

The Price to Love



Chapter 1

There was something about the breeze, the way it drifted across the bay in harmony with the waves as they slapped against the sandy shore. It was stirring, peaceful, and powerful being this close to the salty spray of the ocean, and it helped clear her head. Candy Friessen rolled her shoulders and breathed in the fresh morning air as she walked beside Sable, her smoky gray Azteca and best friend...though she could never tell her husband that she considered her horse her closest confidant!

Neil Friessen would never understand, because the fact was that he believed her world should rotate around him, not in an arrogant, conceited way but more a way that showed her devotion to him and their family. Neil was so committed to family—his family, his picture-perfect idea of how his family should look. Candy knew he believed they were as close as two human beings could be, and he thought of her as his best friend. He was her husband, her lover, and, at times, her confidant, but there were still some painful parts of herself that she couldn't share with him. Those fears and dark thoughts she could only share with Sable.

Neil wanted to be a father more than anything. It was his dream, his burning desire, to have a family—but it was the one thing Candy couldn't give him; a child, *his* child. That had been taken from her at her darkest hour, when she had been left barren after an emergency hysterectomy was performed to save her life. She had been so young! She knew it wasn't fair, but she'd learned to live with this agonizing, hollow feeling deep inside; though it was an emptiness she couldn't share with her husband, only Sable, who understood the deepest parts of her soul, the things she couldn't say to anyone.

She also knew there were still options if they wanted to have a family. One door had closed while another had opened. The doctors, and their family, all meaning well, had said so—but Candy knew her husband well enough to realize that his dream of having a child of his own was the one thing that would always come between them. Oh, he loved her. She knew that, as he wouldn't have married her once she'd given him the opportunity to walk away. She wondered, though, if there were times he regretted what he'd done. Maybe she was reading too much into it, but this was what she did on her mornings alone with Sable as they walked side by side down their sandy white Cancun beach.

When she tossed around the idea of what was next in their journey, it always came down to one thing—how much she loved Neil. To stop loving him would be like suffocating herself. She couldn't do it. She loved her magnetic, charming, and powerful husband—and he was *hers*. Every time he was with her, he touched her, talked to her, took over her thoughts and senses. His hold over her was unsettling, now that she was away from him and had the space to think, but she had to admit there was something addictive about him giving her all his attention. He knew how to look after himself, too, which added to the attraction and the dynamics between them. Of course,

his confidence and inner strength made her believe he would always take care of everything. He made her feel safe, loved, and cared for...as if she were in a bubble that could burst at any moment.

Neil Friessen was everything to her, and the man still had the ability to take her breath away. She just wished she could be as confident in their love, especially considering Neil was oblivious to the fact that any warm and breathing woman would have given him a second look, doing everything she could to get closer to him. It bothered Candy, though she knew this was a sign of a lack of faith on her part. Neil was smart and loving, always holding her hand and waking her with a wild, burning passion every morning, and she loved all of that about him, but she still couldn't tell him about this feeling she had, this building confusion, as if something was about to change everything—all because of what he was proposing now—a surrogate. He had mentioned it the night before, out of the blue, but just the idea of another woman carrying his child was too much to bear. Candy shut her eyes at the thought of another woman stepping in to do something she couldn't. It left her feeling impossibly lonely.

Sable nudged her shoulder as they walked side by side down their beach until the resort, in full construction, came into view. She stumbled and slowed at the chaos of the pounding, the constant buzz of power tools, creaky scaffolding, and workers. She stopped by the fence that was the gateway to her private beach—and to Neil's multimillion-dollar resort. He was erecting it where her house had once been, the property owned by her father, which he had left to her when he died. What had once been there had been swept away by a storm the previous year.

It had been her land, though she had lost it to her creditors. Neil had coveted that land for years, but after buying and paying for it, he'd given it back to her. It had been a gift of love, and she hadn't been able to deny her husband his dream. The beachfront resort he was now building had once been an obstacle between them, but she trusted him to do what was best for the land because of how much she loved him.

Candy looped the lead rope around Sable's neck and slid the halter around his muzzle and over his nose before tying it at the post. He was starting to skitter from the noise, and their connection had been lost. She held him steady when a sudden bang had her heart racing and Sable spooking. "It's all right, Sable," she murmured. "Let's turn around and head back home and away from this noise."

