

What Makes a Father

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Chapter 1

Annie Campbell didn't know exhaustion of this magnitude was even possible. Since suddenly becoming a mom to newborn twins three months ago, she'd been tired, but in the last week she'd counted sleep in seconds and minutes rather than hours. Either Charlie or Sarah was always awake, hungry, wet, crabby or crying uncontrollably for no apparent reason. Childhood had been challenging for Annie, but raising twins was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

And she wouldn't trade being their mom for anything. With one toothless grin they had her wrapped around their little fingers. Now they had all the symptoms of teething—drooling, gnawing on their fists, crying—and Annie honestly wasn't sure she'd survive it.

Her apartment was small, perfect for a single woman.

Then she brought infants home from the hospital, forced by circumstances to care for two babies at once and too overwhelmed to look for a bigger place. And she was still overwhelmed. On a good day she could sneak in a shower. Today hadn't been a good day but there were hopeful signs.

Sarah was quiet in the crib. Charlie was in her arms but she could feel him relaxing, possibly into sleep. Oh, please God. She would walk until her legs fell off if that's what it took. With luck he'd go quietly in with his sister and Annie could close her eyes. To heck with a shower.

Slowly she did a circuit of the living room, past the bar that separated it from the kitchen, around the oak coffee table, gliding by the window that looked out on the center courtyard of the apartment complex. As the baby grew heavier in her arms, she could almost feel victory in her grasp, the euphoria of having two babies asleep at the same time.

Then some fool rang her doorbell. Charlie jerked awake and started to cry just on general principle. Sarah's wails came from the bedroom.

"Someone is going to pay." Annie cuddled the startled baby closer and kissed his head. "Not you, Charlie bear. You're perfect. But if someone is selling something they'll get more than they bargained for."

She peeked through the front window and saw a man wearing military camouflage. This was probably daddy candidate number three, the last one on her sister's list of men who might be the babies' father. This had to be Mason Blackburne, the army doctor who'd been deployed to Afghanistan. She'd contacted him by email and he'd claimed he'd get back to her right away

when he returned to the States. She hadn't expected that he actually would.

In her experience, men were selfish, hurtful and unreliable. His written response was a brush-off any idiot would see. Except maybe not since he was standing outside. Not to be picky, but the least he could have done was call first. Come to think of it, how did he get her address? She'd only given him her phone number in the email. Apparently she was taking too long because he followed up the doorbell ring with an aggressive knock.

The chain locking the door was in place so she opened it just a crack. "Your timing sucks."

"Annie Campbell? I'm Mason Blackburne."

"I gave you my number. You were supposed to call me. How did you get my address?"

"From Jessica."

Pain sliced through Annie when she heard her sister's name. Jess had died shortly after giving birth to the twins. The joy of welcoming her niece and nephew into the world turned to unimaginable grief at losing the person Annie loved most in the world. Her sister had lived with her off and on, couch surfing when she needed somewhere to stay. She didn't trust men in general any more than Annie, so if she'd given the address to this guy, her gut must have said he was okay.

Annie unlocked the door and opened it. For the first time she got a good look at Mason Blackburne. Two things stood out: he was tall, and his eyes were startlingly blue. And he was boyishly handsome. Okay, that was three things, but she was too tired to care. And some part of her worn-out brain was regretting that her hair was in a messy ponytail because she hadn't washed

it. Or showered today. Or put on makeup. And she was wearing baggy sweatpants and an oversize T-shirt.

“Come in,” she said, stepping back. “I’ve got a DNA swab right here. Just rub it on the inside of each cheek for thirty seconds and put it back in the tube. I’ll send it to the lab with the other one and the results will be back in five business days.”

But it wasn’t clear whether or not he’d heard her. The guy was staring at Charlie. The baby had stopped crying and was staring suspiciously back at the tall stranger. And he was sucking his thumb. The baby, not the stranger.

She sighed. “Well, baby boy, now all my extensive research into the best pacifier on the planet to prevent thumb-sucking is down the tubes. Somewhere an orthodontist is doing the dance of joy.”

Mason had a look of awe on his face. “What’s his name?”

“Charlie.”

“Did Jessica choose that?”

“No, she didn’t get a chance. But she’d narrowed down the choices to Christopher and Charles. Sarah was always the top girls’ name.”

He looked past her to the hallway where the baby girl was still crying. “Can I see her?”

Annie wanted to say no. She didn’t know this guy from a rock, but again, Jess didn’t normally share her address with men and she’d given it to him. So maybe it was okay.

After closing the front door, she headed for the hallway with daddy candidate number three following. The master bedroom and bath were on the right, and across from it was her office, now the twins’ nursery.

