

# Billionaire's Baby

by Leanne Banks

## Chapter One

"That's mine!" a voice echoing with feminine distress called out, making Garrett lift his head from the waters of Chankanaab Park in Cozumel. An orange bathing suit top floated to his side in the turquoise waters.

Garrett had taken a day to snorkel, and he'd expected to see plenty of tropical fish, but not this. A parrot fish nudged the orange triangles to check for edibility, then swam away.

"Could you — please!"

Garrett turned his head to catch sight of a young woman with strawberry blond hair slicked back from her forehead, her mask on top of her head, and her eyes wide with embarrassment.

The parrot fish was dead wrong. This woman was definitely edible.

"The current carried it away," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. "If you could just send it over here."

"I don't know. Haven't you heard? Finders keepers," he said unable to resist the urge to tease her just a little.

Kicking her fins to keep herself afloat, she gave a long-suffering sigh. "Aw c'mon. Orange isn't your color."

"Maybe not," he mused thoughtfully as he held the top out of the water. Looked like the cups would take just a little bit more than a mouthful. "What's the reward for the top?" he asked, looking at her again.

She lifted her chin. "A gentleman wouldn't ask for a reward."

"I never said I was a gentleman. On the flip side, a lady would give a token of her gratitude."

"What'd you have in mind?"

"Dinner tonight," he said, meeting her gaze dead-on.

"If you can deliver the top of that bathing suit and keep your eyes on my eyes — with no detours lower," she emphasized, "I'll meet you for dinner in town."

"Deal," he said, though he knew the effort would cost him. He wouldn't be a man if he didn't want to see her naked, and the clear water would have made the viewing oh, so easy.

"Since you've already said you're not much of a gentleman, I imagine I'll be eating dinner with my friends," she said in a cool voice, keeping her eyes trained on his as she moved closer. He made damn sure his gaze never wavered, never dipped. He had an odd feeling in his gut about this woman.

His eyes fastened on hers, he pressed the suit top into her outstretched hand.

"Thanks," she said, surprise shimmering in her gaze.

"Turn around," he told her, his voice a little rough around the edges.

She did then fidgeted with the clasp. She made a sound of frustration. "I can't make it stay."

"Wait a minute. I've got a rubber band on my wrist," he told her, treading closer.

"You want me to try it?"

"Please."

Garrett made a makeshift fastener and looped the two ends of the suit together.

He gave it a slight tug. "Okay?"

She nodded and turned around. "Thanks. Really." She paused then, as if on impulse, she leaned toward him and brushed her lips over his. "A token of gratitude," she said.

Garrett licked the combination of salt sweetness from his lips and felt a slow burn. "Alberto's at seven. What's your name and where are you staying?"

"Haley. Haley Turner. I'm at Plaza Las Glorias. And you are?"

He opened his mouth to tell her his name, but thought better of it. The temptation to give in to the freedom of anonymity was too much. He'd been burned so many times by women who had wanted him for his family name, money or both. He'd always wanted to know if a woman could want him for himself instead of all the trappings associated with being a Winslow.

He felt a twinge of conscience but pushed it aside. If things worked out, he would tell her the truth later. "Rick Williams," he said.

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Four days later, he was totally entranced. While the sun set in downtown Cozumel, Garrett Winslow watched Haley snap a photo of two Mexican children selling marionettes on the busy street corner. The children smiled for Haley.

From what Garrett had observed, everyone smiled for Haley. With her strawberry blond hair and easy laugh, she had an unpretentious air that was like pure oxygen for Garrett. He couldn't get enough of her. At odd moments, he envisioned their relationship extending past their time in Cozumel.

She made him feel content and ravenous for her at the same time. He had wanted her in his bed since the first minute he'd seen her. Maybe by the end of the night, he thought. He could feel the crackle of expectancy sizzling between them. He wanted to tell her his real name, but the delicious appeal of attracting her purely on a personal basis stopped him.

Within months, he would take on the role for which he'd been born and bred. Vice-president-in-training for Winslow Corporation, the company his father, grandfather and great-grandfather had built and nurtured.

He would graduate from law school in weeks. His roommate had persuaded him to go to Mexico for spring break for one last hurrah. And what a hurrah, he thought, mesmerized by the sway of her hips beneath the skirt that skimmed just above the knee to reveal long shapely legs.

Haley glanced around at him and, with a grin, shook her head. She waggled her finger. "You're staring again."

"You've got a lot worth staring at," he told her, catching her hand in his and dragging her against him for a quick kiss.

Her slightly sunburned cheeks turned even pinker, but she didn't stiffen or pull back as she had the first couple of days he'd cajoled her into spending time with him. "Are you trying to take my breath away?"

"Turnabout's fair play," he said, staring into her green eyes.

Her gaze deepened with a sliver of doubt. "Bet you say that to all the girls at Yale."

"Don't bet the farm," he told her, unable to resist skimming his finger down a strand of her red-gold hair.

"What's so different about me, other than the fact that I lost my bathing suit top in the ocean and you rescued it for me?" she asked with a catch of laughter in her throat.

"You're real."

Haley felt her stomach flip at the look in Rick's eyes. Ever since the first time they'd met, she'd been intrigued by him. She'd been cautious at first, but now she was very curious and very attracted.

Haley was a good, sensible girl who attended a women's college on scholarship in Texas, but she didn't feel at all sensible when she was with Rick. She felt beautiful, interesting and sexy. He made her heart go pitter-patter, and all kinds of other places buzz.

She took a quick breath and tried to cling to sanity. Mexico was no place for a girl to lose her head. "Everyone's real."

He shook his head. "Not like you. I want to dance with you tonight."

"Carlos 'n Charlie's?" she asked. The wild, rowdy bar was the most popular spot with the spring break crowd.

He shook his head. "Too loud."

"Then where?"

"A store owner told me about a place that plays blues and jazz."

"Sounds nice," she said, feeling a reckless anticipation bubbling inside her.

Two hours later, after a dinner of fajitas and two margaritas, she was swaying to sultry music in Rick's arms. She probably shouldn't have had that second margarita, but Haley felt as if she'd been sensible her entire life. She wanted to cut loose and enjoy herself for once.

She stumbled slightly, and Rick drew her body flush against his.

"Sorry," she said, breathless. "A little dizzy."

"After just two margaritas?" he gently teased.