It was loud and chaotic, a huge project that provided jobs to a community that desperately needed them. She understood that, but it was hard to let go of what had once been. The tide had turned, changing her life in ways she could never have imagined. She had once fought this sort of change, but her love for Neil had helped her overcome her fears.

"Candy!" she heard her husband call out, and she picked up their pace, starting back down the beach until she spotted him.

He was dressed so neat and tidy, with dress pants and a white shirt. His dark hair was neatly groomed, and he walked purposefully toward her. "I've been looking everywhere for you," he said. "Why didn't you tell me you were taking your horse out and coming down here to the beach?"

She kept walking toward him. It was always his eyes, their intensity, that reached out to her and pulled her to him. She could never look away—even though being with Neil, being his wife, sometimes made her feel as if she were drowning.

"Next time, let me know if you're coming down here," he said. He glanced over her shoulder at the fence and the workers on the other side; there was something in his expression that had her looking back.

“Neil, I always came down here before,” she said. What was going on? At times, Neil could be overbearing and overprotective; it stoked her temper, but there was something about the way he watched the workers that bothered her.

“I don’t want you down here alone anymore. Can’t that just be the end of it, Candy? Why do you have to question everything?” Neil said, sounding annoyed.

This was so unlike him, and she found herself watching him the way she would Sable, trying to figure out what was going on. He sighed and shook his head, gesturing toward the construction.

“I didn’t mean to say it like that,” he said. “I just can’t explain it. There’re a lot of riffraff around right now, workers coming in from all around Mexico, and I haven’t had the chance to get to know any of them yet. I don’t want to be worrying about you right now, and I don’t want something to happen to you. Do you understand?” He stepped closer to her, and Sable nudged him as he put his hands on her shoulders. His eyes slid down, and she knew he was taking in her very short white shorts, white tank top, and sneakers. He lifted her long, dark hair over her shoulders and tucked strands behind her ear. For a moment in time, it was just them. “Tell me you’ll listen to me,” he said, “just this once.”

How could she deny him when he looked at her the way he did, as if she was the only thing that existed for him in that moment?

“You know how much I love this; the beach, the ocean, spending time with Sable,” she said. “I need to do this every morning. It’s who I am, Neil, and you agreed to keep this part of the beach ours.”

He touched her cheek and rubbed the pad of his thumb over her lips as he tilted his head closer, really taking her in. It was distracting, he had to know. “I promise I’ll come down with you every day,” he said. “It’s just not safe right now. It won’t always be like this, Candy. I promise.”

She could smell his minty breath. She could feel his warmth even though his lips hadn’t touched hers yet.

He took a deep breath and said, “I got a call from a possible surrogate.”

She couldn’t help the way her body instantly stiffened.

Thankfully, Neil didn’t appear to have noticed, as his hand slipped away and dropped to his side. He stepped back, looking impossibly happy. “She’d like to meet us in an hour.”

She felt as if she were being sucked into a vortex. Her ears rang as she watched joy fill his expression. She hadn’t even had time to digest the idea, and now he was barreling right ahead as if he wanted no further discussion. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t see eye to eye with him on this. Why did he always have to move so quickly on his ideas?

Maybe her feelings were showing, as his smile faded and his expression became serious. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I just don’t understand why you feel a surrogate is the only answer. I mean, you haven’t even considered adoption, and there’s an orphanage so close by. There’re a lot of children, young children, who need parents, Neil.”

“Candy, you know how I feel,” he said. “I want a baby, a child of my own. You already know that with an international adoption, there would be a waitlist, interviews, red tape. We’re Americans, Candy. As difficult as it would be to adopt in the U.S, we wouldn’t even know what we were getting into here. We’d be old by the time a baby became available. No, this is better; less mess, fewer problems.”

She wanted to finish for him, to say what she knew he was really thinking. He wanted a child with his blood, his genes, one that was biologically his. If there was one thing about Neil Friessen, it was that when he wanted something, he never allowed anything to stand in his way.

“I see. So your mind is made up?” She swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat.

“Candy, we’ve discussed this. We’ve already decided. I know you want a baby. I saw how much you loved looking after the babies when we stayed in Montana at Andy and Laura’s. You have no idea how happy I was to see how comfortable you were with Chelsea. You loved holding her. I could see how much you wanted a baby. Let me give that to you.”

“Neil, I loved caring for Chelsea and Jeremy. Your cousin’s twins are adorable babies. But I’m also a realist. I think we need to talk about other ways. You only mentioned surrogacy last night! I need time to digest this, to discuss all the aspects of it with you. I need to be comfortable with this entire process.”

