

Chapter One

“JENNIFER! TWIN CRISIS IN THE kitchen!”

“Okay . . . I’ll be right there.” Jennifer Mason didn’t look up from her computer as her fingers flew over the keys. “What happened?” She directed the question over her shoulder to her assistant, Kelly, who had delivered the message and was now standing in the doorway attending to a toddler’s messy face.

“Sarah tried to take Patrick’s rolling pin. Keep still, Andy; that’s a good boy.” Kelly concentrated on trying to wipe the little boy’s nose as he twisted his face from side to side. “Patrick started crying, so Simonne raced to his defense and clocked Sarah with the frying pan.”

“Ouch.” Jennifer screwed up her face as she pressed the Save key and stood up quickly. “Is Sarah all right?”

“Rachel’s attending to her.” Kelly let the little boy slide gently to the floor. “She’s got a bit of a bump but nothing serious.”

“I’m glad we decided on the faux-metal look-alike pots and pans.” Jennifer rolled her eyes as she walked quickly past her friend. “Thanks, Kelly.”

As she walked out into the main area of the early childhood center she supervised, she heard Patrick Durand’s distinctive wail coming from the dress-up corner, where they had just established a new miniature-kitchen area. Jennifer instinctively reached up and pulled the hair tie from her ponytail and shook out her thick brown hair. From past experience, she knew that her long, springy curls would be a key to settling Patrick quickly.

“So what’s been happening to my boy?” She knelt down as soon as she stepped into the play area and quickly glanced at the other teacher, Rachel, who was cuddling a small girl on her lap. She raised one eyebrow in inquiry and received a satisfactory nod from Rachel as the little girl wiped her face with the back of her hand. “What happened, Simonne?”

“Sarah took Patrick’s cooking thing.” Patrick’s twin sister raised her wide blue eyes and pointed at her brother as Jennifer picked him up and hugged him to her. “She was naughty.”

“I see.” Jennifer patted the boy’s back as the sobs began to slow down, and he finally drew a deep, shuddering breath. As she had expected, she felt his hand slip up into her hair, his finger twisting a curl as he settled his face against her shoulder and began to suck the thumb on his other hand. “I think maybe Sarah and Patrick both liked the same thing, and she forgot to ask.” She looked at Simonne. “I know you were trying to help Patrick, but do you think you should have hit Sarah with the frying pan?”

Simonne stared at Jennifer without blinking then glanced at Sarah before fixing her gaze on Jennifer again. She opened her mouth then closed it again and hung her head as a single tear rolled slowly down her cheek.

“Are you sorry you hit Sarah?” Jennifer whispered as she gathered the little girl close with her other arm. She felt the child nod and tightened her arm around her. “Would you like to tell her?” Again she felt the nod then watched as Simonne walked slowly over to Sarah.

“Sorry, Sarah.” Jennifer could barely hear as Simonne murmured her apology, then the girl bent forward and kissed Sarah softly on the cheek. It was a simple gesture, but it perfectly captured her key personality traits—swift to jump to her brother’s defense but always willing to make amends for wrongdoing.

“That was very nice of you, Simonne.” Jennifer gave her another hug when she walked back to stand beside her brother. Again the little girl showed her natural tendency toward affection by reaching out to hold his hand, but he resisted when she tried to pull it out of his mouth. Jennifer stared down at the two blond heads nestled against her. Simonne had long wavy hair while Patrick’s head was covered in tight, dark blond curls, but their features were almost identical, and they had the same olive skin, long black eyelashes, and distinctive bright blue eyes.

“Would you both like to play outside with me?” Jennifer eased herself up and pointed outside. “I don’t think you’ve seen the new toys in the sandbox, have you?”

Both children shook their heads, and Simonne immediately began to skip her way across the center. Patrick followed but made sure Jennifer was coming by holding on to her finger tightly. Somehow he always managed to convey what he wanted without really speaking. Simonne was his voice, and he seemed happy to let her speak for him most of the time. Once outside, the twins settled into digging in the sand, and as usual, when they

were happily occupied, Jennifer delighted in hearing the French accent and occasional French words that permeated their speech as they talked to each other, almost oblivious to the other children.

A few minutes later, Kelly sat down beside her on the wooden edge of the sandbox. "I just took a phone call from the twins' father. Nanny number four just resigned, so someone else will be picking up the twins today."

"Why doesn't he just pick them up?" Jennifer frowned as she watched the children. "He can't be that busy at work."

Kelly shrugged. "I don't know what the deal is, but he sounded pretty abrupt."

"That's the reason the nannies don't stay. This one has only been here a few weeks."

"Yes, but she was a real charmer, wasn't she? I'm kind of glad she left—for the twins' sake." Kelly stood up. "Anyway, I got all the details on the neighbor who's supposed to be coming, so I'll make sure everything goes okay. Are you leaving soon?"

