual case and since both Laura and Aidan had been illegally violated, the attorney had requested time to research the situation and promised to get back to her soon. She had thrown herself into her work and her child, but it felt as if she was mourning a loss, and truly she was – what could have been.

As the weekend arrived, Aidan would be leaving town. With sincerest apologies to his daughter and promises to make it up with triple scoop ice cream sundaes, he explained he had an important matter to take care of at home, and would be gone Saturday and Sunday. To Laura, he said everything

would soon be settled. She had not asked for details, but no doubt it regarded her and Jeanie. What kind of surprise would arrive Monday?

Sunday came, and Laura sat quietly on the sofa in her house. Jeanie was at friend's birthday sleepover, and would not be home until the next morning. The television was on, but she wasn't really listening. She was wearing a pair of gray sweats, and her hair was messily pulled back in a pony-tail. A half-empty box of cream-filled chocolate sat in the corner.

It was utterly pathetic and so not like her. Fortunately, it would end soon – she had given herself exactly one week to grieve like a lovesick teenager before jumping back into life. This was the grand finale.

Suddenly a loud knock came from the door as a strident voice sounded. "I know you're in there, Laura Jane Blake. You open the door right this minute, young lady."

Laura gasped at the voice she never thought she'd hear out of a dusty, musty room. "Dad?"

"Well, who else would call you *young lady*? And by the way, you're in big trouble. Now open up before I collapse on the floor."

She practically fell off the couch in an attempt to get to the door. She unlocked the latch to look up at her father, looking stronger and stouter than he had been in years. "Are you okay?"

He humphed. "Of course, I am. I just said that to get you off the couch I figured you were holding down. Now if I may come in?"

"Of course." She moved aside.

Her father came in and then stopped, taking in the chocolate, television and her appearance. He shook her head. "Laura. This. Is. Ridiculous."

She looked at the apartment, at herself in the mirror. "I'm sorry, Dad, I've had a stressful week. It's really no big deal. Starting tomorrow, I'm jumping back on the energy

bandwagon. But what are you doing here? You look amazing, by the way.”

Her dad shook off the compliment. “This is about him, isn’t it?”

She started, pretended she didn’t know the one man he could mean. “Who?”

“You know who. Aidan Hunter, your boyfriend according to the news channels.”

It was hard enough enduring a private breakup. With confirmation of their relationship a mere week ago, she had not yet told anyone of their fight except Candace. “Dad, he’s not m—”

“He’s Jeanie’s father, isn’t he?”

Laura froze. How could he possibly know?

“It isn’t so difficult to figure out.” He turned perceptive eyes to the new picture of Aidan and Jeanie that graced the mantle. “They look exactly the same.”

Laura grimaced. She considered denying it, but what was the use? Her dad had always been great at noticing minor details. She had inherited her reporter’s instincts from him. Aidan was going to publicly acknowledge Jeanie soon, and, truthfully, she’d had enough deception to last a lifetime. “You’re right,” she said simply. “Aidan is her father. He wasn’t supposed to be, but because of an error, he is. I just discovered the truth when I visited the fertility clinic searching for his medical records.”

“But you didn’t tell him right away, did you?”

Sadly, Laura shook her head. “How could I? Like most people in America, I knew of him, but I didn’t really know him – whether he would be a good father, whether he would hurt her. I *did* know he had power and money, which he could use to try to take away Jeanie if he wanted. It’s not that I made a decision to never tell him; I just needed to get to know him first to protect my daughter. He’s a good guy, and I was about to tell him, but before I could...”

“He found out,” her father guessed.

Laura looked up through eyes blurry with liquid sadness. “And now he thinks I knew all along, that I tried to keep them apart, that I was lying when I said I lo...”

She stopped, looked at her father.

“That you love him,” he finished softly.

She nodded slowly. “Yes,” she whispered. She closed her eyes, awaiting the gruff reaction. He would offer a rough, *I told you so*, tell her she brought it on herself by becoming a single mother. And yet there was only silence. She opened her eyes to a kind expression and arms opened wide.

And suddenly she was a little girl again, her dad once again the prince rescuing her from a broken heart. With a choked sob, she embraced him, holding on like she had done a thousand times when she was a kid. For the first time in a long time, her burden seemed lighter, her solitude less. Life just seemed... kinder. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“No, thank you,” he replied softly.

That was unexpected. “What for?”

He looked at her with stoic eyes. “For not giving up on me. For telling me not to give up on life, for visiting even when I shut myself in that room. You might have thought I wasn’t listening, but I was. When I heard about your relationship, I realized how little I knew about your life, and that isn’t right. I haven’t been very fair... or understanding.”

“Your life is yours to live, the choices yours to make. I want to be part of your life, and not while sitting in a room smelling like medicine and mildew. I’m ready to start living life, and to accept yours, and I’ll start by helping in any way I can. Not by telling you what to do, but by listening.”

A ray of sunshine edged its way into Laura’s heart, pushing aside years of pain. “Thank you.” She hesitated. “But there’s no hope. I betrayed him and...”

“Well, isn’t that a bunch of hogwash.”

Laura started. “What?”

“You didn’t betray that boy. You did what was necessary to protect your daughter. I reckon most mothers would have done the same thing, and most fathers for that matter. In fact, I bet Mr. Billionaire CEO would have acted precisely the same way if he had been in your shoes. He’s just too angry to see it right now. But don’t worry, he’ll get over it, and everything will be as it should.”

Laura shook her head. “I just don’t see how that can happen.”

“Didn’t you just admit you love him?”

Her breath caught on the denial that simply wouldn’t come. With a gulp of courage, she nodded the truth.

“And he loves you.”

This time, her denial was immediate, yet her father interrupted it, with a wave of his hand. “Of course, he does. Even I can tell by the way he looks at you. In a week he’s discovered he’s a father and the woman he loved was keeping it from him. He’s probably afraid to believe you really love him, perhaps even afraid of losing you. But—” He held up his hand. “The man loves you. Are you ready to give that up, or are you going to fight for him?”

The words slammed into her, washing away the self-pity, the anguish, the doubt. Why had she given up so easily, succumb to a pity party with balloons and guests and half-eaten chocolate? It was time to take control of her life.

Time to fight for what she wanted.

Without a word more, she strode to the phone. “That’s my girl.” Her father smiled proudly, as she lifted the cell and dialed the number she knew by heart. Aidan answered on the first ring.

She didn’t wait for him to speak. “There’s something we need to discuss.”

“I agree,” he replied smoothly, “Something very important.”

Laura's heart skidded to a stop, paused to consider, then resumed with a giant thump. What did he mean? Something about Jeanie, about her? She forged on, "I'd like to go first. I need to expl—"

"No, wait."

The response dried in her throat. "Wait?"

"I'll be there in five."

The line clicked dead.

AIDAN DID NOT HESITATE for a second. Nothing, and no one, would keep him from *his* family. He made it to the car in five minutes, peeled out of the parking lot in six. It was time to claim what was his.

He was grateful he had returned to Pine Ridge early. Although this week had been amazing – fatherhood was everything he had hoped for and more – still something was missing.