She could feel him pull back even though he hadn’t moved one step. He looked away and sighed. She knew he felt disappointed, annoyed, frustrated—the same way he felt whenever he couldn’t get her to think his way. She was smart enough to let him believe he’d convinced her, and she remembered what his mother had once said: *The Friessen men are so strong, both physically and emotionally, that, at times, it would have been easy to lose herself.*

“Candy, why do you have to argue and overanalyze everything when a good thing comes along?” he said. “Sometimes you just have to go with it. Please don’t fight this, baby. Let’s talk to her. We’ll figure it out.”

He went to reach for the lead rope to take Sable from her, but she held tight and started walking. “So where are we meeting this woman?” she asked, swallowing again. This feeling, whatever it was, had stirred up all her vulnerabilities; the ones she thought she’d put to rest long ago.

“Here,” he said. “She’s coming to the house.”

Every nerve in Candy’s body zinged, and she stopped suddenly. Sable picked up on her shock, prancing and raising his head. Neil reached for the rope before Candy could gather herself and took it from her hand.

“Let’s go,” he said. “You have enough time to get cleaned up and put on something nice.” He started walking away with her horse. “Candy, come on,” he called out over his shoulder.

Candy watched as Neil walked away. He was her husband, who had taken over everything and in turn had provided her with a life any woman would give her right arm for. For some reason that she couldn’t explain, their marriage was snowballing into something else, and she realized she was quickly losing who she was—losing her sense of self and her ability to stand on her own two feet. It bothered her because he was making it so easy for her to slip into that role of being cared for, allowing him to handle everything. The problem was, that if something ever happened to Neil and she found herself alone, she would be more vulnerable than ever.

Chapter 2

Candy stared at the simple but tasteful white dress with cap sleeves that Neil had put on the bed for her. A pair of strappy gold sandals sat on the floor. He loved dressing her, picking out her clothes when they went out. Neil Friessen was a sharply dressed man, who loved a sharply dressed woman, and Candy would be the first to admit that her husband had much better taste in clothes than she did.

She sat on the stool in front of the mirror in their large master bedroom, glancing into the ensuite bathroom, brightly lit by the sun flowing through the skylights and windows. Then there was the walk-in closet, with shelves and racks full of clothes, many she’d never even worn. She still couldn’t get used to Neil believing she needed so many outfits. Before Neil, her wardrobe had consisted of a few jeans, t-shirts, a summer skirt—barely enough to fill three small drawers in a dresser, really. But this was just one aspect of her eccentric, complicated husband.

Today, as she sat perched on the stool, she just couldn't bring herself to pick up the dress laid over the gold comforter of their four-poster bed. It was too fancy for just meeting a woman who might possibly carry her husband's child. She was still stunned over what Neil had brought up the night before. As she was getting ready for bed, he had mentioned the surrogacy as if it were just another aspect of their search. A young woman would be implanted with a donated egg, and fertilized by his semen, all done in a lab. It would be clinical, with no emotion involved. Then the woman would give birth and simply walk away. A contract would be signed, she would be paid, and they would have their baby. The entire time Neil spoke, saying over and over that this was the right way to go, rambling off the legal aspects (which, of course, her mind had tuned out), she had said nothing—until he asked what she thought about his idea.

As she took in the happiness and joy beaming from him, she had been reminded of the time she took a home pregnancy test...before her ectopic pregnancy changed everything for them. This wouldn't be her carrying his baby, a love child. It would be another woman. All Candy had been able to say was that surrogacy was, of course, another aspect they could consider. She'd never meant for this to be the only option. She'd thought they would have time to talk about other avenues. What was his rush? From that one comment, had he decided she was in favor of this ridiculous idea and wanted him to go ahead and find a surrogate?

She tried to remember everything they had discussed, because she was positive a step had been missed—namely, he had neglected to consult her about this very important decision. She glanced at the clock and sighed at the time she had wasted. Instead of changing, she ran a brush through her hair and rummaged through her closet, grabbing the first blouse she touched. It was a new one Neil had bought her a week ago, with blue and orange flowers on sheer white fabric; she pulled it on over her white tank top so that it hung loosely past her hips. She glanced at her makeup, which was organized neatly in the drawers, and stepped away. She never wore makeup, not unless she needed to attend one of Neil's important business functions. The first time, he had hired someone to show her how to apply it.