Jennifer nodded as she squinted up at the sun.

"In a few minutes." She stood up slowly and brushed the sand off her pants. "This should be the last supervisor's meeting, but we've got a couple of afternoon sessions over the next two days to plan for next year."

"That's okay, I've got you covered." Kelly smiled as she glanced around the center playground. "I'm sure we'll get along just fine without you—even Patrick and Simonne."

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Jennifer took a deep breath as she closed another folder. She'd only missed three half days and already the accumulated paperwork had grown into crooked piles on her normally tidy desk.

The door swung open as Kelly burst into the office, and Jennifer had to put a hand out to stop the papers from flying off the desk in the sudden gust. She glanced up from the portfolio holding some of the children's work samples to see her assistant glancing into the small wall mirror by the door and quickly applying the lipstick she always kept handy.

Jennifer frowned as she looked down at her watch. "Are you off already? I thought you were here until six o'clock."

"I am." Kelly kept looking in the mirror as she assumed an instant bright smile showing all her straight, white teeth. "I'm just getting ready for the parents to arrive."

“With lipstick?” Jennifer smiled as she placed the portfolio on a pile. “Who are you trying to impress?”

“No one,” Kelly answered quickly as she leaned forward to look out the window overlooking the parking lot. “In particular.”

The door swung open again as Rachel leaned in, still holding on to the knob. “Still no nanny?”

“Yes!” Kelly flicked her hair back and walked out the door, ignoring Rachel’s wide grin.

“What is going on?” Jennifer used both hands to push herself away from the desk and leaned back to look out the door. “What’s with Kelly?”

“She’s smitten.” Rachel grinned and placed her hand over her heart. “With the handsome Frenchman.”

“Who?” Jennifer tilted her head to one side.

“The twins’ father.” Rachel stood up straight. “Of course, you’ve been away since he’s been coming to pick them up.”

“Mr. Durand? He’s actually been coming here?” Jennifer pointed to the ground for emphasis.

“The last three days.” Rachel nodded. “Just in the evening. His neighbor drops the children off in the morning.”

Jennifer nodded as she recalled seeing an older, gray-haired woman leaving that morning. “So why is Kelly smitten?”

“Because he’s drop-dead gorgeous.” Rachel’s voice dropped several tones as she smiled dreamily. “I could almost wish I wasn’t engaged.”

“But your Tony’s great looking.” Jennifer laughed as she shook her head.

“I know. But it’s a different look . . . and sound.” Rachel shrugged. “You wait till you see his eyes.” She touched the side of her head. “You know how blue the twins’ eyes are? Well, try brighter and lighter and looking right through you, then add a French accent to the package.”

“Sounds positively dangerous.” Jennifer grinned and stood up. “Now I’m fascinated to meet this gorgeous creature who disposes of nannies so quickly.”

“Ah, you mock, but wear your sunglasses.” Rachel folded her arms as she stood back from the door. “You’ll be dazzled.”

“Okay, then . . . if you insist.” Jennifer laughed as she picked up her sunglasses and pushed them onto the bridge of her nose. Then she clenched both fists in front of her. “So, do I look ready to meet the amazing Mr. Durand?”

She was still laughing and shaking her head as she walked out into the waiting room, where the children hung their bags. A quick glance around showed two empty spaces where Simonne and Patrick usually hung their bags, and she felt almost disappointed to think she had missed seeing their father.

“The amazing Mr. Durand,” she murmured in an exaggerated French accent as she bent to pick up some papers lying on the floor. As she straightened some name tags on the large wall board, she added, “Who has to be seen to be believed.”

Jennifer smiled again and began to hum a little children’s song she had learned while serving a mission for the Church. That had only been eighteen months ago, but she found she had to review the song in her mind to fully remember the tune. She nodded her head and began to quietly sing the words as she walked toward her office, pushing the door open with a flourish as she finished the last line of the song.

She stopped abruptly as she nearly bumped into the legs of a man sitting on the chair just inside the door. He had Simonne on one knee and Patrick on the other. Despite the fact that he was sitting, he was obviously tall as he seemed to make the tiny office seem even smaller.

“Oops, I’m sorry . . .” She took a step back.

“Jenni!” Patrick held out his arms to her, and she automatically bent to pick him up when the look on the man’s face made her hesitate.

“I’m sorry . . .” She pointed at Patrick rather helplessly. “We usually have lots of cuddles.”

Patrick was already attempting to climb up her arm as the man released his hold and smiled. It was only a half smile, but Jennifer saw the way his eyes seemed to lighten—revealing an even more penetrating blue.

As she lifted Patrick onto her hip and gave him a tight squeeze, she turned back to the man and held out her other hand.

“I’m sorry, I—” She didn’t get to finish her sentence as the man inclined his head.

