



A Family to Keep

CHAPTER ONE

MEN WERE UNRELIABLE

creatures at best. Toxic at worst.

A few—*very* few—could be delightful and amusing in discrete, small doses. But a woman with an education and career, a well-stocked toolbox and easy-to-follow home repair book, along with a steady

supply of batteries for her B.O.B.—battery operated boyfriend—didn’t actually *need* one.

Certainly Dr. Amelia Young didn’t.

And yet, here she was. In North East, Pennsylvania, a little town outside of Erie. About to finish a quest she’d started a month ago, a search that included private investigators whose methods she suspected involved computer hacking. She didn’t know, didn’t care to know, only cared about the results: this address.

Another step forward in her larger plan.

She eased her Jeep Liberty into the parking lot on the side of the massive old Victorian. The house perched on a bluff, overlooking Lake Erie. The October dawn streaked the clouds over the vineyard across the street with bright rosy hues. The leaves on the towering oak in the front yard had begun to turn, their tips blazing scarlet. According to her reports, the building had once been a bed-and-breakfast.

Well, Amelia wasn’t in need of either.

After pulling into a space alongside a green Dumpster, she jerked the gearshift into Park. Rehearsing several more possibilities of what to say to the donor, she climbed out.

Sets of sawhorses dotted the front lawn, and another pair graced the wide wraparound

porch. Lumber was stacked near the front door. The construction crew she'd observed late yesterday afternoon was nowhere to be seen as yet. Exactly how she'd planned.

The last thing she wanted was an audience for this.

The doorbell chimed as she leaned on the button. "Don't say Jordan's name," she reminded herself softly. "No gender-specific pronouns. No unnecessary information. Get in, get what you came for, and get out."

Several minutes and a few more *ding-dongs* later, muttered curses accompanied the sharp click of the dead bolt on the other side of the large double door. "Damn it, I told you guys not before nine today! It's the freakin' crack of dawn. I catered a party last night and..."

The deep voice trailed off as the door opened.

Leaving Amelia staring at a lean, rippled torso, dusted with dark hair that meandered down to an unbuttoned-but-zipped pair of faded jeans. Meandered down to...

Her face heated. Batteries were so not included with *that*. *Good morning to you, too*.

Amelia lifted her gaze—and forced herself not to step backward.

She was looking into her daughter's aquamarine eyes, at her daughter's strong jawline—in a decidedly masculine, sensual face, rough with five o'clock shadow.

The edges of his mouth curved, revealing a deep dimple in his right cheek. He'd caught her staring and found it amusing. "You're not the construction guys."

She shook her head. "No. I'm not."

"You're way better looking, that's for sure. Much easier on the eyes this early. Can I help you?"

"Y-yes," she stammered, then cleared her throat and straightened her shoulders. "At least, I hope so. You're Finnegan Hawkins, right?"

"Finn. Last time I checked, yeah." The confident, borderline-smug smile faded, replaced with a wary expression. "Why?"

"The Finn Hawkins who, thirteen years ago, was a sperm donor for American Fertility Labs in New York City?"

For a long moment, he stared at her. Her stomach tightened, certain he was about to deny it. But there was no denying that jaw, or those eyes.

Finn Hawkins was her daughter's father.

"Freakin' hell." He dragged his hand over his face. "I'm going to need coffee for this conversation, aren't I?"

"Probably."

He muttered a few more choice curses. "It hasn't been eighteen years."

“No, it hasn’t.”

“I’m supposed to be anonymous. I opted to stay anonymous even after eighteen years.”

“Sorry about that.”

“You don’t look very sorry.”

Perceptive guy. Because she wasn’t. Not in the least. She’d do what needed to be done, no matter what it took, no matter who else got trampled in the process. Though she could understand his desire to remain unknown—she’d certainly never wanted to meet him—it didn’t matter. Jordan was counting on her. “Really, Mr. Hawkins, I—”

He held up a hand. “Coffee first. Guess you’d better come in.” He opened the door wider, then turned. From his left shoulder and muscular back, the tattoo of a white tiger with blue eyes and bared fangs glared at her.

Well. That was a surprise. Totally not what she’d expected from the sperm donor she’d chosen based on his profile, which had indicated that at twenty-two, he’d already obtained a bachelor’s degree in business, with a 3.89 GPA, and was pursuing further education. An IQ solidly above-average. Serious, well-thought-out responses on the essay questions.