"It doesn't take much for me, but I don't think it's just the tequila." She looked into his eyes and felt her stomach dip and sway.

"Then what is it?"

The alcohol loosened her tongue. "You."

He lowered his lips to her ear. "I don't believe you. You've been hard-to-get since we first met."

She shook her head. "There's a difference between hard-to-get and shy. And careful." She searched his face. She had felt the oddest, strangest connection with him right from the start.

His dark eyes darkened further with arousal and he lowered his mouth to hers, taking her lips in a French kiss that made the room spin. He slid his leg between hers, and she felt the hard evidence of his desire against her. She instinctively moved against him, and he groaned.

"You're going to drive me totally crazy, aren't you?" he muttered against her lips.

Her heart pounding a mile a minute, she shook her head. "Not me. I don't have that kind of power."

"You greatly underestimate yourself," he said in a wry voice and pulled back with a sigh. "I need some air. Let's go for a walk on the beach."

They left the sexy sounds of the jazz club and grabbed a cab to his hotel, which boasted the most walkable portion of the beach. That didn't say much, considering much of Cozumel's beach was rocky. They arrived at a good time, however, and ended up walking the narrow strip of sand several times.

"It's very strange," she said, allowing him to tug her down beside him on the beach. "I feel like I know you and don't know you at all."

He shrugged. "There's not much to know. I'm a simple guy."

"Liar," she said, playfully tossing a handful of sand on his leg. She wasn't an idiot. She could tell he was a complicated man. He'd let her see parts of him, but she was convinced he kept some parts secret. The more she knew about him, the more she wanted to know.

He chuckled. "Okay. What do you want to know?"

"That's easy. What do you want more than anything?"

His gaze grew serious, and he laced his fingers between hers. "Right now? Right this very minute?"

## Chapter Two

Haley couldn't have breathed if her life had depended on it. She bit her lip at the rush of emotions that rolled through her. She forced herself to look away from Rick's dark gaze to regain her equilibrium. "Before you came to Mexico, what did you want?"

He lifted her hand to his lips, and she closed her eyes at the tenderness in the gesture. "To meet a woman like you."

It should have sounded like a line, but it didn't. And the same feeling resonated inside her. She had always wanted to meet a man like Rick. Fun but intelligent. Sexy, with heart.

"Hey, what happened?" he asked, his hand touching her foot.

Haley glanced down and saw a trickle of bright red blood on her toe. "I must've stepped on something, maybe a rock." She shrugged. "It doesn't hurt. It's no big deal."

"Band-Aid and antibiotic ointment," he said firmly, pulling her to her feet.

"There's no need to make a fuss," she protested.

"If you end up with an infection, you'll really be fussing. C'mon. I've got the supplies in my room. It won't take but a minute."

As they took the elevator to his room, in some corner of her mind, it occurred to Haley that it might not be prudent to be anywhere near a bed with Rick. The temptation to do more and go further had been simmering between them for days, and tonight it was stronger than ever. But she knew Rick wouldn't force her into anything. This was just a first-aid mission, not a seduction scene.

He motioned her toward the sofa as soon as he unlocked the door, then flicked on a light and opened the door to the balcony before he disappeared into the adjoining bedroom. He returned with a washcloth, a tube of ointment and an adhesive bandage. Haley extended her hand to take the supplies from him.

He shook his head. "I'll do it."

"I can put on my own Band-Aid."

"Don't deprive me of a legitimate reason to touch your feet."

She smiled as he cleaned the sand from her foot. "You don't have a foot fetish, do you?"

"No, but you have very cute feet."

She curled her toes. "They're long."

"Like your legs," he said, his voice laced with rough approval.

"I always thought I was too skinny in high school."

Wrapping the toe in a bandage, he gave her body an appreciative glance. "Baby, you have filled out very well."

He made her feel as if she'd kept her nose stuck in the books entirely too long. What had she missed by focusing almost exclusively on her studies? Her college buddies had insisted she take this trip to Mexico for some fun, to hook up with a guy and be spontaneous for once. Everyone close to her knew she worked hard to keep her grades up so her scholarship wouldn't be threatened.

She was the first in her family to get a college education and she never forgot how lucky she was to get to study photojournalism. She hadn't allowed herself to get distracted. She couldn't, but something inside her was pushing her toward Rick. The push was so strong it felt like a storm surge. Haley didn't know whether to fight it or let it take her....

"Thanks for the complimentary medical treatment," she said with a smile that she hoped covered her mixed emotions. "Are you sure you're not a med student?"

Chuckling, he helped her to her feet. "No chance of that. Take a look from the balcony. It's a nice view even at night."

Following him out to the balcony, she drew in a breath mixed with sea air and the subtle scent of his aftershave and looked at the reflection of the stars on the ocean. "It looks like magic."

He looked back at her. "Magic," he echoed. "I don't think it's the ocean. I think it's you." He dipped his head and took her mouth in a kiss that made her feel things she'd never felt, heat and need so intense she trembled with it.

He pulled back slightly. "You're shaking. Are you cold?"

"No," she said, swallowing over the lump in her throat. "I don't want this time with you to end."

He nodded slowly and slid his hands through her hair. "I feel the same way. I can't get close enough to you."

In the warm, strong circle of his arms, she felt the heavy beat of his heart and the urgent evidence of his need pressed against her. Her own need surged inside her, overriding years of good sense and restraint. She had never felt like this about a man before. She didn't want to miss him, to miss being with him. Something inside her broke free and she arched against him.

"How close do you want to be?" she whispered.

Time stopped between them, and Haley had the odd sensation of being in the eye of a hurricane.

Rick slid his hand to the small of her back to guide her more intimately against him. "As close as we can get," he murmured, then took her mouth again.

Heat roared through her. She loved the taste of him, and he touched her as if he knew exactly what would take her breath away and make her heart pound. She felt the strings of her sundress slip to her shoulders. Rick's mouth traveled down her throat to her chest, then he took her nipple into his warm, avid mouth.

A delicious combination of shock and desire coursed through her. She didn't have time to react before he skimmed one of his hands up her leg to her panties. She could have stopped him. If she'd wanted to stop him.

His fingers slid into her secret, damp swollen place, and he groaned. "I want all of you, Haley."

Her heart hammered in her throat. She knew she was at the point of no return. "I don't have any —" She swallowed. "I don't have any protec —"

He cut her off with one finger pressed to her lips. "I'll take care of you."