“You appear to be sorry for a lot of things, Miss Mason.” He slowly stood up, settling Simonne onto his hip.

“I’m sorry—Oh, my goodness!” Jennifer burst out into a spontaneous laugh and shook her head, then rested it against Patrick’s curls. He reacted by immediately putting his hand up into her hair and sucking his thumb. “I really am . . . I mean, I’m not . . . that is . . .” She rolled her eyes and pointed out the door. “Maybe I should just go back out and start again.”

"There's no need for that. I suspected who you were, and Patrick just confirmed it." He held out his hand. "I'm Phillippe Durand, and I'm pleased to meet my children's favorite teacher . . . at last." Their hands met in the briefest shake, and Jennifer felt her cheeks burning, but she cleared her throat as she cuddled Patrick.

"I heard you had been picking the children up." She nodded toward Simonne, who was surprisingly quiet as she rested her head against her father's shoulder. "They're obviously happy with that arrangement."

"It would appear that way." He nodded and adjusted Simonne on his hip. She responded by holding tightly to his tie so that it was twisted to the side, rendering it the only thing out of place in his immaculate outfit. "And I must confess I've been enjoying the extra time with them. Simonne keeps me well informed of all of your adventures together."

"Our adventures?" Jennifer touched her hand to her chest as he nodded.

"I was beginning to believe that there were only three of you here at the center; such are the perceptions of little ones." As he glanced briefly around the office, Jennifer suddenly noticed that the pile of portfolios had slid to one side of the desk. She winced at the month's assignment sheets and bills that formed another haphazard pile. Then she noticed the brightly wrapped and beribboned present an appreciative parent had left on top of the computer. She found herself staring at his chest and wondering if he'd ever had a tie askew before.

"Simonne and Patrick are obviously devoted to you, so I thought I'd just stop by and thank you for your diligence and your . . . companionship."

"Oh, believe me, it's a pleasure looking after them." She smiled down at Patrick's head, which was starting to droop against her shoulder. "Technically, I'm probably not meant to have favorites, but they have a way about them. You just can't help loving them."

There was a long pause, and she found herself reluctant to look up, concentrating instead on rocking Patrick gently while supporting his head with her hand.

"Papa, are we going to McDonald's again tonight?" Simonne suddenly reached up and turned her father's face toward her. "I want a Happy Meal again."

Jennifer looked up quickly and was surprised to see Phillippe's cheeks color slightly as he shrugged.

"Maybe we'll try something else tonight." He coughed slightly and began to turn toward the door.

“But I want to.” Simonne voice became a whine, and he touched a long finger against her lips.

“Hush, *chéri*, we’ll talk about it in the car.” He turned back to Jennifer and gestured with his head toward Patrick and then to the parking lot. “Would you mind giving me a hand, Miss Mason?”

Jennifer smiled and tightened her grip on Patrick as the boy’s father stood aside to let her pass. They walked out along the veranda in silence, then she half turned her head toward him.

“I love the way you called your daughter *chéri*.” She carefully stepped over a toy truck lying on the ramp. Most of the children had left, and the tidying up was still underway. “I haven’t heard that for such a long time, and it sounds beautiful.”

“So you know French?” He walked beside her and she nodded.

“High school French to begin with, then I had the opportunity to live in France for eighteen months.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I love the language, but I don’t get much of a chance to speak it anymore.”

“Except to my children.” He hesitated at the gate. “Simonne has commented that you’ve spoken to them in French.”

Jennifer reached up a hand to undo the lock and swing the gate open.

“I love listening to them play together. It’s like they’re in their own little French world, and sometimes I can’t resist joining in.”

“And singing to them as well?” He followed her through the gate as he pulled his car keys out of his pocket and unlocked the doors of a large, shining, bronze sedan. “I noticed you were singing a song as you came into the office.”

“Oh, that . . . I was just remembering a lullaby an old lady taught me in France.” Jennifer slid Patrick gently off her shoulder and placed him into his car seat. As Jennifer fastened the harness around his son, Phillippe Durand opened the door on the other side and placed a suddenly sleepy Simonne into her own seat. When both children were secured, he looked at Jennifer across the backseat.

“Well, it made me remember my own childhood.” He smiled, and again it almost reached his eyes. He nodded briefly as if to end that part of the conversation. “It’s been a pleasure to meet you, Miss Mason. Thank you for everything.”

“You’re very welcome, Monsieur Durand. I’m glad we can help.” She’d consciously used the French pronunciation of his name, ending with the “ond” sound rather than “and,” and he raised his eyebrow as he straightened up out of the car.

“Then, *au revoir, ma’amselle.*” He stared straight at Jennifer across the top of the car then, without another word, slid behind the steering wheel and started the engine. Jennifer stood back on the path as the car moved smoothly out of the parking lot. Then almost as an afterthought, she slightly raised one hand in a form of farewell.