She glanced in the mirror at her lightly tanned complexion, and the hint of natural pink in her cheeks. She looked fine—more than fine. She didn't believe she needed to coat her face with all that color, so she slipped her bare feet into flat sandals, the comfortable ones she wore every day, and started down the ceramic tile stairs, taking in the grand entry, the faded orange adobe walls. Her husband was talking to someone, and she noticed Ana carrying a tray with a pitcher and glasses into the living room.

Neil had his back to Candy as she strode quietly across the foyer. He was folding up a newspaper and tucking it in a box by the fireplace. He looked so professional in his crisp white dress shirt, navy dress pants, and leather belt. The way he dressed screamed class and wealth, but at least he hadn't put on a tie. Candy went down the two wide ceramic steps into their large, warm living room, decorated in browns and greens, with large windows overlooking the grounds. It was the room in the house where the family, including Neil's parents, Rodney and Becky, gathered most nights before dinner.

Rodney and Becky owned this ten-thousand-acre estate, which had some of the best cattle ranching around these parts. It was a business venture Neil and Rodney shared, and there was a ranch house and camp at the far west side of the property, which held, at last count, five hundred head of cattle. A foreman and cook lived there all year, and the cowboys they hired stayed in the camp and never came to this side of the property. Neil had only taken her there once. She knew he didn't like the interest the ranch hands had shown, although they were just being friendly. Neil

didn't like other men showing interest in what he believed was his, so that one time had been the first and last.

"Mister Neil, when are you expecting your guest?" Ana asked. The short, plump Mayan woman was their housekeeper and cook, and she moved a plate of cookies onto the sofa table.

"Any minute now," Neil replied as he glanced at his watch before noticing Candy where she lingered beside the bookshelf. "Candy, I didn't hear you come in," he said. His gaze lingered on her as he took in what she was wearing. His expression was questioning. This was the first time she had chosen something different than what he'd set out for her. Before, it had been helpful for him to pick out her clothes when she didn't know what to wear, but now it seemed as if he was dressing her up to meet a mistress. She said nothing.

"Your parents, will they be meeting this woman, as well?" Ana asked.

Neil turned to Ana, distracted, and said, "No, not yet." He stepped around the sofa, closer to Candy, and Ana took that moment to slip out of the room. "Why aren't you wearing the dress that I set out for you?" he asked.

"I didn't want to wear a dress. What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"You're not wearing makeup, so what have you been doing for the past hour?" He sounded annoyed.

"I was thinking," she said as she moved around the sofa toward one of the large windows. She leaned in and stared at the small black car pulling up out front.

"What were you thinking about?" he asked. She could feel his heat as he stepped up behind her.

She shrugged. "Just some things. Besides, what should it matter what I wear? Is there something more going on, here?"

This time she met his gaze, and humor filled his expression. She wasn't amused, though. She was ready for a fight, though their fights usually led her to a place she loved to be—making up with him in bed. He put his hands on his hips, and she knew he was about to start in on her and maybe push a little harder. He never let things go, not after everything they'd been through, fighting their way back to each other from hell. Her connection with Neil was everything she'd every wanted, but at times his worry about her could be smothering.

Fortunately, he was stopped from pushing his agenda, as far as dressing her went, when the doorbell rang. Candy glanced out the window and noticed two women as Neil yelled out, "I'll get it, Ana."

She didn't move from her spot by the window as he went down the hall. Charm oozed from her husband as he spoke, and then, as expected, she heard a woman laughing. Neil had that effect. She rolled her eyes, knowing no one could see her, and listened to their voices and footsteps as they approached.

"Candy, this is Maria and her mother, Carmen," Neil said as they entered. The two women stood beside Neil and followed him after he gestured to the sofas. "Come in, sit down, please. Could I offer you a glass of lemonade?"

"Si, señor. That is very kind," the older woman said. She was slim and attractive, with jet-black hair woven with silver threads, pinned back at the sides with two barrettes. She was pretty and looked so neat and tidy in her red skirt and white blouse. Her daughter, Maria, was a young woman, and she smiled brightly up at Neil. When her gaze slid over to Candy, she blushed. Her hair was long, dark, straight—not wild and out of control, like Candy's. She was slim, with long legs, and curvy in a way men must have loved.