He knew *who* that something was.

Staying away from Laura had been a knife to his heart. He'd been so furious when he discovered she was hiding his daughter, and believed she had done so from the very beginning. But when fury subsided and logic took hold, not only did her story make sense but it seemed likely. The clinic receptionist confirmed Laura had only recently searched for Jeanie's father after a medical crisis. And what mother wouldn't protect her child? She'd made every effort to get to know him and had been poised to share Jeanie's paternity when he discovered the truth. In her position, he wouldn't have done anything different.

Yet fury had blinded him, so he couldn't even listen to her declaration of love. Through the week, he'd been so numb, yet his feelings hadn't changed, nor had his resolve. As the days passed and the anger faded, he finally saw the destiny that could be theirs. Even in his greatest fury, he still planned a future with her. He'd told himself it was to be near to his

daughter, and that was partly true, but when he peeled through the layers of emotion, he admitted the truth.

He loved her.

Does anyone truly know the moment they fall in love? Yet it happened, and fiercely. He loved Laura Blake, with a ferocity stronger than a hurricane and more intense than an F5 tornado. He loved her kindness and her strength. He loved her intelligence and how she protected Jeanie like a mama tiger. Simply... he loved everything about her.

He wanted the whole package. He wanted Laura, he wanted to be a fulltime father to little Jeanie, he wanted new babies. He wanted to stay in Pine Ridge, where he could enjoy both his business and family. For so long he had been afraid, but he wasn't anymore. He had grieved and mourned, wracked by guilt and blinded by misery, but it was time to let go of the past. Those he loved would always remain in his heart, but it was time to embrace a new destiny. Like in business he would be smart, he would be persistent and he would do whatever it took, but in the end he would get what he wanted. Her family. His family.

Their family.

He didn't want a marriage of convenience, no union based on a child. He wanted the love, the family, the soul mate. He thought he would never love again, that he would walk through life alone. The shadow had been lifted, the curse ended. He loved Laura.

She would be his wife.

That's why he spent the weekend away, preparing for his new family, signing documents to officially acknowledge Jeanie as his daughter, researching the steps to get married. Laura might have objections, and if so, he wanted to get everything in motion swiftly so that before she knew it, the ring was safely on her finger and his last name attached to hers.

He had more to do, but he longed to see her again, to apologize for not listening, to tell her how he truly felt. To

pose the life-altering question.

So he came back to Pine Ridge, to the same quiet road, the same small hotel room. That's when she had called. If getting ready took minutes, the ride seemed seconds, before her home came into view. Anticipation and purpose tangled. The next minutes would define his entire life.

He couldn't wait.

THE KNOCK REVERBERATED through the entire apartment, strong, commanding and demanding attention, just like the man who wielded it. Laura turned to her father, her first *hero*, and he smiled and nodded. It was all the encouragement she needed.

Without a word, she strode to the door and opened it, gazing at the man who had given Jeanie life, the man she loved. Instincts planned her next move. She opened her arms wide.

He embraced her.

Everything around them disappeared – her apartment, her father, the very universe. At that moment, only the two of them mattered. “I’ve missed you,” he whispered.

“I missed you, too.” *So very much.* “Aidan, I...”

“No, wait—” He stopped her. “This time I go first.” He stood up tall, his deep voice resonating to her very soul. “Laura Blake, you’ve given me a precious gift, a beautiful daughter who has brought light to my life. Jeanie is amazing, a dream come true, and I will always be thankful for her. I know you kept her a secret, but I understand it was only to protect her.”

Laura nodded, as sadness emblazoned her. She should be happy he had forgiven her, so they could now form an amicable relationship to co-parent their child. But it wasn't enough. She wanted more. “Wait—”

“Hold on a minute, my impatient beauty.” Aidan put a finger against her lips in a shockingly intimate gesture. He

moved closer, his muscle-bound body towering over her. “But I need more.”

She stilled. “More?”

He smiled, sapphire eyes shining with brilliant emotion. “I want a family, I want a wife, I want *you*. Laura, you are my shining star, my love, my heart. You are the most amazing woman in the world, so kind and caring, intelligent and beautiful. You’re an amazing mother, but that’s only part of why I love you. My love for you is separate from Jeanie – it’s because of you and nothing else.”

He caressed her cheek with the pad of his finger. “I want to spend forever with you. I want to wake up next to you every morning. I want to hold you every night. I want to explore the world with you, share my business, share everything. I want to create another perfect life with you, this time the right way. I want *everything*.” He retrieved a small blue velvet box from his pocket, opened it to reveal a ring as radiant as the North Star, a twinkling round diamond surrounded by a halo of smaller diamonds set in platinum. Rainbow fire danced in its depths, as powerful and striking as the man who held it. Then...

He sank to one knee.

“Laura Blake, you are beautiful beyond compare, inside and out. You are my light, my past and my *future*. You are my heart, and my home. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Elation filled the world with newfound purpose and unparalleled joy. The future was an unwritten path, their destiny a journey of pure love. “Yes. Yes. Yes!” she said it once and then again, sharing all the love in her heart.

With a smile of pure joy, he stood, transferred the ring from its soft home to its new one, where it fit perfectly. Then he embraced her, holding her tight as if he’d never let go. She would never let him.

“I love you,” she whispered just before he took her lips. This time, it was even more breathtaking, more meaningful,

filled with the promise of endless tomorrows. When they finally broke apart, with the inherent promise of so much more later, brilliance burst through her.

In the background of their kiss, a one-man applause sounded. Laura looked over at her dad. He smiled, and with a whisper that reached the deepest part of her heart, said, “I love you, princess.”

After promising that soon – and often – he would return, her father departed, leaving Laura and Aidan alone. There they celebrated their love deep into the night, sharing their worlds and holding each other tight, until they had to prepare for Jeanie’s impending return home. Yet still Aidan held her near, as if couldn’t bear to let her go.

“I’m not letting you out of my sight.” He nuzzled her neck, as they snuggled on the sofa the next morning. The air was fresh and sweet, the world bright and crisp, as the sun shone through the windows, illuminating the world with the promise of a new day and a new life. “Never again.”

“I wouldn’t let you.” She gasped as he brushed a kiss on her neck, its softness belying its tumultuous effect. A shiver steaked through her, sensitizing her. Yet they hadn’t time for more, at the tiny yet rapid knock at the door.

Jeanie burst into the apartment, beaming with happiness, hugging both her mommy and daddy. When Laura told her they were getting married, she clapped her hands and literally jumped for joy. “I told you so,” she announced.

They all laughed. They talked, told stories and relished each other. Laura had found her true love, her soul mate. They would be together for all time.

She had followed her destiny.

And Aidan...

He was her *forever*.

EPILOGUE



“I can’t believe I just watched a major league baseball game from the *Billionaires of Miami* VIP suite.” Laura grinned down at the field through the flawless glass wall, where the home team celebrated their victory with fifty thousand of their closest friends. The sun was shining on the brightly lit field, the roar of the crowd deafening even in the private room scented with an unlikely juxtaposition of green grass, Cracker Jacks and luxury. “Actually, I can’t believe there’s a Billionaires of Miami club.”