“Au revoir, Monsieur Durand,” she murmured and smiled slightly as she walked back in through the gate and up the path.

“Well, you don’t usually take all that time to see the parents off.” Kelly’s voice was a mixture of laughing and accusation as she met Jennifer at the office door. “Was there some reason?”

Jennifer stared at her friend then shrugged and grinned. “Hey, everything takes twice as long with twins.”

“Well, I heard you two speaking French.” Rachel bounded up the front steps to join them. “Au revoir, ma’amselle.” She swayed slightly and rolled her eyes as she imitated the French. “Ooh la la, it made chills go up and down my spine.”

“Well, lucky it didn’t do that to me.” Jennifer laughed as she pushed the door of the office open. “But it was good to see the twins with their dad. He seems like a very nice person . . . if a bit abrupt.” She hesitated and frowned. “I wonder where Mrs. Durand can be? We’ve only ever seen nannies, haven’t we—even at enrolling?”

Kelly nodded. “No *Mrs.* ever mentioned. I can only assume he’s a single dad.”

Something in the tone of her voice made Jennifer look up sharply. “And we are the caregivers of his children . . . Right, Kelly?”

“Yeah . . . right.” Kelly grinned as she pushed Jennifer’s shoulder gently.

Chapter Two

IT COULDN'T HAVE TURNED OUT to be a better day for sailing if they'd placed an order for it. The sky was obligingly devoid of clouds so that the late spring sun gently shone uninterrupted onto the beachgoers; the wind was light but consistent, so there was enough to fill the sails of all the small yachts setting out onto the Waitemata Harbor.

"What an amazing day." Jennifer squinted into the sun as she and her twin sister, Danielle, watched their parents launching the Hobie catamaran into the slightly tossing waves. "I thought for sure, with Auckland weather, that it was going to rain today, but it's perfect."

"Always the optimist." Her sister shook her head, but she was smiling as she waved to their mother and father. "I never believe the weather report."

"No, you just think what weather you'd like and assume it'll happen." Jennifer grinned. "You're totally unrealistic, Dani."

"Hey, it must have worked today, so don't complain. At least we're going into summer and not like Amy up in Utah, battling a blizzard." Dani concentrated on sinking her feet deeper into the wet sand as the waves lapped around her ankles, then she looked back out at the small craft now rapidly moving across the water. "I'm glad Mum and Dad got to come sailing at the beginning of the season. They hardly had any time out last year."

"Mmm . . . other things on their minds." Jennifer put her hands on her hips as she shook her head. "Like parents with Alzheimer's and siblings with terminal diseases and friends dying . . ."

"And children with failed relationships." Dani frowned. "Clearly, the older you get the more things there are to worry about and grieve over. You just know and love too many people by then—bad odds."

"And the solution is . . . ?" Jennifer glanced at her sister.

“Don’t ever get married, have children, or be friends with anybody—that way you can’t get hurt or ever be worried about anybody but yourself.” Dani spoke quickly and brightly, but Jennifer could hear the emotion behind her sister’s words and knew that behind the wide-framed, dark glasses there were tears in Dani’s eyes. Jennifer reached out and rested her arm around her sister’s shoulders.

“You’re better off without Larry, Dani.” She spoke quietly but firmly. “And you’re lucky you found out about him—and her—before you married him.”

“I know that now.” Dani barely nodded as she screwed up her nose. “But knowing it doesn’t make the loneliness or the feeling that you’re not good enough go away.”

Jennifer fought back the urge to make a derisive remark about her sister’s ex-fiancé. They’d had this conversation a few times now, and though she was getting better, Dani still found it difficult to reconcile the fact that she had really loved Larry Hill while he’d apparently had no real feelings for her. Jennifer, on the other hand, had no problem relegating Larry to the category of useless people in the world.

“Just think what you’ve been able to achieve since Larry made an exit.” She dropped her arm and took hold of both ends of the towel hanging around her neck. “You’ve gone back to school, and you’re doing awesome things with your nursing degree.”

“Yeah . . . I can go out and ‘save the world’ from disease and malnutrition.” Dani grinned slightly. “One woman against a whole third world.”

“One woman determined to make a difference,” Jennifer corrected her. “And I really think you will. You’ve had a totally different sense of purpose since you went back to school.”

“It’s amazing what can happen when you focus.” Dani nodded. “And I was scared to focus on anything else. What’s weird is that a few months before, the only thing I could focus on was Larry and getting married and having children.” She paused. “It was all I ever wanted.”

There was a long silence between them, then Jennifer turned and motioned toward the dry sand farther up the beach. They walked slowly to an unclaimed spot between other small groups of people and sat down on the warm sand, facing the water. Their parents’ catamaran was now more of a bright orange-and-white triangle bouncing jauntily against the black-green backdrop of Rangitoto Island, so they knew they had a while to talk.