Neil poured two glasses of lemonade, and Maria smiled in a coy, shy way that stirred all Candy's insecurities. Her stomach was starting to hurt, maybe from how tightly she'd been holding on to everything, bottling up her feelings. Having a woman here who would carry her husband's child...it was almost more than she could bear.

"Candy?" Neil gestured to another glass as he poured.

"No," she said, shaking her head and crossing her arms in front of her. She took only one step from her spot by the window before deciding to stay where she was.

Neil set the glass down and strode around to the fireplace, facing the women. "I'm glad you agreed to come. My wife isn't able to have children, and we want a family—a child of our own."

Maria, sitting right beside her mother, cast Candy a sympathetic look, and Carmen patted her daughter's hand. "My Maria is strong and young. She can carry your child, Mister Friessen," she said boldly.

Candy had never considered that Neil would talk openly about her condition this way, in front of strangers, and it stung—never mind the fact that this was why the women were here in the first place. "How old are you, Maria?" she asked.

Everyone turned her way. Maybe they'd forgotten she was there. She couldn't help feeling like a third wheel, considering how Carmen darted a glance between her and Neil as if she'd already figured out who made the decisions in their relationship.

"Maria is nineteen," Carmen said with authority, as if talking down to Candy.

Candy started around the easy chair closest to Neil. "That's very young for what you're offering to do. I wonder if you've really considered all the ramifications," she said. She didn't need to look at Neil to know he wasn't pleased, but at least he wasn't saying anything to undermine her—well, not yet, anyway. "Maria," she continued, "have you thought about what might happen if you become pregnant and decide you can't go through with it? I mean, you'll carry a baby inside you for nine months and then be expected to walk away and have no contact with the child. Are you telling me, honestly, that you can do that?"

Maria's smile faded. She was watching Candy with an odd look in her light brown eyes. There was something there that was young and old at the same time. She was beautiful, and her face had a radiance that Candy found attractive. There was innocence, but also something that suggested this young woman was experienced beyond her age. Then again, perhaps Candy might have been reading too much into her expression. It was an awkward situation.

"Of course it won't be easy, but, to me, this is a gift, something I can offer a childless couple who could give their child everything," she said.

"You'll be paid, though, of course," Candy added.

Carmen turned, giving Candy all her attention. "My Maria understands, very clearly, what this is about." She gestured with the flat of her hand to Neil. "My daughter will sign your contract, and you will pay for all medical care and living expenses, and she will be compensated for her time. This is a business arrangement, nothing more," she said.

The woman was blunt, and Candy watched Maria closely as her mother spoke for her. The young lady glanced at her hands, which were folded together in her lap, her expression neutral, giving nothing away. Candy wondered what was really going on in her head.

"We won't begin anything until the contract is signed and all the terms are agreed to," Neil said. "My lawyer will handle all the details, and there's mandatory counseling, as well."

Candy wondered if her shock showed on her face. Why was this the first time she was hearing of this? She wanted to pull Neil aside and say something, but she realized, as she looked back at Carmen, who was watching her intently, that the sharp woman had picked up on her confusion.

“Yes, we understand the counseling, but perhaps your wife does not?” she said.

To Candy, her words sounded callous and undermining, but Neil must have interpreted her another way, as he looked to Candy, stepping closer and sliding his arm around her waist. “My wife understands everything,” he said. He held her tightly for a moment, and she wondered whether he had picked up on how stiff she was as she did everything to hold herself together and not snap at him. He walked over to the sofa table and picked up some papers she hadn’t even noticed were sitting there. “This is the contract—what is expected of you and what you can expect from me. Take the time to carefully look it over so that you understand what you’d be agreeing to. This will be overseen by my attorney, of course, but you’re welcome to have your own lawyer look over the contract. I think you’ll see that I’ve been extremely generous.”

Neil held out the contract to Maria. She hesitated for a moment, maybe wondering whether she should take it. When her mother went to reach for it, Neil pulled back. “No, I’m sorry, Carmen. This contract must be agreed to in its entirety by your daughter. She needs to understand clearly her responsibilities, otherwise this won’t work. You’re welcome to support your daughter and be there for her emotionally, but the details of this must be understood and agreed to solely by her.”

Carmen pulled back in her seat and gestured to Maria. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. Maria, take the papers. You need to read them over.”

Candy just watched the exchange. Her alarm bells were going off. There was something about the mother and daughter that seemed problematic. Neil was so astute in business, but when she looked over at him, his expression was that of a man pleased with where things were headed. What was wrong with him? He would have been all over this if it had been some ordinary business deal.