“It’s not a club,” Aidan rumbled, rolling up his sleeves. “Social media started calling us that, and it stuck. We’re just friends.”

“I think it’s perfect.” Laura gazed up at her *husband*, the father of her child. She traversed the posh chamber, decorated in sapphire and gold, the Dragon’s team colors. Her slippers sank into the thick carpeting, as she traced overstuffed sofas with thick gilded braiding. “You have more in common than just being billionaires. Most people don’t know the truth about your exclusive group.”

“Are you digging for secrets again, my dear?” He stalked closer, sending the temperature of her blood to boil. “As you know, we have ways of dealing with such subterfuge.” He moved until towered over her, then, like the snap of a tiger, *captured* her. Delicious need fired as he lifted her arms over his head, bringing her closer.

She shivered at the memories of the last times he had *dealt* with her. “I already know your secrets. What do you think the media would say if they knew the extent of your charity work, all the organizations you and your friends have funded with your billions?”

“We’d get even more attention,” he drawled. “Which is why it’s going to stay our little secret.”

She inclined her head to a sharp angle. “I’ll have to think about it.” Yet the threat was hollow, for she’d never purposely attract any more attention to their now famous family. They’d had more than their fair share when Aidan publicly claimed his daughter, fielding questions from reporters all over the country about their new family, without too many details, of course. The attention had been daunting and strange, yet after a few months, a scandal between a political candidate and his opponent’s *wife* stole the bandwidth from them. Aidan would always be a celebrity, but not too many reporters wanted to camp out in Pine Ridge for a photo op of playground piggyback rides with his daughter.

Laura didn’t want to watch anything else.

The collaboration between his company and Pine Ridge had also started to shape, with gorgeous new offices and a modest influx of high-paid workers. All parties stressed the importance of maintaining the small-town atmosphere, thus the buildings were sustainably built, with green and ecological features that fit in beautifully with their surroundings. As a satellite office, it would be far smaller than the centers in the metropolitan areas, however it was sufficient for Aidan to use as his base of operations, especially with their virtual communication capability and Miami just hours away.

“You look like you’re pondering the mysteries of the world.”

The low murmur and tightened arms brought Laura out of her reverie, to the man who never let her go. No matter where her attention wandered it always returned to her two loves, Aidan and Jeanie. “Nothing so academic – just the collaboration.”

“Oh yeah?” He leaned down, whispered, “I think about our collaboration all the time.”

She tapped him playfully on the shoulder. “Not that type of collaboration.” *Although, that type of collaboration was quite nice. Really, they should have that type of collaboration. As soon as possible.*

The promise in his eyes proved he agreed with every wayward thought.

There would be time for... collaborating... later. Jeanie was spending the day with her grandma *and* grandpa, who had recovered enough to take her to the arcade. He had even promised an air hockey game with his granddaughter, with ice cream sundaes for both first and second place. Tonight, they would all meet for a home-cooked meal.

“You guys are more love-dovey than the couple from my last rom-com.” A deep voice sliced between them. Laura felt and heard Aidan’s rumbling satisfaction, as they separated – just a little. As usual, he kept a possessive arm on her.

“One day, you’ll understand, buddy,” Aidan addressed the man, who was as tall and well-built as him. “If you ever get serious about one of your millions of fans.”

Julian Starcroft didn’t just look like a movie star – he *was* a movie star. One of the hottest A-list celebrities, he’d teamed up with Aidan on multiple charitable endeavors, and then became a full-fledged member of the Billionaires of Miami. His movies, which he starred in, produced and *wrote*, had made him a billionaire. “It does seem to be catching.” The words were said under his breath, meant for no audience, and with just a taste of longing. He shook his head, and gestured to the spacious seating area, to where the other Billionaires of Miami congregated, including several women who’d married the sought-after men. Although in this group, the men played predator.

The trio walked over, and Laura smiled at the group. “It’s so nice to spend time with all of you.” Although she’d met most of them at the wedding, there had been over five hundred people at the grand affair, and this was the first time she’d

spent any time with them. Aidan led her to the sofa and drew her down next to him, so they pressed against their entire length. “I’m impressed by all the charitable work you do.”

A series of hand waves, headshakes and assorted denials replied, from men and women who did far more than they would ever admit. “Aidan does as much as the rest of us.” Cameron Drake, a recently wed billionaire lawyer, shared. His smile was all genuine as he regarded his friend. “We are so happy for you and little Jeanie. No one deserves it more.”

Aidan grinned like a child who just discovered Santa Claus was real. “Jeanie and this beautiful woman have changed my world.” He squeezed her hand. “They *are* my world.”

The Billionaire’s Secret Child – it sounds like a romance novel.” Dominick Knight, CEO of one of America’s hottest technology companies, grinned. “You should write it down.”

“Oh no.” Laura laughed. “I wrote an article for my paper to share our side, but that’s it. What about you guys?” She gestured to the three married couples sitting among the assorted men, Dominick and Adriana, Kaitlyn and Cameron and Elora and Royce. “Anyone have interesting stories of how you met?”

A thought cleared. Someone coughed. *Everyone* looked away.

Like a conspiracy theorist about to break open a case, she leaned forward, lowering her voice. “Come on guys, I shared my story. There were some secrets involved, but I can’t be the only one. Even my great-great-great-grandparents had secrets when they got together.”

The group looked at her in surprise. “You know the love story of your great-great-great-grandparents?” Kaitlyn asked.

She waved her hand. “They were a big deal back then. Michael was a duke and Hannah was a lady. Apparently, they like to blackmail each other, and had some strange fascination with oranges. Now what about you? Any secrets you want to share?”

“Secrets? Us?” Adriana exchanged a look with her husband.

“Never could imagine such a thing.” Kaitlyn’s voice was high pitched, as she gave a nervous giggle.

“Nope, not us.” Elora and Royce said in unison.

Laura exchanged a glance with Aidan. “Are you sure?”

“Nope.”

“Not at all.”

“Of course not.”

Everyone laughed. Laura held out her arms. “You have to give me something. Aidan didn’t go into detail, but he said there were some interesting events surrounding your romances.”

This time there were a *thousand* exchanged looks. “We married without meeting,” Elora blurted out, and then blushed. “No one even knew we were married. I infiltrated one of his ritzy parties, dressed in a disguise... well, I don’t want to give away any spoilers, but I may have been *The Billionaire’s Secret Wife*.”

“Speaking of disguises.” Dominick cleared his throat. “I put one on when I investigated corruption at my company. No one would guess the newest low-level intern was actually the CEO. I was the *Billionaire in Disguise*, I’m afraid.”

“Wow.” Laura cleared her throat, pointed to Cameron, “Let me guess, *Undercover Billionaire*?”

“Guilty.” Cameron laughed. “When I showed up at Kaitlyn’s house, she mistook me as the actor she hired to pretend to be her boyfriend. Let’s just say I didn’t correct her as soon as I should have.”