The rest of him fit. Thirteen years later, now thirty-five, Finn Hawkins was still tall and lean, no spare tire or love handles in sight. Honestly, if you were going to choose a man to stud for you, this prime specimen—Mr. Sex Walking— would do nicely. Had done nicely.

Pity there hadn’t actually been any sex.

The blue eyes and short-cropped walnut hair matched her own coloring, exactly as she’d wanted in a donor. And it was thick. At least Jordan wouldn’t have to worry about passing on premature hair loss to any future grandchildren.

Amelia swallowed hard. Not prone to superstition, she still mentally crossed her fingers that Jordan would have a chance to have kids of her own one day.

And may she never have to face what I’m going through right now.

“Are you coming, or what?” he called over his shoulder. “If not, shut the door so I can go back to bed.”

“I’m right behind you.” She pulled the door closed and scurried to catch up with him as he strode down the main hallway of the house.

She barely had time to register the dark wooden staircase, or the rooms off either side of the foyer, each littered with tools and building materials.

They passed several other doorways before reaching the back, where the hall opened into an enormous kitchen that ran the width of the house. Amelia stopped in the archway.

“Wow. Nice.”

He grunted what she assumed was thanks.

In this stunning combination of home and commercial kitchen, the scent of *new* still hung in the air. There were glossy tile floors and marble countertops. A large island work space, a raised serving counter, and two stools at one end. An eight-burner stove with a double oven beneath it, and another double oven mounted in the wall beside it. The stainless steel appliances gleamed, including the commercial dishwashing station in the far corner.

The tiger stretched as Finn reached into a cabinet, pulling out what she assumed was his precious coffee. Just as well. She wanted him fully awake. Bad enough she had to go to a complete stranger for help. No way she wanted to repeat herself. Especially since she still hadn’t figured out what to say.

A grinding whir was followed by the sharp scent of coffee, which he dumped unceremoniously into a filter basket before jamming it into the coffeemaker.

She slipped onto one of the tall stools at the island. Without another word to her, he pulled out two mugs, plunking one down in front of her.

“Oh, really, that’s not—”

“Indulge me. I don’t like to drink alone. If you’d prefer tea...”

“Coffee is fine, thanks.”

“Good.” He opened the oversize, side-by-side refrigerator. “You like cheesecake?”

“Cheesecake?”

“Breakfast of champions. Gotta have something to go with the coffee. Plain or strawberry sauce?”

“Plain.”

Finn Hawkins slipped the plate in front of the woman and turned away quickly, before she could see that his hands shook like a drunk who’d been dry for less than twenty-four hours. He returned to stare at the dark brew streaming into the pot, not certain how he was going to serve without spilling. He sure as hell didn’t need a jolt of caffeine to wake up. Ever since she’d said “sperm donor” and “American Fertility Labs” he’d been wide-awake.

“I don’t intend to disrupt your life, Mr. Hawkins—”

“And yet here you are.” He carried the coffee to the island, managed to pour it without incident.

The woman sat a little straighter. “Thank you.” She spooned raw sugar from the bowl. “Yes, here I am.”

“I take it that you’re, uh, we, that is...” Oh, great, he sounded like an utter ass.

“I have a child who was created with your donation.”

Finn tried to hide the fact that all the air had vanished from his lungs. A child. She’d given birth to his child. Which was what he’d suspected.

But he still didn’t even know this pull-the-rug-out-from-under-him woman’s name.

Recovering his breath, he guessed that was as good a place as any to start. “You seem to have the advantage here. I’m Finn, and you are?”

“Amelia.”

“Just Amelia?”

She nodded. “I think that would be best. Like I said, I’m not really interested in disrupting your life. You wanted to stay anonymous, and I can understand that. But unfortunately, I had to find you.”

He dragged the empty stool from beside her, positioning himself on the opposite side of the island. “Okay, Amelia. I figure you must want something. So here’s the million-dollar question. What?”

She paused, then set down her mug, rummaging in her purse. “Nothing more than you gave thirteen years ago.” Plastic crinkled and she placed a wrapped specimen cup next to her coffee.