“Thank you for coming by. If I could have your answer by Friday?” Neil added.

This time, Maria stood up and said, “Of course, Mister Friessen—”

“Neil,” he said, interrupting her with his characteristic warmth. “Please call me Neil.”

“Neil, yes. I will read this carefully, but if you would like my answer now, it’s yes. I can’t imagine it changing. I just knew when I spoke with you on the phone that you sounded like a nice man, and now, meeting your wife...well, I’m very excited.”

She had talked to him on the phone? Candy couldn’t hide the warmth in her cheeks, so she turned away, not considering how rude it would appear. She needed to have more than a few words with Neil. This was something they needed to discuss together, not with strangers.

“Thank you, Neil—and thank you, Missus Friessen,” Maria called out to her softly.

Candy turned around with her hand to her chin. The two women were watching her from the stairs, and she had to look away. She could feel Neil’s eyes on her, but she wasn’t about to look his way, because then he’d know how angry and hurt she was. Right now, in front of these women, that was a vulnerability she couldn’t show.

Chapter 3

She couldn’t believe how Neil had lingered outside with those two women, chatting as if they were good friends. Maria had giggled like a silly schoolgirl to everything he said, and Candy had just rolled her eyes again as she waited for her husband. When she peeked out the window and watched Maria climb into the passenger side door, with Neil helping her in before closing the door for her, her temper flared, and she had to fight back the sting of tears, blinking madly.

It was horrible, standing there, waiting for her husband to come back in and give her the time of day. A wave of guilt rushed through her. She usually wasn’t needy, but she felt as if all of this baby stuff was turning her into a crazy person. She started for the stairs when she heard the car engine roar outside.

“Well, that went really well,” Neil said as he walked back in and closed the door. “I have a great feeling about...”

She kept walking, not missing how his voice had trailed off.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Upstairs,” she said, her throat aching. He was following her now, of course, letting out one of those sighs he gave when she tested his patience. This time, she wasn’t interested in smoothing things over. She wanted to be alone to think. She went into their bedroom and heard their bedroom door close behind her.

“Candy, stop,” he said. “Can you just tell me what’s going on with you?”

She couldn’t believe it, the way he was making it sound as if this problem was just about her. “Are you kidding me?” she snapped. “How do you think I felt to hear that you’ve already had a conversation about surrogacy with this woman over the phone? I can’t believe you actually went ahead and had a contract done up. I thought this was just a meeting, or did I miss something?” She lingered on the other side of the bed, holding the foot rail, and Neil put a hand on his hip and took a stance as if he was getting ready to lay down the law. Was he actually irritated with her?

“Look, I filled you in last night,” he said. “This is a great idea—even you thought so. Why wouldn’t I go ahead and have an agreement drafted? If she’s not going to go along with the terms, we’ll look for someone else. Nothing is settled right now.”

“Neil, I’m your wife, your lover, your friend—but this thing, bringing in a surrogate...this is a huge, life-altering decision. There could be huge problems you haven’t even considered. You can’t make a decision about this without talking to me! This is something where we need to discuss every aspect together—as husband and wife. We think together on this one, or we don’t do it.”

He started toward her. “Candy, you’re overreacting. We talked about this last night. How is me having a contract done up, protecting every legal aspect, wrong?”

“You’d already talked to her on the phone about the details! You led me to believe you had just scheduled an appointment, but you shouldn’t have done even that without talking to me. Do you have any idea how I felt, standing there in the living room, listening to her talk about your conversation, which I knew nothing about? Had it somehow slipped your mind to even mention it this morning?”

He started to speak, but maybe he knew his expression had given him away.

“Wait,” she said. “When exactly did you first talk to her?”

“Last night,” he finally replied, looking as if he had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Look, I’m sorry. I admit I jumped the gun, but my lawyer called, and he knew we were looking at all the options for adoption. He tossed this idea out and gave me Maria’s name. I thought that, before I even mentioned it to you, I would just talk to the lady, because if it wasn’t going anywhere, there was no sense in mentioning it to you.” He stopped again right in front of her, not close enough to touch her. She would have moved away if he tried.

“Mentioning it to me...are you kidding me? What am I, a passing thought? I thought I was part of this marriage, Neil, not an afterthought. Were you going to pick and choose which details to share with me, with something this important?”