And she knew by the look in his eyes that he would. In every way a man can intimately care for the woman he wants. She closed her eyes for a second, scared, yet full of wanting, then opened her eyes and met his gaze. "I want you."

His eyes lit with dark fire, and he took her mouth, took her body and took her heart. He made love to her with fierce gentleness, seducing her response. He kissed her mouth and throat, caressed her breasts to turgid points of desire. Then lower still, he pressed his open mouth to her belly and thighs, then between her thighs.

When he thrust inside her, she felt the melding of minds, bodies, souls. Even afterward, she clung to him, shaken by the power of their joining. As if he couldn't get enough of her, he made love to her again and again.... They finally slept wrapped in each other's arms.

Hours later, the jarring ringing of the phone abruptly awakened Haley. She sat bolt upright in bed, disoriented by her unfamiliar surroundings.

"Yes, yes, it's me," Rick said, sliding to sit on the edge of the bed. He stopped midmovement. "Oh my God! How bad is he?"

Haley's stomach clenched at the shock in his voice. She glanced at the alarm clock and bit her lip. Good news never came at two a.m.

"The jet's already on the way? I'll go to the airport right away." Rick paused. "If he regains consciousness, tell him I love him and I'm on my way." He hung up the phone, his body taut with desperation. He took a deep breath then shook his head as if to clear it.

"What is it?" Haley asked.

Standing, Rick looked at her. "I have to leave. It's my father. He's had a heart attack."

Her heart ached for him. "That's terrible!"

He nodded, pulling out dresser drawers and throwing clothes into a suitcase. "I always thought he was as strong as an ox. I never thought he would —" He broke off, his voice catching.

She wrapped the sheet around herself and rushed to put her arms around him.

"I'm really sorry. What can I do?"

Distracted and rightfully so, he shook his head. "Nothing. I just really need to go. I'm sorry. I'll be in touch with you. Okay?"

Haley tamped down a flood of insecurities. Now wasn't the time for her to ask for reassurance or declarations. "Okay," she made herself say. "I hope he'll be okay."

Ten minutes later, she watched him walk out the door and hoped with all her heart that it wasn't the last time she would see him.

### Chapter Three:

Four years later...

"It's nice of them to let us see the executioner before they send us to the guillotine," Susan Cooper said to Haley as the two of them walked toward the outdoor company courtyard to meet the new owner.

"Do you have to call him the executioner?" Haley asked, fighting her own nerves about the prospect of losing her job.

Susan Cooper shrugged. "That's how Garrett Winslow operates. He buys and takes over little companies like ours, then cuts away the fat, so to speak —" she glanced down at her plump abdomen and sucked it in "— of the employee

workforce." She tossed Haley a mock scowl. "You don't have to worry. You're superslim."

"I'm in advertising. That can be farmed out or taken over by one of his other companies."

"But you take great photos and write great copy," Susan protested.

"I appreciate your loyalty, but I take photographs of computer components. I'm replaceable." Her stomach twisted with nerves. "I really don't want to lose this job. The day care center is right across the street. I can visit Jake just about every day for lunch and if there's a problem I can be there in less than two minutes."

Susan patted her shoulder in sympathy. "You'll be fine whatever happens. You've got your degree. You've got a great kid. And if you'll just cooperate, I could get you ten marriage proposals in no time."

Susan had been the best friend Haley could ever have since moving to Tremont, Texas, two years ago. A mother of two married for fifteen years to a terrific husband, Susan worked as the assistant in Haley's department and had opened her heart and home to Haley and Jake right from the start.

"I don't need a husband. I just need things to stay the same," Haley said.

"Hmm. Well, I can guarantee that won't happen. C'mon, let's get a look at the executioner. He may hand us our pink slips, but I hear he's a hunk. He's a bachelor," she added with emphasis, then sighed. "But I also heard he has a beautiful blond assistant who's angling for another position and making some progress in that direction."

Haley couldn't help smiling at Susan's ability to get the personal scoop on the new owner. "How do you get all this info?"

"I keep my ear to the ground and my nose to the wind."

"Sounds like a recipe for a crick in the neck."

"Aren't you cute?" Susan said with a chuckle.

"That's what you keep saying," Haley playfully retorted as they approached the double glass doors, which led to the courtyard. "You go first."

"Age before beauty," Susan said with a sniff, then walked outside.

Haley's stomach twisted and turned as she hung near the back of the large crowd of employees of E-Z Computer Corporation. She wondered if the company would keep its name or become Winslow Computers. That would really mess up the marketing plans.

Her mind turned to her son, Jake. She wondered how he would adjust to a move if she lost her job. She feared the transition could be difficult. She had chosen the job at E-Z Computers because the management had offered flexibility, a great health benefits package, reasonable job security, and Tremont, Texas, was the perfect place to raise a son. Now, it appeared that her job security would be threatened.

Hearing a flurry of activity behind her, she moved to the side as a small entourage of people walked through the doorway. Haley identified the president



and vice president of E-Z Computers, a beautiful blond woman she pegged as Winslow's assistant and a tall, dark handsome man who looked entirely familiar. Her heart stopped. It was Rick Williams. The father of her child.

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Garrett Winslow climbed the steps to the small platform as the president of E-Z Computers introduced him. Looking out over the crowd, he saw a mixture of curiosity and apprehension on the faces of the employees.

Both were understandable. In the past five years, Winslow Corporation had gained a reputation of taking over companies and making them lean and mean. After his father's death, Garrett had been thrown into a battle to keep the control of the company in a Winslow's hands. He'd had to prove himself by showing healthy profits from the word go.

He had succeeded and won the respect of every member on the board. If he'd sacrificed his personal life, then that was just a necessary loss. Maybe someday he would be able to have a life and family outside the confines of Winslow Corporation. But not now.

The employees applauded, signaling him to step up to the microphone.

"Good afternoon. Thank you for coming. I can't tell you how excited Winslow Corporation is to bring E-Z Computers into our family. E-Z has produced a superior product and marketed it in a highly inventive and effective fashion. We want to take E-Z to the next level." He automatically scanned the crowd as he spoke, and his gaze hung on the way the sun glinted on a woman's strawberry blond hair in the back of the crowd.