“Do you think you’ll ever feel you can trust a man again?” Jennifer didn’t look at Dani as she drew small circles in the sand with her fingers.

“Not right now,” Dani answered immediately. “I’ve sat in church and looked at some of the single men, and although I think they’re good people, I find myself wondering if they have some hidden agenda and then thinking that I don’t even want to go there.”

“Same.” Jennifer nodded. “I don’t even want to go there either.”

“But it’s different for you.” Dani frowned. “James couldn’t help dying. It wasn’t like he deserted you on purpose.”

Jennifer almost smiled as she thought about James Bolton. They had been friends for several years in high school, and he had always teased her about what he’d called her ‘religious fanaticism’; then, in the first year at university, he had actually begun to ask serious questions about her beliefs. She’d been reluctant to talk about the Church in case it affected their very safe and platonic relationship, but the more he’d learned, the more he’d pressed her for information.

“Do you think he would have joined the Church?” Dani tucked in her legs, folding her arms on top of her knees. “He was such a good guy.”

“Mmm, he was.” Jennifer nodded as she remembered the days she had spent sailing with James during school holidays. “For years he was absolutely my best friend. We had so much in common.”

“But did he ever say that he was really interested in the Church?”

“He always said that he thought the Church was interesting but that he wasn’t actually interested.” Jennifer smiled. “Until the last few weeks . . . before the accident.”

They were silent again. It had been three years since James had been the victim of a head-on collision caused by a young drunk driver, but for Jennifer, it seemed suddenly as if she were just hearing the news. She swallowed hard and fought back the instant tears.

“He actually said that he wanted to make some sort of commitment, but he was also studying philosophy at university so he wasn’t sure to what.” She shrugged her shoulders. “James wasn’t big on commitment, so that was a major step.”

“He never really committed to your relationship either, did he? I mean, you two were in a convenient place, weren’t you? You’d been friends for so long that it was comfortable.” Dani glanced sideways. “Do you think you really loved him, Jen?”

Jennifer took her time answering. She closed her eyes, shaking her head.

“I really don’t know. I know that I loved him as my friend and I felt like my world stopped when he died, but I honestly don’t know if it was ever the sort of love that . . .” She hesitated.

“That you’d marry for eternity,” Dani added quietly.

Jennifer bit on her bottom lip as she considered the questions she’d asked herself many times over the last three years. Would she have eventually married James? Would she have married him if he hadn’t joined the Church? Would he have been the eternal soul mate she had always dreamed of having since she was a little girl?

She shook her head again.

“I still don’t know, Dani. I spent a lot of time before my mission asking myself those questions, and then when I was on my mission, I watched a lot of families to determine what made the best relationships between couples. Was it the sort of friendship that James and I had, or was it something more? Did there have to be a major spark, or was it a gradual thing—where you grow to love each other because you enjoy the same things?” She shrugged.

“And the answer was . . . ?” Dani raised one eyebrow.

“I didn’t really find it.” Jennifer smiled. “I actually decided pretty early on that I’d better concentrate on my relationship with Heavenly Father because at least I could rely on that being right. I figured that the rest would fall into place eventually.”

“Same.” Dani grinned. “I guess you could call it a cop-out, but I prefer to think that Mum’s advice has a sound foundation.”

“Be the right person in the right place,” Jennifer supplied, laughing as she repeated her mother’s familiar saying.

“And the Lord will look after you.” Dani finished the sentence, but she wasn’t laughing. “I really do believe that, Jen. I’ve prayed about it so much, and I really feel that I’m doing the right thing for now.” She rested her head on her arms briefly then looked up at the sky. “I don’t even know that there is a husband and family in the future for me, but . . . I’m okay with that now.”

Jennifer turned her head slightly to look at her sister, and she could sense the peace Dani felt in what she was saying. Jennifer swallowed hard and nodded slowly.

“I don’t know if I’m quite at that stage yet, Dani, but I do feel like I don’t want a relationship yet. Maybe my feeling isn’t about distrusting someone else as much as it’s about being sure I trust myself—and my judgment. But like you said before, I just don’t even want to go there.”

Dani sat quietly for a second then lifted a handful of fine, dry sand and poured it over her sister’s foot.

“You know, some people would say that we’re a sad couple of women.” Dani frowned, then her ready smile came back, never absent for long. “Like Sister Peters, who will never give up on trying to matchmake us. But I prefer to think that we’re just giving Heavenly Father a bit of time out from listening to our personal problems.” She stretched her arms forward and thought for a moment. “How about we plan a holiday this year—just the two of us—and go somewhere really different that we would never realistically consider in a million years.”

“Invercargill?” Jennifer grinned. “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to go there.”

“I was thinking a bit more exotic than that.” Dani stared up at the sky. “What say we think about it and each make a list of four places we’d love to go to, and we’ll compare notes after family night on Monday.”