“What the hell?” Finn jumped up. “Whoa, whoa. Wait a minute here. Number one, I gave at the office. Number two, I don’t do that kind of thing anymore.”

“Mr. Hawkins, as I said, this is urgent. I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“Lady, the sperm bank has plenty of other little swimmers for you to choose from. Go through the catalog and pick someone else.”

“It has to be you.”

“Why?” He slowly sank back to his seat, eyeing the specimen cup warily. Did she seriously expect him to simply pick the thing up, excuse himself to the bathroom, and return with it filled? Good grief, the woman was a nutcase. No wonder she’d had to resort to a sperm bank to have a child.

“I need a full biological sibling for my child. A half-sib won’t do.”

A horrifying suspicion struck him. But she was asking for sperm. Not blood. Not a kidney. Not, God forbid, bone marrow. “Why?”

She twirled a strand of shoulder-length hair around her index finger. “This doesn’t have to be a big deal,” she said softly. “Just give me what I came for, and you never have to hear from me again.”

“I wasn’t supposed to be hearing from you *now*. And yes, it is a big deal. You’re asking

me to father another child for you.”

“No, I’m not.” She nudged the container in his direction. “I’m asking you to fill it and forget this ever happened. Just like you did thirteen years ago.”

“It’s not like you’re asking to borrow a cup of sugar.”

“It doesn’t have to be any more complicated than that.”

Finn sighed. “Look, I’m flattered you’re so thrilled with my genes that you want more of them. But I shouldn’t have done it then, and I’m not going to do it again now.”

The color drained from her face and she propped her arms on the counter, staring into her coffee. “Oh. That’s...that’s unexpected.”

“What? That I don’t believe in indiscriminate reproduction anymore?”

She looked up. “You believed in it thirteen years ago.”

“Thirteen years ago, I was young and stupid. I hadn’t thought it through. It was an impulsive, crazy thing to do.” Of course, crazy and impulsive defined most of his life. He’d applied and been accepted to grad school, but, inspired by Greg’s success as a comic-book artist, and their parents’ grudging acceptance of his brother’s somewhat unorthodox pursuits, Finn had chosen culinary school. His life had been one kitchen after another, one location after another, one relationship after another....

Until he ended up here, back home.

“Look, Mr. Hawkins—”

“Finn. I think, given the situation, you can use my first name.”

“All right. Finn. Is there a woman whose permission you need for this?”

There was one woman in his life who *would* care.

He snorted. “Yeah, my mom. And she would rip me a new one if she found out I’d created grandbabies she never knew about.” Which was why he’d only donated twice before his conscience had slammed the door—and his zipper—shut.

Amelia’s eyebrows drew together. “This is *not* your mother’s grandbabies we’re talking about. We are talking about *my* child. You and your mom have nothing to do with it.”

“I’m pretty sure I have something to do with it, or you wouldn’t be here.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I can’t. I won’t.”

The muscle on the side of her jaw twitched. She dug in her purse again, slapped a checkbook on the counter. “I’ll pay you. The clinic paid, right?”

“You’re joking?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

No. She didn’t. And he wasn’t sure how to take that. “Money isn’t the point. It wasn’t the point then.” He sighed. “I’m sorry.”

She slid from the stool and stalked the length of the kitchen, stopping at the back door. She leaned her head against the edge of the frame. Her shoulders slumped.

Ah, hell. He left his own chair, went to stand behind her. “You’re not crying, are you?” he murmured. “’Cause there’s no crying in the kitchen.”

“No,” she snapped. “I’m not crying.”

“Why is this so important to you? What’s the big need for a full biological sibling?”

Her blue eyes, a shade darker than his own, were red-rimmed, but no tears fell as she turned abruptly to face him.

“My child’s life is at stake. And I will do whatever it takes to save h—uh, my child. *Whatever* it takes.”

Finn’s chest tightened. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Severe aplastic anemia,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a blood disorder. Her body doesn’t make enough new blood cells.”

“That’s serious?”

“It’s often fatal. Treatment can help control it for a while, but the only chance my child has for a cure is a bone marrow transplant—”

The room tilted around him with those three words.

“—and there’s no match in the database. We need a matching sibling.”

“Shitdamnhell.” He raked his hand through his hair. “I’m sorry.”

She pressed her lips tightly together, gave a quick jerk of her head. Her eyes filled again.