He paused. His heart hesitated. His mind traveled backward, to what now seemed eons ago, to a time when his life had been simpler. A sweet time when he hadn't shouldered the burden of his father's death and his subsequent struggle to take the reins of Winslow. A time when a woman had wanted him just for him, and not the Winslow name and fortune.

He blinked. It couldn't be her. In lonely moments, he'd thought of her but never called. When his father had died on his return to the States, Garrett's life had changed in an instant. There'd been no time for dancing and laughing. There'd been no time for love.

He remembered the bitter guilt he'd felt. While he'd been playing in Cozumel, his father had been dying. Even though, logically, he'd known he couldn't have prevented his father's death, he'd punished himself by turning away from thoughts of Haley and drowning himself in work.

As time passed, however, he knew he'd let something precious slip away, and losing Haley had become his greatest regret.

He continued speaking, but his gaze returned to the woman in the back of the crowd. She flipped her hair behind her shoulder, and he got an odd feeling in his gut. If he could look into her eyes, he would know.

He wrapped up his speech and nodded at the applause, then turned to Bob Stevens, E-Z's president. "Bob, do you know if you have an employee by the name of Haley —"

"Haley Turner," Bob said with a broad smile. "Great employee. She's a great photographer, works in advertising. Everybody loves her."

"I often like to talk with a few of the employees during these visits. I'd like you to put her on the list for this afternoon." Garrett felt his pulse race but tried to remain outwardly calm. He wondered if he would find the words to explain. He wondered how she would respond to him. He wondered if there was a remote possibility that he could have her in his life again.

## Chapter Four

"Mr. Winslow wants to see you." The words echoed inside Haley's brain as she walked down the hall to see Garrett Winslow. Her heart pounded a mile a minute. Had he recognized her? Was he going to fire her personally? Why her? Why not someone else? Of all the ways she'd fantasized seeing Rick again...Garrett, she mentally corrected. Of all the ways she'd fantasized Garrett coming into her life again, this hadn't been one of them. Taking a shaky breath, she opened the door to face her past.

The sight of her made Garrett's heart stop. Haley's face was pale, her eyes didn't quite meet his, and when he reached to take her hand, she hesitated then briefly pressed her cold palm against his.

"Take a seat, Haley," he said, leaning back against the desk.

"Mr. Winslow," she said with a short nod.

If he hadn't noticed her pale complexion and slight jitteriness, then he almost would believe that she'd forgotten him. His gut twisted at the notion, but that was what he deserved. "You like it here at E-Z Computers?"

"Yes, I do. I've enjoyed the family atmosphere of the company. I hope that won't get lost in the transition."

"Family atmosphere is fine as long as it doesn't hold the company back. Change is necessary to get ahead."

"That would be your area of expertise. Getting ahead," she said in a neutral tone. She still didn't quite look at him, and that bothered the hell out of him. He missed her warmth. He had missed it for years, but now standing in front of her as she sealed herself off from him like a cold vault, he missed it even more.

"You're afraid of losing your job?"

"Of course. Everyone is," she said, lacing her fingers together. He could almost remember how her hands had felt on him. "Your reputation precedes you." He narrowed his eyes at her words. "What do you mean 'my reputation'?"

She hesitated, emanating discomfort. "Just some talk I've heard."

"I'd like to know what the talk is."

"I'm not sure you really want to know," she said, finally looking at him.

"I do."

"You're called the executioner."

Remembering all the jobs he'd cut during the past couple of years, he nodded wryly. "I can see that. It's not the only thing I do, though."

When she didn't respond, he found himself impatient for the way she had responded to him all those years ago. Ridiculous but true. Her legs were still long enough to give him hot fantasies, her hair sleek and strawberry blond, and her body held a few more curves than he remembered. He wondered how many men had passed through her life and felt a surprising stab of jealousy. "Are you married?" he asked.

She paused a half beat. "No."

"Will you join me for dinner?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. "No," she said with breathless speed.

He leaned toward her. "I need to explain. I need to apologize for never call —"

She held up her hand. "I don't want explanations or excuses. I'm not interested."

Frustration coursed through him. He'd handled a dozen difficult situations better

than he was handling this one. "But we had something special, and there's too

much you don't know. You're acting as if this is the first time you've met me."

Her eyes flashed with anger, the first warmth he'd glimpsed since she'd walked

into the room. "I can honestly say that this is the first time in my life that I've

ever met Garrett Winslow."

He opened his mouth to disagree then remembered he had never told her his

name. Ouch. "I should have told you my real name, but that trip was supposed to

be my last escape from everything associated with my family name. I can't tell

you how important it was for me to have you interested in me as a man, not a

Winslow."

"I'm sure you had your reasons for deceiving me," she said, not mincing words.

He couldn't blame her for her anger. He would have felt the same way. It

frustrated him that he didn't remember much about that last night he'd shared

with her except making love to her over and over again.

"My father died that night."

She bit her lip and her expression softened a fraction. "I'm sorry. I'm sure it was difficult to lose him."

"In more ways than one. I remember making love with you that night, but —"

She sprang to her feet, her back ramrod straight. "I really don't want to talk about that."

"I don't remember anything after I got the call about my father."

She took a careful breath and dipped her head as if she'd traveled her own path of pain since then, and had no intention of returning. "That's probably best."

"Why?" he asked, moving toward her. "Did you forget me so easily?"

"You have a lot of nerve asking me that. At least you knew my real name."

Frustrated at his inability to reach her, he shoved his hands into his pockets. "I missed you more than you could know. Please — I need the chance to explain."

Haley shook her head. "This is too much, too hard for me to take in. If you hadn't taken over E-Z, then we never would have seen each other again. I don't want to go back to what we had in Cozumel, even for a few minutes. I can't."

"Why? You're not married."

"No. But I'm committed. If you'll excuse me, I must go," she said, and left him smelling the faint sweetness of her perfume. He inhaled deeply. He had the gnawing sensation of wanting more.

If he listened to her, then he would leave her alone and let her go. She clearly had no interest in him. Seeing her again stirred up long-buried needs and wishes. His chest ached with regret. He'd been forced to focus entirely on taking over Winslow when his father had died, and he had known he couldn't bring Haley into that kind of crisis situation. It wouldn't have been fair. By the time the worst of the crisis had passed, he was a changed man and he hadn't been sure she would want him. But now he couldn't avoid the gut-wrenching loss. Was there anyway he could get her to listen to him? Should he even try? Garrett knew that nothing good came easy. He silently vowed not to give up.