Jennifer nodded slowly, the idea of planning a vacation suddenly sounding very appealing. “Somewhere different and amazing . . . You’re on.”

* * *

“Somewhere different and amazing.” Rachel leaned back in the office chair and stared dreamily out the open window. “I’ve always wanted to go to the Greek Islands or Bora-Bora or somewhere French-ish, where everybody is incredibly romantic and unreal.”

Jennifer laughed as she watched her assistant’s dreamy look.

“Somehow I don’t think I should have asked you two for suggestions—I can see your minds won’t be on the children.” She glanced at Kelly sitting on the other side of her desk, carefully studying the travel catalogs Jennifer had picked up from an agency on Saturday afternoon. She had felt almost rich as she’d plucked random brochures off the rack and assured the sales assistant airily that she’d be back to discuss fares later. Just the idea of traveling seemed to add a new dimension to thinking about the future, and with the early morning sun beating in through the window, it was easy to let her thoughts drift to faraway places.

“Don’t be silly.” Rachel peered out the window as the first sounds of children’s voices began to filter up the pathway to the center. “We’ll just pretend that they’re coming with us. In fact, I think we’ll make a desert island in the sandbox this morning and pretend we’re all castaways.”

“Except that two-year-olds won’t know what a castaway is.” Kelly looked up. “Or a desert island, for that matter.”

“That doesn’t matter as long as we can build sand castles and let me dream.” Rachel giggled. “With the twins’ French accent in the background, I could almost imagine myself on Bora-Bora.”

Kelly stood and stretched as she pointed at Jennifer. “Just get Jen to speak French around you, and you could be on the Riviera. It always amazes me how she can prattle on with the twins.” She shrugged and pinched lightly at the side of her stomach. “Maybe my mother was right; I should have taken French at school instead of food science.”

Jennifer was still laughing after both of the girls had gone out into the center to greet the early morning arrivals. She had been fortunate in getting this job so soon after returning from her mission and then to have the opportunity to choose most of the new staff. Rachel was several years older than Jennifer but happy to work as her assistant, and Kelly was straight out of college and wonderful with the children—if sometimes a bit distracted. Together they set a tone that parents welcomed.

The pile of brochures sat temptingly on the end of her desk, but Jennifer didn’t hesitate to put them out of the way on the top shelf.

“Out of sight, out of mind.” She smiled as she opened the door and went to check who was attending for the day. A quick glance at the wall chart where children stuck their name tags upon arrival showed that most of the students were there.

“Simonne and Patrick not here yet,” Jennifer murmured to herself as she glanced out to the parking lot, then nodded as she saw the familiar green car belonging to the children’s neighbor, Mrs. Summers, pull up. “What would you do without obliging neighbors, Mr. Durand?” she asked no one in particular.

She watched as the gray-haired woman got out of the car then seemed to spend a long time with the car door open. Jennifer could sense the frustration in the woman’s body language as she ran her hand through her hair then bent inside the car again. Without hesitating, Jennifer walked through the outside playground toward the parking lot, greeting the children as she passed and still managing to share a quick cuddle with several. As she opened the gate, the Durands’ neighbor turned with an expression of relief.

“Oh, thank goodness you’re here, Jennifer. Patrick is a little upset this morning. He wants you, but he won’t let me touch his seat belt to get him out, and Simonne won’t let me either because she doesn’t want Patrick to cry.” She rolled her eyes and leaned against the car. “I stayed with them last night because Phillippe suddenly had to leave after they

had gone to bed, so they woke up and were all disoriented when he wasn't there. It's gone steadily downhill ever since." She shook her head. "I'm happy to help out, especially because they're such a nice family, and I do feel sorry for the man, but I really think I'm beyond this at my age." "Well, I think Mr. Durand is extremely lucky that he's had you to help out." Jennifer smiled as she leaned down to look inside the car. "I just hope he doesn't take advantage of your kindness."

"Oh no, dear." Mrs. Summers immediately waved her hand as if to dismiss that idea. "He pays me far more than necessary, and I just love the children. Besides, it breaks my heart to see them with some of those scatty women he's had looking after them at times."

Jennifer didn't respond to the woman's comment as she suddenly found herself being pulled into the car by a strong little hand. In an instant, she made pretence of falling awkwardly between Simonne's car seat and the back of the driver's seat, then lay sideways looking up at the twins' surprised faces.

"Oh, my goodness . . . How did I get in here?" She pretended to half fall again as she tried to get up and was rewarded by Simonne's delighted giggle. Patrick was smiling, but his grin was hidden behind his fist and a small, blue, soft toy that looked like it might have once resembled a dog. "Can someone please help me up? I think I might be stuck here all day."

"We'll help you." Simonne giggled as she slipped out of her seat, and Patrick patted his fastened seat belt to show he wanted to get out. His twin said, "You'll have to do Patrick's belt, though, because I'm not allowed, and he can't do it yet."