He’d always been a sucker for a strong woman’s tears. The determined way she struggled for control tied his guts into knots.

He pulled her against his chest.

She stiffened for a moment, then leaned into him. Finn wrapped his arms around her, stroking her silky hair. Vanilla. She smelled of vanilla.

Something deep inside him warmed. A primitive need to protect, to help this woman who, despite her protests to the contrary, had given birth to *his* child. “I’m so, so sorry.”

She rested her head against his shoulder.

He held her for a few moments. When she eased back, he let her go.

He crossed the kitchen to rummage in the cabinet beneath the island. Pulling out the bottle of Bailey’s, he dumped a liberal dose into his mug. He turned it toward hers as she joined him. “You probably need this more than I do.”

She waved him off. “Need it, yes. But...” Her mouth twitched. “I’m hoping to get

pregnant soon, so none for me. Coffee is already pushing it.” She picked up her mug, took a long drink.

“How do you get this anemia thing?”

“The doctors aren’t sure.”

“Is it genetic?”

“Sometimes.”

He put the bottle away, the tremors returning to his hands with a vengeance. His worst nightmare had come true. His child was out there, sick, with a disease his DNA may have transmitted. Of course, he hadn’t known at the time. His brother Ian’s bout with leukemia had occurred shortly after Finn had donated his sperm. After the diagnosis, he’d begun to worry. What if?

Now, *what if* was standing in his kitchen. She wasn’t a nutcase, after all. Just a desperate mother trying to save her child’s life.

He knew a thing or three about determined mothers, having watched his own with Ian. Every single sibling, eleven of them in all, had been tested. Derek and Kyle had matched. Kyle’s age, only thirteen at the time, had led to Derek being designated the donor for Ian.

Except Ian hadn’t survived long enough for the transplant. Double pneumonia, in conjunction with his weakened immune system, had cut his fight short.

Which meant Finn—and the rest of the clan—didn’t match Amelia’s child, either, since they were all listed in the Bone Marrow registry as a result of the tests.

“What if the new baby doesn’t match?”

“They prescreen the embryos before they implant them. They’ll match.”

“Oh.” He settled back onto the stool and waited for her to do the same, then leaned across the island to clasp her hand. Her fingers were cold and clammy despite having been wrapped around the cup of hot java. He gave them a quick squeeze. “Okay. Tell me the whole story.”

“There’s nothing more to tell. I need you to help save my child. Will you?”

Anger surged through him. “What kind of a man do you take me for?”

She freed her hand from his grasp. “Mr. Hawkins—”

He glared at her.

“Finn. I have no clue what type of man you are. Hopefully, you’re not the kind who can turn his back on someone who needs you.” She glanced down.

“You’re not used to asking for help.” He could see it in the proud way she held her head, her shoulders.

“No. But I’ll beg if I have to.”

“You don’t have to.”

Her head jerked up. “Really? You’ll do it?”

She wasn’t asking him to be a father. Amelia’s emphatic references to “her child” drove that fact home. Not that he wanted to be a dad at this point in his life.

He had enough to handle right now, getting the restaurant ready to open without adding a family-size side dish of complications.

But if the only way to save one child was to create another... Did he have a choice?

“Yeah, I’ll do it.”

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Ten minutes later, Finn found himself upstairs, in the bathroom attached to his bedroom, warily eyeing the specimen cup he’d unwrapped and set on the counter. He paced the small space—one and a half steps one way, one and a half back. Sinking to perch on the edge of the bathtub, he scrubbed his palm over his face.

Think dirty thoughts. Imagine naked women.

But the only image that came to mind was the troubled blue eyes of the woman who waited in his kitchen, and the only thoughts were of his unknown, unnamed, sick child. He didn’t even know the gender!

He stared down at his zipped fly. “Hell, at least the clinic provided magazines.”

He could always raid Hayden’s room. No doubt his younger brother, who’d moved to the new place with him following Greg’s engagement, had an old *Playboy* or two stashed somewhere. Hayden insisted *Playboy* was classier than surfing the Internet.

Thank God Hayden, known within the family, not always affectionately, as Jabber Jaw, had already left for work.

That train of thought wasn’t helping Finn, either.

What he needed was inspiration. Motivation.

He smiled wryly.

His best inspiration always had been found in the kitchen.

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