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After his last appointment, Garrett joined Bob Stevens for a drink in the hotel lounge. "You've done an amazing job," Garrett said, lifting his glass in a toast. "You built it from the ground up."

Bob shrugged and took a sip of his bourbon. "I just hope you won't cut too many of my employees. They're the reason the company has succeeded."

"I told you we'll try to let retirements and resignations take up any slack we might find. But you've run a tight ship. You shouldn't be worrying. You should be celebrating," Garrett said, patting Bob on the back. "You've just successfully negotiated the deal of your life."

Bob grinned. "I guess I have." He took another sip of his bourbon. "What did you learn during your employee interviews?"

"What you already know. They love you and they're concerned about losing their jobs." He paused, seizing the opportunity to get more information about Haley. "Especially Haley Turner."

Bob nodded. "She's got a lot of responsibility on those slim shoulders."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she's young. Single mother."

Garrett blinked. His gut clenched. "Mother?"

"Yeah, and she takes both jobs seriously, motherhood and her job at E-Z. The men call her no-man's land." He chuckled. "Mostly because she won't go out with any of them."

"So she doesn't have a significant man in her life?"

Bob cracked a grin. "It depends on whether or not you count a three-year-old son."

A son. Haley had given birth to a son while he'd been busy proving himself to all the doubters at Winslow Corporation. He couldn't help feeling another punch of loss. He also couldn't prevent his mind from doing the math. He had shared one amazing night with Haley four years ago. One amazing night where they'd been careful. The child couldn't be his. Could it?

## Chapter Five

Haley's heart was still racing when she climbed into her car and fastened her seat belt. Turning on the ignition and backing out of her parking space, she struggled with a dozen emotions. He had recognized her and he still wanted to see her. Oh, heaven help her. Even though she was furious, looking at Garrett had brought back a longing she'd been certain was dead. Even though she had walked, practically ran, from the office, part of her had wanted to stay and hear his explanation. It had taken so little to fan embers she'd thought were cold. She couldn't help wondering how his life must have turned upside down when his father died. She wished she could have been there for him, comforted him. Life could have been so much easier if they'd had each other for the good times and the bad. She shook her head in disgust at herself as she pulled into the daycare parking lot. It still shouldn't have taken him four years to contact her. She strode through the doors of the childcare center and caught sight of Jake. A surge of anger raced through her. For so long, she'd hoped and dreamed Garrett would come to her. She'd given up that foolish dream when Jake had taken his first steps. She couldn't allow herself to go back to that pain and uncertainty. After driving home and closing the door of their small house behind her and Jake, Haley squeezed her son's little body. Her mind continued to race. Her instinct was to take Jake far, far away and hide. She'd worked so hard to build a good life for the two of them that she didn't want any disruptive intrusions. Plus, she knew that if Garrett ever saw Jake, he would want him. He wouldn't be able to resist the child that bore such a strong resemblance to him. And Haley didn't have the money to fight a custody battle.

Jake giggled and squirmed. "Mommy, that tickles."

Still trying not to panic, Haley took a deep breath and smiled. "Tickles? You think that tickles? What about this?" she asked, and lightly worked her fingers over his rib cage.

Jake laughed uncontrollably, and the sound of it soothed her fears. Haley had learned long ago that Jake's laughter had great medicinal qualities. In fact, she'd call it magic. She stopped tickling him and dropped a kiss on his forehead. "Do you want to walk Sparky before or after dinner?"

"Before," he said, his eyes lighting like firecrackers. "And after."

She laughed and ruffled his hair. "Okay, let me change my clothes."

The doorbell rang, and she automatically turned to open the door. Garrett stood on her front porch.

Her heart fell to her feet. She closed the door partway, but felt Jake wrapping his arms around her legs to crane his neck to see. "Who is it, Mommy? Who is it?"

"Someone from my office," she murmured, her panic returning full force. "Go to your room."

"But Mo-om," he protested.

"Go to your room," she said in a voice that brooked no defiance. She bit her lip at the hurt expression in his eyes, but she couldn't let Garrett see him. After Jake shuffled to his room, she stepped out onto the front porch.

Her heart hadn't stopped racing since she'd seen him in the courtyard. She'd dreamed of this for years, constructed wild fantasies and excuses for why he'd never called her. Amnesia or a kidnapping had been her two favorites. But after Jake had been born, she'd gradually snuffed out the embers of those dreams, and she didn't want Garrett stirring them again.

"I can't talk with you now. I'm busy," she said.

"We have to talk," he said, emanating a determination that made her want to run and hide. "There's too much that's been left unspoken for too long."

"That wasn't because of me."

"I know," he said, sighing. "It was because of me and my situation. I think we would both feel better if I had a chance to really explain."

Her stomach tightened and she shook her head. "I can't talk right now. I have other commitments."

"Your son," he said.

Haley's heart stopped. It took a full moment for her vocal cords to work. "How did you know?"

"Bob Stevens mentioned that you had a young son, that you're not married, and you don't date," he added meaningfully as if he were referring to their previous conversation.

Haley swallowed over a lump of fear. "Then you understand why I can't —" She broke off when she heard the sound of Jake's racing footsteps and the click of canine paws on the hardwood floor behind her just before the door swung open. "Mommy, Mommy, Sparky needs to tinkle!" Jake tugged at the hem of her dress.

Haley felt herself turn to ice. She saw Garrett drink in the sight of his son and knew in that moment that her life and Jake's would be forever changed. And not necessarily in a way that she would like. "Take him to the backyard, sweetie," she managed to say, then watched Jake drag Sparky to the rear of the house. Her heart hammering in her head, she fidgeted with her hair. "As you can see, we're kind of busy, so —"

"He has your eyes," Garrett said, stepping toward her. "He has your green eyes." She couldn't produce a word with him so close, so she nodded.

He tentatively lifted his fingers to a strand of her hair. "But not your hair."

"Right," she said in a voice she wished weren't so shaky. "He won't be called carrottop in school."

He gave a half grin, then his eyes turned serious. "Where's the father?"

Right here, she thought and fought a stab of hysteria. "He didn't want to hang around." She crossed her arms over her chest. "But we're fine without him."

Garrett nodded, his intense gaze belying his smooth tone and casual stance.