Jennifer had barely released the belt clip before Patrick had thrown himself on her neck, pinning her down between the seats. Both the twins began giggling again, and Jennifer had to struggle to pull herself up. She somehow managed, with lots of laughing, and emerged from the car with a twin hanging from each arm.

"Well, it's easy to see whose side they're on." Mrs. Summers shook her head in disbelief as Patrick eyed her warily and rubbed his arm across his face, further smearing the tears and residue from his nose. "I think I'll just leave quickly before I make them cry again."

"So will Mr. Durand be picking the children up tonight?" Jennifer frowned as Mrs. Summers shrugged.

"I imagine so. He didn't say that he wouldn't be back, just that it was a very urgent matter."

“Okay.” Jennifer nodded slowly. “Well, I have his mobile number, so I’ll give him a call near the end of the day just to make sure.”

“Thank you, dear.” Mrs. Summers gave the children a little wave, but only Simonne responded. Patrick turned his head away and clung to Jennifer’s arm as she got into the car.

“Oh no!” Simonne suddenly gasped as the green car pulled out of the parking lot. “She should have taken Max home!”

“Max?” Jennifer looked puzzled, then she felt Patrick tug on her arm as he silently held up the blue toy.

“Max isn’t allowed to come to school,” Simonne explained importantly. “Papa says only babies bring toys to school, and Patrick has to be a big boy.”

Jennifer felt her heart beat oddly as she watched Patrick listening carefully to his sister’s explanation then looking up with tears beginning to form once more. She quickly bent down and gently touched Max’s head.

“Do you know what? I was thinking we might have all the children bring their favorite toy friends to school next week, so why don’t we see how Max likes it here today, and then we can see if the others want to come too.” Jennifer watched Simonne processing the information then nod at her brother.

“That would be all right, Patrick,” Simonne decided, “because then Max is helping us. Isn’t he, Jenni?”

“Absolutely.” Jennifer gave Patrick a quick hug, then she stood up and held out both hands. “Now, let’s go and see what’s happening in the sandbox. I think Rachel really needs you both there today so she can go on a dream holiday.”

Patrick nodded happily as she led them across the playground, but Simonne frowned as she skipped beside them.

“Why is Rachel going on holiday in the sandbox?”

* * *

Jennifer kept a close eye on Patrick for the rest of the day. It took some time before he let her out of his sight, and she noticed that he was always watching her as she moved off to play with other children or head to her office. She made sure that she always went back to him after a short time, and she could see him gradually accepting her absence for longer periods of time. Max, however, was his constant companion, and Jennifer could see the security it gave the little boy.

At five thirty in the evening, when most of the children had been picked up by their parents, Jennifer took the time, once more, to sit down with the twins. Their father had frequently been the last person to arrive in the short time he'd been picking them up, so she wasn't overly concerned about his absence even though she hadn't been able to get more than voice mail on his mobile phone.

"Do you think Max would like to read a book or draw a picture?" Jennifer pretended to tickle Max under his chin, and Patrick laughed.

"Max can't read." He showed Max the book, then held the toy up to face Jennifer. "He could watch us draw a picture."

"A picture it is, then." Jennifer breathed a sigh of relief as she noticed Patrick using longer sentences. He was much more vocal than he'd been during the day, especially now that there weren't many people around.

"I'm going to draw a castle." Simonne promptly took control of the box of crayons and chose some pink paper. "A sand castle in Bora-Bora."

Jennifer laughed as Rachel popped her head out of the office. "Don't tell me you haven't influenced the children. Sand castles in Bora-Bora?"

"Well, they need to have their horizons expanded." Rachel laughed as she held up some of the travel brochures. "I've put my top four choices on the desk on the right-hand side, and Kelly left hers on the left. And now I'm going to catch up on some portfolios until Mr. Durand gets here."

Jennifer lifted Patrick onto her knee as Rachel disappeared back into the office. It was a rule of the center that there had to be two teachers until closing, which was usually around six o'clock.

At six thirty, she again pulled her cell phone from her pocket and dialed Phillippe Durand's number. For the fourth time she listened to his rather abrupt message asking callers to leave their contact details, but she clipped the phone shut just as abruptly.

"There is no point leaving a message if you don't respond to it, Mr. Durand," she muttered under her breath, but Simonne picked up the name immediately.

"Why are you calling Daddy?" She didn't even look up from the third page of large circles and small stick figures she was drawing.

"I just wanted to check that he was going to be on time." Jennifer watched as Patrick also drew some more figures. Unlike Simonne's prolific artistic attempts, he had worked studiously at the one picture the whole time. Now she saw that he was matching up a blue crayon to the blue of Max's coat.