“Now who’s starring in a romance novel?” Laura looked between the couples in turn. “Your stories sound very unique.”

“Oh, they are.” Kaitlyn grinned. “Full of twists and turns and of course happy endings. All the men are clever, gorgeous and just a little too commanding.”

“We couldn’t let the women of our dreams get away,” her husband drawled, his adoration for his wife apparent for all to see. “And as you can see, everything worked out well in the end.”

“What about you guys?” Laura turned to the other men seated on the couch and surrounding chairs, a cornucopia of attractive, well-built and commanding billionaires. If the women of the world could see the contents of the room... “Who’s next to meet the *one*?”

Before anyone could answer, the door opened. A large man in a blue uniform strode in, scruffed, stained with grass, and wearing a billion-dollar smile. The catcher for the Dragons was power defined, and had the muscles to prove it. The tall man had thick blond hair, blue eyes and a competitive air that proved he was an elite athlete.

“That’s Jason Sterling,” Laura breathed. She was fangirling, but she couldn’t stop herself. Her family was big fans of the great American pastime, and had watched the star catcher blossom from a young prodigy into a future hall-of-fame powerhouse. The world-famous catcher had led his team to multiple world series wins, propelling his image all over social media, as well as ads for everything from cell phones to cereals to sneakers. His moves behind the plate were legendary, however his behavior off it... well, that was another story.

“Should I be jealous?” Aidan growled.

“Not even a little.” She snuggled against the man of her dreams. “You’re the only man I ever want. Forever and ever.” The words were as low as a fairy’s sigh, their importance belying their slightness. Every day they reaffirmed their love for each other, and the daughter that connected them.

He brushed her lips, sending tingles everywhere. “Do you want me to introduce you?”

“Immediately.”

He laughed at her exuberant reply.

“This is quite a group. The reporters would love to get in on this.” Jason was jubilant as he walked up. He should be. They’d denied the other team a single run. “Thank you everyone for coming. Your support means a lot.” An edge unscored the light words, as if he didn’t expect it.

“Come join us.” Aidan patted the seat next to him. “You missed a lot while you were playing little league.”

“Little league?” Jason laughed. He grinned at Laura. “You must be the lady who swept this man off his feet. He hasn’t stopped talking about you. I am sorry I missed the wedding. With the run for the playoffs, the GM wasn’t too interested in me taking off time. But now I’m here, and I want to hear all about your story, and about all of yours.” He pointed to the other couples. “Go.”

A chorus of negatives greeted him. Jason put his hand to his heart in mock pain. “This is what I get for providing entertainment for everyone. After that mysterious woman yesterday, I thought—”

A chorus of *hold ons, waits* and *whats?* stopped him. “Did you just say a mysterious woman?” Laura pretended she wasn’t speaking to the man whose image smiled at her from her cereal box this morning. “Tell us everything.”

The humor disappeared, and his eyes shuttered. “There not much to tell, because I don’t know much – yet.” He smoothed down his uniform and stood taller. Just when it seemed he wouldn’t share, he spoke lowly, “A woman showed up at the nightclub yesterday, and we connected. At first, I thought it was just a coincidence, but now it’s clear she was purposely there to watch me. She gave me a fake name, and apparently works for the team.” He flexed long fingers. “Soon my clever spy will learn I am not so easily caught. I’m going to discover who she is and why she was watching me. So it seems, ladies and gentlemen, that it is my *turn*.”

Laura shivered a slight chill, and Aidan held her closer. Did that woman realize what she’d awakened? The predator was about to become the prey, and if she wasn’t careful, she may just become *The Billionaire’s Catch*.

Yet that was a story for another day.

For now, she nestled back into the man who'd captured her heart. She'd exchanged it for his, in a love that encompassed Jeanie and all the children reflected in his eyes – including the one now *growing* inside her. Theirs was a beautiful journey to last a lifetime and beyond.

She couldn't wait.

THE BILLIONAIRE'S CATCH



Thank you for reading *The Billionaire's Secret Child*. I hope you enjoyed their romantic world. My next book, [The Billionaire's Catch](#), will be FREE in Kindle Unlimited.

CHAPTER One

HE WAS the most commanding man she'd ever seen.

The boldest.

The most powerful.

But most of all, he was her greatest obstacle.

And they hadn't even met.

He had burst from the entourage of limos as she arrived, so Dara Everett swiftly slipped through the exclusive entrance to *The Sweet Spot's* VIP room, a privilege only granted to celebrities, athletes or billionaires, or those who knew them. Fortunately, as niece of the owner of a Major League Baseball team, Dara had scored an admission. She'd settled into a corner booth, slouching underneath a massive painting of a woman clothed only in rose petals and in between two copper-hued statues of a man and woman clothed in *nothing*. Overstuffed red leather couches and distressed wooden tables crowded the spacious room, illuminated by modern lamps casting dim beams of light in the darkness. The room was

dense with socialites and celebrities dressed in sexy, sheer outfits and drenched in designer perfume that cost thousands an ounce. Insincere laughter mixed with chiming wine glasses, an asynchronous harmony that pierced her eardrums like nails against a chalkboard.

A commotion sounded by the door, and she turned, just as the focus of her thoughts strode in. Gasps and whispers sounded as people took in the strapping giant of a man, surrounded by fellow players, bodyguards and, of course, a legion of the most beautiful women in the world. Celebrities and billionaires alike stared at the man who was in a league of his own, as more people rushed to join his followers. He smiled with easy charm. like a king playing court. And the people played right into their roles of adoring subjects.

She straightened, attempting to see the star athlete over the fans vying for a glimpse of their hero. Even in the high-end club, he still stood out. One overachiever even boasted a lifelike tattoo peeking out from under her cleavage. How many women dreamed of having him just that close?

How close would she get?

In seconds, Jason Sterling became the discussion of every conversation. A woman wearing Jason's jersey with strategically placed cut-outs called him the "hot tamale muscle man of her dreams" and another said she wanted to take a lick. Of course, he was beyond good looking, breathtaking even. He was about fifty levels above there, and then some. He looked like Adonis or Thor or a glorious combination of the two, with shoulder length golden blond hair, piercing blue eyes and a body of solid muscle. As for finances, an astronomical salary, hundreds of endorsements and wise investments added *billionaire* to his resume. The Florida Dragons catcher was an athlete like no other, with a sky high batting average and nearly superhuman moves behind the plate. Add to that movie star looks, a rock hard body and enough charm to disarm a nun, and he'd become the hottest bachelor in America.

A shiver raced through her, but she forcefully squelched it. It didn't matter how he looked, only how he acted.

Moving inconspicuously, Dara removed her cell phone, and shot a quick picture of the commotion. Several of his Dragons teammates were present: Chance Jenkins, a personable playboy, and Andy Sawyer, one of the more serious members of the team. Jason and his group took their seats at the other end of the lounge.

For a few minutes, she observed Jason as he chatted with his friends. Rounds of liquor were brought with regularity, but he nursed the same beer. Actually, he didn't appear to take a sip. She wasn't surprised. After the *accident*, she doubted he'd drink at all. Not that he'd been the one driving that fateful night...