"When was your son born?"

"He's almost three-and-a-half years old," she reluctantly admitted, knowing she couldn't hedge. She was desperate to end the conversation and the terrible awkwardness between them. "I really need to —"

"Is he mine?"

Haley's heart stopped. She'd wanted to avoid those three words more than anything. She forced herself to breathe. He stood there, so strong, so confident. What she wouldn't have given to have his shoulder to lean on during just a moment or two of the most lonely times in her life. But she'd been forced to handle it alone, and she and Jake had survived just fine.

"He is mine. I went through nine months of pregnancy, childbirth and weeks of colic by myself. Jake is mine."

"But someone is his father, Haley."

She shook her head. "No. I can't talk with you right now. You lied to me about who you were, had a one-night stand with me —"

"It wasn't a one-night stand," he said, his jaw tightening with anger.

"How many nights was it?" she asked sarcastically, hearing her voice crack at her remembered shame. "One. You promised me you would call me and you never did." She bit her lip, fighting tears. "My little boy wants to take the dog for a walk, and I don't want to have to explain why Mommy is upset, so you need to go."

Garrett's gaze held a world of pain and confusion. Some crazy part of her wanted to comfort him despite what she'd been through because of him.

Haley had to collect herself and have time to think. It had taken her a long time to stop wishing that Garrett would magically reappear in her life. Now that he had, she was shaken clear to her bones.

"I'll go," he said, and the lethal determination she read on his face frightened her. "But I'll be back."

Chapter Six

Garrett was more nervous than he'd been in years. He'd persuaded Haley, or more accurately speaking, twisted her arm, to meet with him at a local diner. It took three phone calls for Haley to speak to him for more than thirty seconds. Garrett admitted that showing up at her house had been a mistake. He hadn't intended to upset Jake, but he'd been knocked sideways by seeing Haley again and learning he had fathered her child. He promised neutral territory, but he had to see her. They had to talk.

He'd suggested cocktails in the evening. She'd countered with coffee on Saturday morning. He couldn't remember a takeover that had involved more dicey negotiations. He couldn't remember a meeting that had been more important to him.

She breezed through the door of the diner dressed in jeans that faithfully followed her curves and a T-shirt that failed to hide the slight bounce of her breasts, with her hair pulled back in a low ponytail.

She may have dressed not to impress, but Garrett couldn't stop looking at her. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed her. She tossed a quick smile at the waitress then searched the room. As her gaze met his, her smile fell, and he felt the pinch of loss. There had been a time when her face lit up whenever she saw him. He stood when she arrived at the table.

"Where's Jake?" he asked.

"Susan, a friend from the office, is watching him. She adores him." She smiled.

"Everyone adores him."

"Including you," he said.

Her smile grew. "I'm the worst."

"Or in his case, the best," he countered.

She thought about that a moment. "Maybe."

The waitress took an order for coffee and left. Silence hung between them.

He cleared his throat. "An apology would be so inadequate that it would be ridiculous."

She looked down and laced her fingers together on the table. "An apology for what?"

"For not telling you my real name and for not calling you." He paused while the waitress delivered their coffee. "Growing up as a Winslow, I never knew if a woman wanted me for my family name. I didn't know if I could trust you. You were almost too good to be true. By the time I realized you offered me the real thing, it was too late. I stayed up all night last night trying to think of a way to make it right for you."

"And you can't," she said, lifting her gaze to his. "You can't change that you lied to me about who you were. And you can't change that you never called me."

He so wanted to capture her hands in his and hold her. "What did you do when you found out you were pregnant?"

"I panicked. I tried to find you, but you didn't exist. I had wild fantasies that you would reappear," she said, smiling sheepishly.

"How wild?"

"You had amnesia and had forgotten my name, but in my dream, you suddenly remembered and couldn't live without me."

He chuckled but felt a stab of sadness at how close she had come to the truth.

"I felt stupid and foolish. I knew better than to get involved with someone during a trip to Mexico. When I found out I was pregnant, I was so scared." She blinked her eyes at memories he wished he could take away. "I was afraid I would lose my scholarship," she said, shaking her head.

"You didn't, did you?"

She shook her head. "My grades suffered a little one semester, but I did okay."

She took a sip of coffee. "It was hard realizing that the time you and I shared meant so much more to me than it had to you, but that's water under —"

"That's where you're wrong," Garrett said, unable to allow her to continue thinking that. "It may look that way because I didn't call, but I thought about you. I just didn't feel like I could drag you into my situation. When my father



died, there was a fight for power in the company, and people were counting on me to come through. I was dragged through the mud and every day was a new crisis. By the time it was all over, I wanted to call you but figured too much time had passed." He shrugged. "I thought you'd moved on, and I wasn't the same man who walked the beach with you in Cozumel. I didn't know if you would feel the same way about me. But I never forgot about you. Never."

She bit her lip. "It looks like you did come through for the corporation," she said.

"But not for you. Or me. Or Jake."

"I don't mean to be unkind, but we've done okay without you."

"Maybe," he conceded. "But I'm realizing I haven't done so well without you."

Her eyes widened in surprise, and he felt a quick electrical awareness come and go between them. She bit her lip. "Our chance is over. Too much has happened."

His gut tightened. Something inside him wouldn't accept her words, but he knew now was not the time to fight her. "But what about Jake?"

She shot him a guarded glance. "What about him?"

"Are you going to deny that I'm his father?"

"I won't deny that you made a deposit, then left," she said crisply.

"Don't you think there will come a time when he will want to know his father? I'm sure you're a fabulous mother, but even you must know that he would need a father."

She sighed. "Jake is a great kid, and he deserves the very best. That's why I don't go out very much. I want to find the very best man possible for him."

Garrett struggled with his pride. "What about his natural father?" he demanded.

She looked at him and shook her head helplessly. "I don't know how to say this nicely, but I'm not sure you're good father material. You may be loaded, great-looking and good in the sack, but you haven't always told the truth. You haven't kept some important promises, and you're a workaholic. I want somebody who is interested in Little League, soccer, telling bedtime stories and willing to trade cocktail parties for Disney movies. You, on the other hand, are obsessed with building the Winslow empire to new heights, no matter what the personal cost is, and are known as the executioner."

He felt the slow burn of challenge. "Are you telling me I'm not qualified to be Jake's father?"