He was watching her now, and his expression was hard, as if he was thinking about how to respond. “Candy, I’m sorry. Maybe you’re right and I did get a little ahead of myself, but this is a wonderful opportunity for us to have our family. I just wanted to cover all the bases and make this easier on you.” He moved closer again, putting his hand on her arm and then his other on her hip, pulling her closer to him. “I’m sorry if I made you feel left out. That wasn’t my intention,” he said.

When he touched her, she had a hard time staying mad at him. His hands were cupping her cheeks, his thumbs caressing her chin. “You’re not a passing thought. I’m sorry.”

“Neil, don’t do this again. You made me feel as if I was on the outside, looking in. Do you have any idea how it makes me feel that you’re considering using another woman, a surrogate, to carry your child?”

“Our child,” he said. She didn’t miss the passion and fire in his eyes, as if he truly believed he could make her feel as he did.

“Neil, this child will be part of you, not me. I don’t even have my ovaries left. This baby will be another woman’s.”

“Hey, stop right there,” he said. “This baby will be ours. Whatever we decide, this is our chance for a family, Candy. Let me make this happen for us. Please trust me to handle all the details. With the legalese, my lawyer will make sure we have no problems.”

She wanted to believe him, she really did, but there was something about this situation that unsettled her completely.

Chapter 4

“Candy, I have to tell you, the time you’ve offered of yourself at this orphanage is a gift,” Pastor Rafael Mendoza said. He was around Neil’s age, and he had dark hair and dark eyes. He was attractive and kind, and he gave a voice to so many children who had none.

Casa Perdido, the Cancun orphanage where Candy volunteered, was home to 112 children, most of whom were unregistered, born to women who had given birth on patios or had simply been unwilling to register their children. For the past sixteen days, Candy had found herself driving into Cancun to this very orphanage, the one she had stopped in after returning from Montana, where she and Neil had looked after Andy and Laura’s babies. It was there that she had fallen in love with Chelsea, who was six weeks old, and had realized she wasn’t a complete failure as a future parent. Of course, Chelsea’s twin brother, Jeremy, was cute, too—in a demanding, Friessenman sort of way. But holding Chelsea for hours on end...it had filled a hole in her that she hadn’t even known was empty.

After stopping in the first time and seeing the need at this local orphanage, Candy had found herself looking into the lost little faces. She didn’t know how someone could come in and choose just one, so she kept coming back every day for a few hours and helping out, bringing food, bedding, anywhere she saw that there was a need. Neil had never asked where she was, not that he was around during the day, and, for some reason, she didn’t feel she could share this with Rodney and Becky, either. She could be wrong, but she didn’t think they’d understand how she felt.

“I wish I could do more,” she said as she walked beside the pastor, who was always dressed in the same worn jeans and old t-shirt, into a large room where all the beds were situated side by side. The children slept two or three to a bed, the mattresses were old, and there were blankets on the floor for more children, with cribs in another room for toddlers. “I’ve ordered and paid for new beds, and I hope they’ll be here by the end of the week. What else can I give you?”

She hadn’t thought of the expense when she charged it to Neil’s credit card. She never spent anything, but she realized she needed to say something. *Tonight*, she thought. She had to tell him that night. She couldn’t put it off any longer.

“You show up every day and help in the kitchen. You’re an angel, and with what you’ve given here, the beds...I would not want to anger your husband,” Rafael said. “You should bring him down here so he can see how much you do to help these children. He’d be proud of you.”

“I don’t know if my husband has time, but we’ll see,” she said, realizing she sounded vague. This was unlike her. She wasn’t so sure how happy Neil would be. She forced a smile, hoping the pastor wouldn’t pursue it.

The noise level increased as they entered a large room. A plump, aging Mexican woman sat at the front, facing older children on benches. She appeared to be teaching them how to read.

“These are the ones who can’t go to school,” Rafael explained. “Rosa used to be a schoolteacher, but she donates her time here now.”

“Why can’t these children go to school?” Candy asked.

“They’re unregistered,” he said. “The government will not allow it. Most of these children were born to young mothers, alcoholics and prostitutes, abandoned. No one cared enough to register them. We have no birthdate for those children, so we have to guess their ages, and—”

An awful screech came from another room. It sounded like a frantic animal.

Candy followed the pastor, who hurried into a room with half a dozen young children. One small child was the source of the noise. Her hands were flailing, and she hit an older woman in the nose as she tried to hold her still.