Women gushed over the star athlete, and although Jason talked to them, he actually did keep his hands to himself. Dara narrowed her eyes when one bold woman reached her hand under the table in a direction that could only lead to one place, but Jason returned the woman's hand with a stern look of disapproval.

Then... he looked up.

She'd been staring straight at him, and she quickly looked away. She'd forgotten to be subtle, instead acting like a teen who'd read one too many Nancy Drew novels. She took a sip of her bottled water and peeked out from under her lids.

He was still gazing at her. No, more than gazing. Studying, examining, *challenging*. A slow smile spread across his face.

She gulped, fighting the heat threatening to engulf her. He couldn't know who she was, at least not yet. Her uncle had wanted to introduce her at the team meeting. Yet as he gazed at her, she wondered if somehow he'd discovered the truth.

"Hello, sweetheart."

Dara jerked, her attention forcefully stolen as two large, grinning and clearly inebriated men stumbled to her table. They loomed over her. "Is this seat taken?" Without waiting for an answer, one of the guys, a sweaty man with long hair and leering eyes plopped down next to her. "How are you doing?"

“I bet great now that we’re here.” The other man gave her a lewd look as he collapsed down on her other side. He reached a beefy paw around her.

A sliver of unease rattled her. “I’m sorry. I’m waiting for someone.”

“And now we’re here.” The long-haired man slid closer. Dara tried to escape to the other side, but the other man lumbered his perspiration-covered body closer, surrounding her in the noxious odor of sweat, alcohol and urine. She was *trapped*. “You should consider yourself lucky. You have no idea how big our...” He gestured down at himself with a lecherous grin. “Bank accounts are.” The men guffawed loudly at the vulgar joke.

Her heart slammed against her ribs. Even in the busy room, no one noticed, as instincts screamed danger. Dara pushed against the unmovable men, fought to maneuver around them, but they matched her moves. Escape was impossible. “I don’t care how big – or small – anything you own is.” Could they hear the fear in her voice? “Let me go.”

“Sure you care.” The long-haired man waved his hand. “When women discover the company our dad owns, they’re usually happy to associate with us. What do you want... dresses, jewelry, diamonds?”

“I want nothing from you.” Now Dara pushed even harder against the beefy man, yet he didn’t move. Would anyone notice if she screamed? “I told you I was waiting for someone.”

The beefy man took her bluff, leaning forward, enveloping her in his hot breath of rancid beer. “Oh yeah? Do you belong to someone, little girl?”

“Actually, she belongs to me.”

Three gasps – two from the men and one from her – sounded as a dangerous voice rumbled from up above. They all stared at the man standing like an avenging warrior, his muscular arms folded across his expansive chest, his

thunderous expression pinned on the two men. He exuded power, fury and danger.

The greasy man beside her gulped. “Mr. Sterling. She’s um...”

“Yours?” the other finished.

Jason nodded, then slowly leaned forward, his large biceps flexing as he gripped the edge of the seat. “That’s right,” he said softly. “And as you must know, I don’t like when someone tries to steal a base... or something else of mine.”

She could all but smell the fear of the men as they scrambled up from the table. “We’re sorry, Mr. Sterling. We didn’t know.”

“We didn’t mean anything!”

“Really?” Jason drawled. He didn’t make a move toward them, yet controlled power charged the air. He could contain the large men in a moment should he choose. “I’m sure your father will be dissatisfied to hear you’re getting hammered and cornering unwilling women.”

“But Mr.—”

“I suggest you leave now.” Jason clenched his fists, the only sign he wasn’t as in control as he portrayed.

The two men nodded profusely. With gasped apologies, they stumbled to the exit, where a team of security guards stood ready to escort them out.

Dara breathed out in relief. Then she looked up. Relief died.

The world *stopped*. She’d seen most of his games because even she couldn’t escape the family passion for baseball, and of course she could scarcely pick up a magazine without seeing his billion-dollar smile. Yet nothing could prepare her for the sight of him up close and personal.

He was the most gorgeous man this side of the universe.

Not simply “He belongs in a magazine” gorgeous, not just “Greek God” gorgeous, but “This should really be illegal”

gorgeous. He stood well over six feet, with massive muscles attesting to his power, his strength. Thick blond hair, a chiseled jaw and eyes as blue as the twilight sky gave the presence of a man who commanded his world.

“Come here,” a deep voice intoned.

He was all power and confidence, and she fortified herself with her strength. With forced casualness, she rose and came face to face with... his chest. She ignored how large he was from up close, how she had to look almost straight up. Heat swirled, electric-like energy sizzling all around, as his power focused solely on her. The rest of the crowd faded away in the background, replaced by the deep scent of pine and sandalwood.

“I’m Jason Sterling,” he said as if he wasn’t known by millions. He leaned closer. “Are you all right?”

She told herself to move, her limbs to shift, but they didn’t listen, so she just stared. And for some reason, so did he. It was strange – he must be accustomed to women fawning all over him – and yet he seemed as disconcerted as she, his expression intense, searching. Anger and emotion swirled, but no familiarity. Had he merely come to the rescue of a woman in danger, or had her cover been blown?

Did he recognize her?

It seemed impossible that he had, unless her uncle had shown him a picture, and told him who she was. Perhaps he recognized her the second he walked in and was waiting to see how far she would take this.

“Did you travel here alone?” He spoke lowly, softly. Dara stared up at him in shock. He sounded protective, *possessive* even. “Even if the building has security, we’re in downtown.” Piercing blue eyes speared her. “Those guys might have been thugs, but the public arena afforded some protection. In the streets, no one will help you.”

Dara didn’t move, unsure of what to say and loathe to speak. She hadn’t planned on interacting with him, only observing him to see if the newspapers had been fair in their

condemnation. She should reveal her identity or leave, yet she did neither.

“If you were mine, you’d never be in a place like this alone.”

Anger vanquished her caution like a tidal wave drowning a lit match. How dare he dictate her life when he’d destroyed one? “You mean I might run into a guy like you?”

His eyes darkened to sapphire shards. “Are you comparing me to those men?”

It wasn’t a fair comparison, as his jaw tightened like a woodshop vise. Jason Sterling may have a reputation, but he’d never been accused of anything inappropriate by a woman. In contrast, women fought for his attention, from fanatically fainting fans to A list movie stars and everything in between. She couldn’t let herself get flustered. If he didn’t know her identity now, he soon would. She needed to stay calm, collected and professional.

This could even be an opportunity. She could play the part of adoring fan and observe how he treated her. Then she’d have firsthand experience to use Monday, when she would be introduced as the person tasked with reforming the team’s image. How would he take it when he discovered the person charged with changing his partying ways had been observing him? Likely he’d be furious.

Like with everything else, he’d try to take control.

He never took his gaze off her. “Appearances do not always reveal the truth.”

No one needed to assume anything about him – his actions and their consequences were there for all the world to see. “Everyone says you’re dangerous.”

“Do they?” His deep murmur sent shivers through her. “And what do you think?”