"Yes. That's what I'm telling you. A great sperm count is not an indication of character or parenting potential." Her cell phone rang, and she frowned, pulling it out of her tiny purse. "Hi. What's up?" She listened for a moment, her eyebrow puckering. "Oh, no. Okay. I'll be right there." She looked at him and stood.

"Sorry, I have to go."

"What is it?"

"Chicken pox."

He stood, not pausing a beat. "I'd like to help."

She cast him a look of doubt. "I appreciate the thought, but this is really not your area."

"Maybe it needs to be if I'm gonna become father material," he said meeting her gaze head-on. "I didn't have nine months to get ready, but I'd like a chance to be the man Jake needs as a father." And a chance to be the man you'd have as a husband, he silently added.

## Chapter Seven

Four days into his son's chicken pox, Garrett began to realize that watching the Disney channel hadn't adequately prepared him for parenting.

Although Jake was adorable, he was justifiably cranky, and Haley wasn't much better. She might not have the pox herself, but she was tired from being up half the night with Jake because she refused to allow Garrett to stay at her house.

Jake had initially been shy but curious with Garrett. But Haley had raised a loving, friendly boy and Jake was becoming more outgoing every time Garrett visited. Jake was beginning to trust him.

It might be wishful thinking, but Garrett sensed Jake wanted a father figure in his life. He could tell Haley was nervous about how easily Jake had trusted Garrett, but he would prove she had nothing to fear.

Meanwhile, he and Haley had reached a truce of sorts. He longed for the easiness they'd shared, but she seemed determined to keep him at a distance. And he couldn't blame her.

That didn't mean he was giving up. Each hour he spent in her presence reminded him of all the time he'd missed with her, and he didn't want to miss any more.

He heard her laugh with Jake, and the sound alternately lifted his spirits and twisted his gut because he knew she didn't feel free to laugh that way with him.

Susan called and tried to persuade Haley to join her for dinner. Haley looked at her miserable son and gestured for Garrett to stop Jake from scratching. "I'd better not, Susan. Jake's at the superitchy stage." She paused. "Yes, I know I have a baby-sitter, but he's not experienced and —" She broke off when her gaze tangled with Garrett's.

"I can do it," he told her, walking toward her. "You're well-stocked with Benadryl and calamine lotion."

She looked at him doubtfully. "Yes, but..."

He saw a faint, grudging glimmer of trust and attraction in her eyes. "I hear you, Susan. I'm not being an overprotective mother." She frowned at the phone.

"Okay, I'll come, but I'm not staying for more than two hours." She hung up the phone and looked at Garrett. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Never been more sure," he said, knowing this was his opportunity to prove himself to her.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"It will help you to get out. You won't feel so...cooped up and cranky."

She gave a double take. "I haven't been cranky."

"Did I say cranky? I meant cooped up and tense."

"I haven't been cranky," she insisted then left him biting his tongue.

When she returned from her bedroom, dressed in a skirt that revealed her pretty legs and a top that clung to her skin, reminding him of intimacies they'd shared, she reviewed medication dosages and procedures. "Jake knows my cell phone number in case you forget," she said sweetly.

"Forget?" he echoed, his pride roaring to the surface. "I wouldn't forget your cell phone."

"Well, y'know, you did forget my other number a few years back."

"Very cute," he said. "But I didn't — 254-555-6238."

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"I dialed it a hundred times in my brain," he told her.

A combination of vulnerability and something that almost looked like passion deepened her eyes for a moment. "I — uh, didn't know."

"There's a lot we haven't had the opportunity to learn about each other."

She nodded. He could see she was processing the new information. She cleared her throat. "Well, I guess I should go."

"We'll be fine. I know your cell."

"I guess you do," she said, her lips twitching. She walked to the door then turned around. "Have I really been cranky?"

"Do you want the diplomatic answer?"

"No."

"You've acted like a worried mother who wants her son to feel better and be well."

"I thought I said I didn't want the diplomatic answer." She chuckled, and the sound filled him with sunshine. "Never mind. I'll be back in two hours."

Within ten minutes, Jake began to itch and scratch. Evening was the worst time for the little guy, and no matter how often Garrett reminded him not to scratch, Jake couldn't seem to help it. He began to cry. The sound wrenched at Garrett's heart. He scooped up the child and put him in a lukewarm bath with baking soda.

The water provided some relief, but upon closer inspection, Garrett learned that Jake's mouth was filled with blisters. That was why he hadn't eaten earlier. Garrett heard his cell phone ringing while Jake was in the bath, but ignored it. He knew it was his assistant calling about the negotiations he'd originally scheduled for this week but shelved at the last minute. It was a tricky situation, and he could lose the deal. His cell rang again, and he looked into his son's miserable gaze and let the damn thing ring. Jake's well-being was the only thing on his mind.

He took Jake out of the tub and tried to dress him, but the boy fussed. Garrett decided clothes were overrated anyway. He carried him into the den, set up a fan so that a constant breeze blew over Jake and pulled out a half-dozen books.

Haley arrived home to a house that was eerily quiet except for an odd beeping noise. For a moment, she feared something terrible had happened.

She rushed through the foyer to the den and stopped short at the sight of Jake sleeping, his head resting on Garrett's chest, while Garrett, too, slept. Her little boy was buck naked and generously coated with calamine lotion, but he was resting more comfortably than he had the past three nights. She saw a discarded stack of bedtime books and three Popsicle sticks.

"Popsicles for the blisters in his mouth," she murmured in surprise, wishing she had thought of it, wondering how the executioner could have thought of such a thing. Maybe because he wasn't really an executioner. Maybe because he wasn't the egotistical villain she'd tried to paint him in her mind.

Garrett still took her breath away. She thought she'd buried her feelings for him, but being with him so much reminded her how much she'd missed him. The way he looked at her made her feel like someone had lit a firecracker inside her. She had concealed her attraction to him so far, but she wasn't certain how she could continue the charade. His determination to know Jake chipped away at her defenses. His gentle humor with her and the light in his eyes made her heart stutter. Despite her best efforts, their camaraderie was coming back; the magic between them still simmered.

She looked at the two dark heads so close together and felt her heart squeeze tight. She was looking at her secret dream, a dream so secret she hadn't wanted to admit it even to herself.

What if Garrett could be a good father to Jake? What if she and Garrett could find what had brought them together in the first place?