“She’s a devil child!” The woman shouted, blood dripping from her nose.

The child rolled to the floor and scurried to a corner in her old, sack-like dress. She pulled her knees up, holding tight, and rocked back and forth, humming.

The woman started toward her, brush in hand, but Candy stepped in front of the child before she could get any closer. “No! You will not hit her,” she said.

The woman looked at her as if she was crazy. “That child is a problem, Pastor,” she snapped. “She belongs in an institution. She’s retarded! We can’t look after her, and she is scaring the other children. She doesn’t listen. The other children are clean, but I can’t even bathe her. I just tried to undress her, and this is what happened. She needs discipline.”

Candy glanced behind her at the little girl, who appeared to be no older than four or five. Her hair was tangled, dirty. She was small, very thin, and she glanced over at the small metal tub of water.

The pastor held out his hand for the brush. “I’m sure you did the best you can,” he said, “but if she doesn’t understand, how will getting angry at her help? Hitting her is never the answer, Rosita.”

The woman blushed. Even though the pastor had never raised his voice, there was something about the way he spoke that made Candy sure that she’d be ashamed if she had behaved that way.

“Take a break,” Rafael told the woman. He patted her arm, holding the brush in his other hand. The woman said nothing as she left the room, and Candy stood over the little girl, watching her.

“What’s wrong with her?” she asked.

“We don’t really know, Candy. She was found a week ago eating out of a garbage can in a very bad part of town. The man who brought her here showed her a kindness. She couldn’t talk, wouldn’t respond. Whatever is wrong with her, the authorities would have said it’s some mental illness and locked her away.”

Candy knelt down in front of the small child, who seemed to tense before she could touch her. “It’s okay, honey. I’m not going to hurt you,” Candy said in Spanish. She didn’t try to touch her—not that she knew anything about children. She knew nothing at all. She found herself observing the girl the way she would a spooked, unpredictable horse. The child was untouchable, and the only thing Candy could use to relate to her were her techniques for working with animals.

“She’s unresponsive, Candy. I don’t know if we can help her. She doesn’t understand. She eats like an animal, with her hands, shoving food in her mouth. If you try to stop her, give her a spoon,

she throws it and goes right back to using her hands. We're over capacity now and only have beds for sixty."

"What's her name?" Candy asked, watching the little girl, who paid them no mind and continued to huddle, her face buried against her knees.

"We don't know her name. She says nothing and is quiet until...well, you saw how she reacted with Rosita. She was trying to bathe her. One of the other house mothers calls her *el gato*, since she caught a mouse."

Candy glanced up at the pastor, who wore a grim expression. "She didn't..."

"No, she didn't eat it, but would she have? I don't know," he said. "I'd never seen anything like it."

Candy slid the strap of her cloth purse down and unzipped it. "You can't call her an animal. It's not right. Cat sounds nice, though," she said. "Pastor, you can't send her away."

The girl reached out her tiny hand to touch the glittering diamond on Candy's finger. Her wedding ring was huge, and the square-cut stone had the child mesmerized as she stared at it. Candy held out her hand slowly so her ring was right in the child's line of sight, closer to her. Her tiny fingers rubbed the shiny rock again.

"Do you like how sparkly that is?" she asked.

The girl didn't respond. She didn't look up—she was engrossed with the rock Neil had put on her finger when he married her. If she sold it, she knew it would provide this orphanage enough money to feed, clothe, and see to all these children's care for a few years. It could pay for staff, for an additional building, for more beds... She found herself reaching to pull it off her finger when a hand touched her shoulder.

"Don't," Mendoza said. "Your husband's ring...you mustn't."

She glanced up at the pastor and back down at the little girl. "But it could help so many."

"There are some lines you shouldn't cross, Candy. Your husband wouldn't be happy. This is not the answer."

"Cat..." she whispered, wanting to reach out and touch her.

The pastor knelt down beside Candy. "Cat," he said sternly, holding a cracker packet out toward her. When the child didn't respond, he ripped open the package, and her eyes went to the crackers as he stood up, pulling them out and handing them to her. Her gaze darted between the pastor and the crackers, and she let him touch her head as she munched. Even Cat noticed how kind his touch was.

The little girl now stood in front of her, and this time Candy really took in everything about her, from her pale, dirty face to her light blue eyes, which were filled with an emptiness Candy had never seen before in the eyes of a child. She knew there was a mystery about this child that would haunt her when she walked out the door.