She drew in a sharp breath. He *was* dangerous. Not to her physically, but in a thousand other ways. She forced her body to relax, easing her stance. “I’m sorry, I’m just a little shaken by what happened.”

“You are?” He softened with genuine concern, and she hid her surprise. Did he actually care?

It made her distinctly uncomfortable. “I’m okay. Better than okay.” She gave what she hoped was a coy grin. “In fact, I’d even say great, now that you’re here.”

The frown melted into a slow, tigerlike smile. “Oh yeah?”

“It’s not every day you get rescued by the...” The words vanished from her mind. What would an adoring fan say? The memory of the celebrity-crazed woman next to her flashed. “Hot tamale muscle man of your dreams!”

Oh.

Crap.

Had she actually called him the hot tamale muscle man of her dreams?

His grin stretched practically across the room. Yeah, she had.

“Tell me more.”

He hadn’t boxed her into a corner, just watched while she neatly did it all by herself. “I know who you are of course.” Everyone did, she couldn’t pretend otherwise. “The best catcher in baseball.”

He leaned down, invading her space, demanding more. Like the doting fan she pretended to be, she’d have to oblige. What else had those women said? “I think you’re just fantastic and wonderful and um... fantastically wonderful.” *What the hell was she saying?* “Your skill with baseball is just legendary. And of course your personality...”

Could his smile widen any more? “Yes?”

“You’re just the most charming, masculine, virile...” *Where had that come from?* “Fantastically wonderful...” *Hadn’t she already said that?* “Man ever!! And don’t get me started on your body!”

He was desperately trying not to laugh. “Please do.”

She opened her mouth and gulped. It was like taking a midnight stroll through a nightmare. Yet there was absolutely no need to be anything less than honest. Physically, the man was unparalleled. “What can I say? You obviously exercise a lot.” She hesitated... a true fan would be far more detailed. “You’re hotter than a jalapeño in the Sahara.” *Too far!* “I mean you have just a fantastic body, all towering and big and muscular.” She licked her lips. “And you’re just so huge and powerful.” *This was going downhill fast – time for the big finale.* “I mean what woman wouldn’t want to rub her hands all over that and take a lick?”

Oh. Crap.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

Had she really just told Jason Sterling she wanted to take a lick? It was bad enough when the woman gossiped, but that was nothing compared to saying it to his face. She took a peek under heavy leashes. He was looking like he wanted far more than a lick, more like the entire feast. What would it feel like to delve that close to Jason Sterling?

Heat engulfed her.

“You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?” he drawled, yet his expression was contemplative, as if he sensed more than she revealed. “Would you like to join me?” He dangled the opportunity like a shiny golden token from a video game, the prize she’d pursued with her nonsensical rant. Only as he studied her like a hungry lion eyeing a gazelle, she wasn’t so sure.

He didn’t give her a choice. “Don’t worry, I won’t bite.” He took her hand, completely engulfing her small fingers in his large, heated and strong grip. As she allowed him to lead her across the room, it felt like she was surrendering far more than just a few moments of time.

She shook her head, forced herself to focus. They reached his table, and she paused. “Where did your friends go?”

Jason held out her chair, then sat down. He offered her a glass of white wine, but she held up her hand. She hadn’t had a

drink since her own accident. He poured them each a glass of sparkling water. “How did you know I was here with friends?”

“Oh, you know.” Dara grabbed her glass, took a much larger sip than ladylike. “I just assumed a man like you would always be surrounded by women.” She winced. “I mean friends.”

He sat back in his chair. “I like to be social, but I’m not always surrounded by women.” He winked. “I mean friends. Actually, sometimes I wish I could be a little more inconspicuous.”

She didn’t say anything, but her expression must have given her away.

“Hey, it’s true. Deep down I’m a shy guy.”

“Now I know you’re teasing me.” For the first time this night, a genuine smile poked through. “You’re about as shy as a Tyrannosaurus Rex.”

“Those guys were misunderstood.” He returned an easy smile. “Okay, maybe I wouldn’t go that far. But I’m not quite the party animal everyone makes me out to be. People only see what’s on the outside.”

She waited for the catchline, but he held her gaze with startling honesty. Was he saying what she wanted to hear, or did he mean it? She shook her head, refused to be drawn in. No way could he be genuine. She was here to catch him acting badly, not portraying the part of sensitive man. “It’s okay to have fun and enjoy life. It’s not like anyone expects you to spend your days contemplating chemistry equations.”

“Actually physics is my field.”

She started. “I’m sorry?”

“My degree is in physics, not chemistry.” His voice remained serious. “Did you think I was one of those athletes with a big body and a small brain? I did go to college.”

She knew that actually. He’d been drafted right out of high school, but had made the unlikely choice to study at university first. She’d had no idea he pursued such a difficult degree.

“No matter how good you are, one injury can destroy a career in a snap.” He set his jaw, and his long lashes lowered. Was he remembering the accident that destroyed his friend’s career – and practically his life? “It’s something we live with every day.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you’d be interested in something like science.” Her cheeks heated. “Of course, I don’t really know you.”

“Physics is actually quite useful for a catcher. I enjoy learning how the world works. I just have my Bachelor’s, but I might go back for a graduate degree after my baseball career.”

“Wow.” She didn’t expect that. “I find science fascinating, too. I was considering going into it, but my unc... family... convinced me to go in a different direction.”

He leaned forward. “You don’t seem the type of woman to be convinced to do anything.”

It was true. So why had she changed her mind when her uncle pushed her towards business school? Perhaps a small part of her wanted to impress him after all. “Usually I’m not,” she admitted. “You don’t always realize what influences you.” She stopped. She was not here to talk about herself. “At least you can enjoy learning about science even if it’s not your career.”

“True,” he agreed. “I even got to accompany a research mission to South America.” Dara was impressed, and even more so as Jason described his recent trip. When they were done discussing science, the conversation turned to other topics: current events, politics and local matters. Soon, they were conversing as if old friends, agreeing on most things, with spirited yet jovial disagreements on others. They spoke for more than two hours, and it was surprisingly – no astoundingly – enjoyable. When he finished a particular hilarious story, she sat back. “You’re different than I assumed.”

He cocked his head to the side. “See what happens when you assume?”

“I never thought you were bad, just that you liked to have fun.” The thought was as sobering as a dip in the Arctic Ocean. Fun could lead to excessive drinking. Excessive drinking could lead to bad decisions. Bad decisions could lead to *tragedy*.

“Doesn’t everyone?” He met her gaze without blinking. “In fact, I wonder if you have a secret, too. A part you keep hidden.”

Her throat turned to sandpaper. Had he discovered her true purpose? Memories slammed into her, blazing somber similarities. He’d destroyed someone’s life, just as someone destroyed hers. She couldn’t afford to forget that, not if she wanted to accomplish the job for which she’d been hired.

“I don’t even know your name.”

She looked up sharply. “My name?”

“What’s your name?” he asked softly.

She took another gulp of water. This was it. She could reveal her identity or continue the ruse. So far he hadn’t shown any of the behavior she’d expected – no rowdy theatrics, no excess alcohol. Maybe she should just be honest, and perhaps they could even work together.