“Are you going to draw a picture of Max?” She smiled as he nodded and carefully drew some small circles with little lines protruding. “And who are these people?” She pointed at the other stick figures on the page.

“That’s Simonne.” He pronounced her name properly. “That’s me . . . and Papa . . . and Max.”

“Mummy’s not there because she doesn’t live here anymore.” Simonne stopped her drawing. “She’s gone away forever.”

“Forever?” Jennifer almost didn’t want to ask, but this little family intrigued her.

“In a plane.” Simonne nodded and Patrick did as well. “To France.”

“Oh.” Jennifer didn’t know what to say. The twins seemed to be very matter-of-fact about their mother going away *forever*. So what was Phillippe Durand planning to do with his children if their mother was gone? If they had split up, surely she would want some access to her children.

She looked up suddenly as a swift, cool breeze lifted some of the papers on the table and saw that Phillippe Durand had let himself in the front door of the center. She wasn’t prepared for the unkempt demeanor of this previously immaculate man or the distant look on his face. His chin sported dark stubble of at least two days’ growth, and he was wearing a dark brown hooded sweatshirt, denim jeans, and beige boat shoes, all of which were covered in smears of white chalky dust. He looked exhausted.

“Papa!” Patrick was the first up, running and throwing his arms around his father’s leg, closely followed by Simonne, who claimed the other leg. Phillippe simply stood with a hand on both of the children’s heads; he made no attempt to pick them up.

“My apologies for being late, Miss Mason.” His tone was distant and formal. “I had some unexpected complications crop up.”

“Um . . . that’s fine, Mr. Durand.” Jennifer stood up, at the same time gathering the children’s pictures. “It’s rather nice to have the children for some personal time with nobody around.”

“Yes . . . that would be nice,” he responded briefly, absently patting the twins’ heads. “We’d better be going.”

“Our bags, Papa!” Phillippe watched Simonne run to the table where they’d put their small backpacks, then he turned to Jennifer.

“Miss Mason, I’m really not sure what the next few days are going to require as far as my time . . .” He hesitated then took a deep breath. “I’m prepared to pay very well for the extra time if I cannot get here by six o’clock. Is it possible that the children could stay a bit later sometimes?”

He stopped and ran his hand through his hair, and Jennifer wondered if he realized that it left a long smear of white powder across his forehead. “Of course, it may not even be necessary, but it would be safer—”

She saw the anguish on his face as he looked down at his children, and something in the way he said the word *safer* seemed to make her heart skip a beat.

“I often work late, Mr. Durand, so it’s not a problem for me, but I’m afraid it could only be a temporary thing. It’s the center policy . . .” She hesitated. “Would it help if I could suggest another nanny, perhaps?”

“Uh, no, that won’t be necessary.” He became suddenly businesslike again. “I am making arrangements for next week, and then it’s the Christmas break.” He nodded. “Things should be sorted out by then.”

“Well, we’re happy to assist wherever possible, Mr. Durand.” Jennifer began to walk toward the door. “And Patrick settled well after a time this morning. Simonne is very good at looking after his needs.”

“This morning?” Phillippe frowned. “What happened this morning?”

“Patrick was very, very unhappy, Papa.” Simonne had obviously been listening to everything they’d said. “And Max came to school, but Jenni said that was a good thing because he could help the other toys decide if they wanted to visit.”

“Max likes it at school, Papa.” Patrick looked up at his father as he held the little dog out. “He likes Jenni.”

“Well, then, I’m glad Max was able to help out *today*.” Phillippe emphasized the final word as he gently swung his son’s hand.

“Yes, it was definitely Max to the rescue *today*.” Jennifer couldn’t help adding as she smiled. “Wouldn’t it be lovely if adults could have a Max to help out sometimes?”

There was a slight pause as she felt Phillippe Durand’s eyes on her, then he almost smiled as he ushered his children out through the door in front of him.

“Well, that was a different sort of conversation.” Rachel was at the office doorway as soon as the family had walked down the path. “Not that I’m into eavesdropping.”

“Of course not. I’m glad you were here.” Jennifer frowned as she bent to tidy up the paper and crayons. “I just wonder what is happening in their lives—or his life at least. I almost didn’t recognize him dressed like that.”

“He looked absolutely hammered.” Rachel folded her arms as she leaned against the doorjamb. “Will you need me to stay after hours if he’s late again?”

Jennifer screwed up her nose. “Probably . . . or if we find out soon enough I could call my sister to come down.”

“The one you’re planning to go on vacation with?”

“Yes. Dani.” Jennifer nodded. “I’m sure we can work it out between us for a week or so. I just want those little children to be as secure as possible.”

“You’ve really got a soft spot for them, haven’t you?” Rachel teased. “Do you think it’s the French influence?”

Jennifer glanced at her friend. “Possibly, or the fact that they’re the innocent ones in whatever’s happening to their parents. That always gets to me.”