The forbidden questions terrified her. The annoying beeping sound continued, and she walked toward it, finding Garrett's cell phone on the sofa. Business, she thought and wondered if it was urgent. She wondered if he would leave again. A knot formed in her throat at the thought. More dangerous thoughts. She shouldn't rely on him. She couldn't rely on him.

"Garrett," she said, awkwardly touching his shoulder. "Garrett."

His eyes blinked, and he took a moment to focus. "Hi, Haley."

Her heart thumped at the way he said her name. She liked the way he rolled it around in his mouth as if he wanted to savor it. Silly thought, she scolded herself. "Your cell phone's beeping. I'll put Jake to bed."

"The fan's the key," he told her as she lifted Jake from his chest.

Jake stirred. "Hi, Mommy. Garrett gave me Popsicles to make my mouth feel better."

"I know. That was brilliant."

"They tasted good, too," Jake said, making her laugh. She put him to bed and returned to find Garrett on the sofa, raking his hand through his hair. "Bad news?"

He nodded. "I'm going to lose this deal if I don't get back to Houston tomorrow."

## Chapter Eight

Garrett was silent for a long moment, lost in thought. He didn't want to go to Houston at all. He didn't want to miss a minute with Haley and Jake. He chuckled to himself at the change in him. His job just didn't seem that important to him anymore compared to being with Haley and Jake. This was where he wanted and needed to be. He'd spent the past four years without Haley and he didn't want to go another moment without her.

"You should go," Haley said, wishing her chest didn't feel so tight and achy. "It sounds important. I can handle Jake."

"I'm not going," he said, pushing down the antenna to his cell phone and flipping it shut.

She laced and unlaced her fingers. "But what if you lose the deal? This was a nice idea to try to be here during Jake's chicken pox, and you've done much better than I expected, but you're the big chief of Winslow Corporation.

Thousands of employees are counting on you to do your thing."

Nodding silently, he stood and walked toward her. He touched a strand of her hair and lowered his mouth, surprising the stuffing out of her when he kissed her. His lips were tender and searching. Her knees lost their starch, and she tried to stiffen them. Startled, she blinked when he pulled away.

"Nice try, Haley, but I'm sticking it out until the last scab falls."

"What happens after that?" The tell-tale question popped out of her mouth before she could stop it. She wasn't supposed to care what Garrett did, period. He cocked his head to one side and gave her a slow, sexy smile that ruffled nerve endings she had thought were deader than a doornail. "I think it depends on what kind of evaluation you give me."

She frowned in confusion. "Evaluation? What do you mean?"

"I mean it's customary for the supervisor to evaluate the trainee after a special project."

Haley nearly laughed aloud at the implication that she could supervise Garrett the executioner in any area. "And the results of my evaluation will do what?" she asked, playing along.

"You'll tell me if I'm ready for a promotion," he said, sliding his gaze over her and heating her from head to toe. "I'm not staying just for Jake, Haley. I've missed you for four years. I don't want to miss you anymore." He lifted his thumb to touch her chin. "G'night. Call me if you need me."

Haley watched him walk out the door and struggled not to drop her jaw in astonishment.

She shook her head. It wasn't possible that Garrett would give up the chance to take over another company to add to the Winslow empire. He wouldn't trade that to stay with Jake while he had chicken pox. It wasn't possible, she told herself. He would be gone in less than twenty-four hours. She darn well better not expect him to be hanging around her house when he could be pulling down a multibillion-dollar deal. The cold reality chilled her, but she forced herself to face it.

\* \* \*

But the following morning, Garrett showed up at her door, and he did so every day until Jake no longer itched and his last scab fell off.

Haley fought her attraction to him during those days, but her heart wasn't nearly as sensible as it should be. Her heart should have learned not to count on Garrett. Her heart should have given up hope a long time ago, but somewhere buried deep inside, that darned little seed of hope pushed through the ground, as if it had been waiting for a spring thaw.

It was hard to stay cold when she heard Garrett make tugboat noises as he read a book to Jake. It was hard to remain untouched when she saw Jake make Garrett laugh. It was hard not to long for that special something she and Garrett had shared in Mexico.

After she tucked Jake into bed, Garrett waited for her outside the door. Her heart raced at the look on his face. She wondered if he was going to leave. The thought of it hurt so much it took her breath.

He laced her fingers in his, and she allowed it. She would have to consider why later. He led her to the sofa and took both her hands in his. "I want a promotion." She bit her lip. "To what?"

"Anything above the slug who left you alone and pregnant would be an improvement," he said wryly. His gaze turned serious. "But I want more."

"You're Jake's father. I won't keep you from that. I can't. It wouldn't be fair to him."

He nodded. "That's important. I want that, but I want more," he told her. "I want you, Haley, like we were in Mexico."

She felt her eyes sting with the threat of tears. "We really can't go back."

"But you're still everything I've ever wanted in a woman. When I'm with you, I still feel that click inside me that tells me everything's okay. I want you. I want to know you as much as any human being can know another. I love you and I want the chance to love the woman you're going to become."

Haley's heart felt as if it were going to burst. She swallowed over the hard lump of emotion in her throat. "What if you change your mind?"

"I won't. I never did. I just didn't think I could drag you into the mess my father left behind." He lifted his hand to her chin. "It's okay if you don't quite believe me. I just want the chance to prove it. If it takes a year, two, three or more, I'll be here until you see we really were meant to be."

"But what about your position at Winslow?"

"I've made arrangements to scale back on my workload. It's time for me to delegate more deals to my executive team while I take care of the important stuff. You, me and Jake. I can stand to lose a lot, but I never want to lose you again. And maybe when you're ready, we can revisit Cozumel. But this time, we'll come back together."

Haley's eyes filled with tears. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. Just let me prove my love to you. I love you, Haley."

"And I love you," she whispered, and it was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard.

## Epilogue

There must have been something in the Cozumel water. They went to Mexico for their honeymoon, and Haley got pregnant again. But this time when she delivered their baby daughter with the wisp of strawberry blond hair and Daddy's brown eyes, Garrett was with her the whole time.

While Haley caught a few winks of sleep, he kissed her on the forehead then took his daughter down the hall to meet her big brother. Garrett's heart was so full he wondered if it would burst. There was nothing more valuable than what he and Haley shared, and she'd just given him one more priceless little miracle of love.

The End