“Hey sweetie!”

“I hope you don’t mind if we intrude.”

“Want to have some fun?”

Dara winced, as her newfound optimism vanished at the three women who’d invaded their table, blond, brunette and black-haired beauties with ample cleavage and far from ample skirts. A thousand invitations lit each gaze, annoying her far more than it should. Yet their cargo was far worse, for each held several *bottles* of alcohol.

Jason’s smile seemed different somehow, emotionless, stretched like a mask without genuine humor. The ladies didn’t seem to notice. “Mind if we join you?” The blonde grinned fire engine lips, as she held up the alcohol. “I’ve got a liquid party.”

Dara narrowed her eyes. With no planned words, she opened her mouth, but Jason's elite reflexes won. Instead of easily capitulating, he responded with a resounding shake of his head. "Not tonight." He stared right at her, even as he spoke to the women. "I'm afraid I'm busy. But I have a few friends who might welcome some company." He nodded toward a table in the corner, where his entourage had relocated.

The women pouted, but he turned down their protests with good-natured charm. With a promise to be available should he change his mind, they left for their consolation prizes.

Dara's jaw ached with tightness. That he turned down the opportunity to get smashed was good, but he'd sent them right to his teammates. She was concerned with everyone's behavior, not just his. If they drank all that alcohol, then got behind the wheel...

"You're looking like I just committed a crime."

She looked down. "I'm sorry. I'm not myself today."

"Then who are you?" His gaze searched hers, as she fought not to squirm. "You never did tell me your name."

"It's Athena." She just managed not to cringe at the ridiculous fib. She had just watched a documentary on ancient myths, and it was the first name that came to mind. No doubt her subterfuge was obvious.

His eyes twinkled. "The Goddess of War? How fitting." Did he know she was making up every single word? "Would you like to dance?"

"I don't think—" she began, but he was already up and grasping for her hand. Then suddenly he was leading her away from the table and toward a dance floor lit with flashing multicolor lights. It was already full, but people moved aside for them, whispering, pointing, smiling with knowing expressions. Before she could protest, he took her in his arms, spreading heat across her veins. Of course, an elite athlete would be an excellent dancer.

Her heart stumbled as sweat formed under the sequined black dress that hugged her curves. People brushed by them, and they pressed together, softness to hardness, plentiful curves to granite muscle. His breath and heat surrounded her, but at least it was a fast song.

The song ended. As a slow dance strummed a soft melody, she pivoted, but Jason grasped her around the waist, bringing them face-to-face. She should protest, could protest, yet the words caught in her throat. He towered over her, his heat surrounding her. He took her hand, and then they were swaying to the music.

Dara's speeding heart belied the soft moves, as she edged ever closer to this man who was everything and nothing like he seemed. His body was so solid, so hard. He was warm and attractive, and the inexplicable urge to push even closer fired. Desire washed over her, the same as before but somehow even stronger. He looked down at her, as if he could see straight through her mask.

The song stopped, and yet they continued to sway. Another started, but she barely noticed as they danced through a fathomless rhythm. All thoughts of the tragic past, the tumultuous present and undefined future vanished as he caught her, as pure physical desire took over. He stopped, yet she could not escape a hold as encompassing as iron shackles. "Do you know how beautiful you are?" he whispered. He said it with such sincerity, such genuine truth, even she couldn't doubt him.

She should do something, say something, to break the web he so effortlessly spun. She knew who he was, what he did, what he had *done*. But his sapphire blue gaze captured her, unarming her defenses and storming her will. She couldn't move, couldn't do anything, as he slowly leaned closer, closer, closer until he was but inches away. She closed her eyes.

His lips took hers.

A world of sensation exploded as warm lips caressed her, as he massaged her softly and then bolder and bolder, as he probed more, demanded more. Her resistance fled as she

pushed back into him, as she touched that sensual mouth, breathed in his scent. She moved with boldness, but he wouldn't give up control, only holding her nearer. She longed to get even closer.

Suddenly the music changed, the slow ballad giving way to a fast song. It was enough to break the spell. *What was she doing?* She broke the kiss, pushing back with all her strength. For a second, his arms remained around her, holding her, capturing her. In the next moment, he let go, just enough for her to move back but not escape his hold completely. She gasped for breath, as he commanded desire, challenge... and something more.

What had she done?

"I have to go." This had not been part of the plan. She wanted to see how he behaved, to see if his role in the scandal had been justified. She hadn't planned on immersing herself in... him. Without another word, she broke away and dashed into the crowd.

"Wait!"

She ignored the voice behind her. Luckily, the chords of sweaty bodies had become dense in the darkened room, and she slipped across the room and out the door without him seeing her. Yet true escape was futile, for soon enough he would learn her identity.

What would he do when he discovered the truth?

WHERE WAS SHE? Jason looked down the seedy street for the fourth time, as sharp unease tightened his chest, amid images of the mysterious woman in the unsavory downtown alley. The roads were all but deserted, the sidewalks inhabited by rough looking men who would enjoy a beauty like his Athena. Despite her ridiculous assertion, she was not the Goddess of War, and no one should be walking in this area alone after dark. He'd searched for his disappearing beauty for an hour, and could only hope she made it home without incident.

Jason turned back, not the club but to his car. He'd had enough of carousing for one night. Actually, he'd had enough for a lifetime. It had been difficult to plaster a smile on his face, to accept when his buddy had placed that beer in front of him. How could they think he would drink when he would be driving? He'd only gone because he wanted to show his team that life goes on.

His team minus one.

A memory flashed, retelling the few minutes that had ruined one life and forever defined his. He forced it back to the recesses of his mind, and images of the woman rose to replace it. It was unusual for anything to take his mind off the accident, and he wondered of its significance. No matter his reputation, he did not usually kiss women whose acquaintance was measured in minutes. There was something about her, something special that struck him immediately. It left one path: He would discover her identity.

He should check to make sure she was okay, but he couldn't do that if he didn't know her name. Fortunately, they kept a detailed log of the guests at The Sweet Spot. He took out his cell. Fairytale princess or Goddess of War – time to discover who she really was.

A few minutes later he had a name.

Dara. It didn't take long for the owner of the club to give him the name after he expressed his concerns. It was unique and beautiful, and far more suiting than Athena. And yet her surname shocked him: Everett. As in Pat Everett, owner of the Florida Dragons Major League Baseball team and his boss. It couldn't be a coincidence. She had to be related to Pat somehow, related to the team. A quick Internet search confirmed it. She was his niece.

Did this have to do with the scandal? Had they sent someone to spy on him, to make sure he wasn't out of control? He had only spent a few hours with her, but he couldn't deny the connection, a rare spark. She could be a good actress, but he'd bet his last signing bonus she felt it, too.

At least now he had a way to contact her. And he would. He'd learn why she followed him to the club, and why she pretended to be a stranger. Then he'd decide what to do about it.

Time for the prey to become the predator.

THE BILLIONAIRE'S CATCH, will be FREE in Kindle Unlimited.

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WHEN ADRIANA RECRUITS her company's newest intern to pretend to be her boyfriend, she has no idea he's actually the billionaire CEO in disguise.

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Kaitlyn hires an actor to be her fake boyfriend, only the powerful man isn't what she ordered. It's a case of mistaken identity, but the billionaire lawyer goes along with the ruse.

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What if you had to tell a man he was a father - not of an unborn life, not of a swaddled infant, but of a child of four? Sound difficult? Then how about this: What if you had to tell a man you never met?

The Billionaire's Catch

When the handsome catcher sets his sights on her, she has to resist her own ridiculous attraction. If he catches her, he will never let her go.

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The Billionaire's Secret Wife

SHE MARRIED a man she'd never met. Why won't he let her go?

Marry a man she'd never met? Outrageous, ridiculous, *impossible*. Yet to save her nephew, Elora Livingston weds powerful billionaire Royce Livingston, separated by continents in a virtual wedding. The marriage was supposed to be temporary, even as they grow ever-closer through letters and phone calls. She must leave the fantasy, but...

He won't let her go.

Donning a disguise, she infiltrates a glittering charity ball at his lavish mansion, determined to dissolve the marriage once and for all. Yet unexpected desires soar, forging a connection she cannot deny. No one knows the woman in their midst is the powerful man's wife, as one question burns above all:

Does he recognize her?

His wife thinks he married her to gain an inheritance, but Royce Livingston has altogether different motives. He cannot ignore the connection with the alluring woman, built through a thousand stories and endless conversations. As secrets swirl, he fights for the most important merger in his life. He will show her what life is like as...

The Billionaire's Secret Wife.

THE SECRET BILLIONAIRES SERIES



Billionaire in Disguise

Wanted: Fake boyfriend

Qualifications: Must be charming and friendly. No criminal masterminds. Prior experience as a fake boyfriend a plus.

Responsibilities: Convince my large family you are my boyfriend, so I don't ruin their celebration. May involve shirtless jogs, splash fights and lots of practice kissing.

Applicant Name: Dominick Knight, a.k.a. Nick Walters

Employment: Billionaire CEO of Knight Technology, undercover as a temp to investigate corruption.

Special skills: Keeping my true identity a secret.



Final result: Secrets, seduction and excitement.

Undercover Billionaire

Her: She's sassy, intelligent and strong, and she's had enough of men trying to run her life. Problem is, she needs a man – and quick – to be the non-existent fiancé she's been bragging about to the family. Enter Drake Alexander, hired with the best of credentials from a top-notch acting association. Only he's not exactly what she's ordered...

Him: He's rich, powerful and just a little bit arrogant, and he doesn't need any more women running after his billions. Problem is, he's stuck in the storm of the century in some hole-in-the-wall town. Banging on the door of a local, the last thing he expects is to be greeted by a beautiful woman ranting about how he's the preposterously late actor she's been expecting. Yet for some reason, he lets her believe the lie....

Kaitlyn has no choice but to accept Drake as her pretend fiancé, even though he invades her thoughts and unsettles her life. Worse yet, continues to play his role even when her family is not around! Soon they're planning a pretend wedding, getting closer and closer to "I do." Sparks fire and suspicions soar, but everything changes when...

The truth is revealed.

The Billionaire's Secret Child

What if you had to tell a man he was a father - not of an unborn life, not of a swaddled infant, but of a child of four?

Sound difficult? Then how about this:

What if you had to tell a man you never met?

Reporter Laura Blake always imagined she would have a child the old-fashioned way, but when life didn't work out that way, she conceived her daughter through the wonders of technology. Five years later, life is perfect... until her father's two heart attacks, and a newfound quest emerges: find the man who fathered her child to attain potentially life-saving medical records. Only the anonymous donor is not the stranger she imagined, but Aidan Bancroft, famous billionaire known for attaining what and who he wants. Furthermore...

He never was an anonymous donor.

Aidan is furious when a reporter confronts him with impossible claims. He only visited the fertility clinic to conceive with his late wife, and lost everything. Yet soon it becomes clear there is far more to her story. He will discover everything there is to know about Laura Blake and her child.

Stunned by the news and their life-altering ramifications, Laura flees, hoping for time to carve the future. Yet Aidan

follows her, his suspicions forging his own investigation. As passions soar and emotions flourish, they delve closer and closer. Soon Aidan is chasing more than his suspicions.

What happens when the truth is revealed?

The Billionaire's Catch

Catch hundred-mile-an-hour fastballs? *Easy*. Call the plays that netted two World Series? *Simple*. Tell the world who he is really is? *Impossible*.

As superstar catcher for the Dragons baseball team, Jason Sterling made his team the hottest in the league. The world only sees the power, an image he must maintain as the league's billionaire powerhouse. Only the team owner's all-too-alluring niece sees more. As she delves ever-closer to his secrets, he delves closer to the woman who is changing his world. Suddenly, he wants something far more personal – and permanent.

Dara Everett will prove she has more than just family connections in her high-powered job as the Dragons' new Image Manager. She's going to reform their party team image, starting with bad boy Jason Sterling. Only, he's far more than he seems. When the handsome catcher sets his sights on her, she has to resist her own attraction.

If he catches her, he will never let her go.

BLACKMAILING THE DUKE



How to blackmail a duke:
Conduct a discreet investigation.
Search for incriminating information.
Do not kiss him (again).

IN LONDON'S ELITE COMMUNITY, Lady Hannah Breckenridge strives to improve the lives of those around her. As soon as she comes of age, she will depart London, exploring and changing the world. She resists her parents' efforts to match her, only Michael Colborne, the powerful Duke of Crawford, isn't so easily deterred.

PERHAPS A LITTLE BLACKMAIL is in order.

MICHAEL IS SHOCKED when Lady Hannah attempts to blackmail him. The beautiful woman mistakenly believes he is harboring a mistress, yet he is actually protecting his sister. That is not the only secret he keeps. If Hannah knew he made an agreement with her father for them to wed, she would be furious. With stolen kisses and ever-deepening feelings, the spirited woman soon delves just a little too close to the truth.

HE MAY USE a little blackmail of his own.

BLACKMAILING the Duke Available Now in Kindle Unlimited.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Melanie Knight has wanted to be a writer since she was a little girl. Twenty years ago, she married her own hero, and now she creates compelling stories with strong heroines, powerful males and, of course, happily ever afters. She writes historical (Regency) romance as [Melanie Rose Clarke](#), contemporary romance as [Melanie Knight](#), paranormal romance as Melanie Starling, romantic suspense and women's fiction. Ms. Knight is a USA Today Bestselling Author and a three-time Golden Heart(R) finalist. Her romances have garnered thousands of positive reviews and reached #2 in Amazon's free store.

Her manuscripts have earned numerous awards in writing competitions, including several first-place showings. With over two decades of professional writing experience, Melanie has written thousands of pieces for businesses and individual clients. She has worked in advertising and marketing, and her freelance articles on the web have garnered hundreds of thousands of views. She writes amidst her five beautiful children, her dream come true. Besides writing, she loves to read, exercise and spend time outdoors. She is a member of Mensa.