“She’s in here. And before you ask, they share the crib. The pediatrician advised not separating them just yet.”

“Because they shared quarters for nine months,” he said.

“Exactly.” They walked into the room where the crib was on the wall opposite her desk. “She probably needs her diaper changed. I’ll have to put Charlie down since I haven’t yet figured out how to do it one-handed. Fair warning—he’s going to cry.”

“Could I hold him?”

Annie’s gaze snapped to his face. “Why?”

“You need help. And he might be my son.” There was an edge to his voice and intensity in his eyes that made her think it really mattered to him.

Annie thought it over. This guy *might* be Charlie’s father. Why not push him into the deep end of the pool, let him know what he was getting into. She held Charlie out to him and he took the baby, a little awkwardly.

Annie walked over to the crib and lowered the side rail. She picked up the little girl to comfort her first. “It’s okay, Sarah. You’re fine. I’m here, sweet girl. I have to put you down again, just for a minute to change that diaper. Trust me on this. You’ll feel a lot better.”

Three months ago the top of her lateral file cabinet had become the storage area for diaper supplies. She settled the baby back in the crib and quickly swapped the wet diaper for a dry one, then picked her up again for a snuggle.

“What happened to Jessica?” He looked away from the baby and met her gaze.

“I told you in the email. She had a pulmonary embolism, a blood clot in her—”

“Lung. I’m a doctor. I get it. But why didn’t she let me know she was pregnant? And that I might be the father of the baby—” He stopped and his gaze settled on Sarah. “*Babies?*”

“I told her more than once that the biological father had a right to know. Even though I suggested she let the guy screw up first, she was convinced that he would desert her anyway. She planned to raise them by herself.”

“Why would she think that?” There was a tinge of exasperation and outrage in his tone.

“She had her reasons.”

His gaze narrowed and irritation pushed out the baby awe. “So you talked her into it? She didn’t intend to share the information.”

“Not with you or the other two men she slept with.” Annie winced as those words came out of her mouth. That made Jess sound like a slut. Maybe it was a little bit true, but that’s not who she was. Her sister liked men and sex. She’d been looking for fun, nothing more. “Men sleep around all the time and no one thinks less of them. But if a woman does it, she’s trash. Don’t you dare judge her.”

“I wasn’t judging—”

“Oh, please.” When a person was as tired as she was, that person had to dig deep for patience. Hers was dangerously depleted. She looked at him and, judging by the uncertain expression on his face, it was possible that there were flames shooting out of her eyes. “And why is this all on my sister? You were a willing participant. Who didn’t wear a condom.”

“I just wanted to talk,” he protested.

“Right. That’s what they all say.” Her voice dripped

with sarcasm. “You should know that I’m not normally this abrasive, but I’m tired. And I was much more compassionate the first two times a potential father showed up—”

“What happened with them?”

“First one wasn’t a match. Number two finally came by a few days ago. I have his sample for the lab along with a legal document from his attorney relinquishing all rights to the babies in exchange for my signed agreement not to pursue him for child support should he be a match. I was only too happy to do that and send him responsibility-free on his way. Sarah and Charlie deserve to be wanted more than anything. They don’t need a person like that in their lives.”

“Prince of a guy.” Mason was still holding Charlie and lightly rubbed a big hand over the baby’s back.

Annie loved her sister but that didn’t mean she approved of her choices in men. “A few weeks before she gave birth, Jess had second thoughts and narrowed down potential daddy candidates to three. Before she could contact them, she went into labor and showed symptoms of the embolism. Tests confirmed it and the risks were explained to her. She got scared for the babies if something should happen to her and put in writing that I would be the guardian. It was witnessed by two nurses and is a legally binding agreement. No one really thought she would die, but fate didn’t cooperate. Now Charlie and Sarah are my babies and I will do anything and everything to keep them safe.”

“I’m a doctor. I took an oath to do no harm.”

“There are a lot of ways to damage children besides physically.” Annie knew from experience that emotional wounds could be every bit as painful and were

the ones you didn't have to hide with makeup or a story about being clumsy. "And I wasn't implying that you would hurt them."

"I would never do that," he said fervently.

For the first time she noticed that he looked every bit as tired as she felt. And he was wearing a military uniform—if camouflage was considered a uniform. What was his deal? "When did you get back from Afghanistan?"

"A couple of hours ago. My family lives in Huntington Hills, but I haven't seen them yet."

"You came here first? From the airport?"

"Yes."

It was hard not to be impressed by that but somehow Annie managed. The adrenaline surge during her outburst had drained her reserves and she wanted to be done with this, and him. "Look, if you'd please just do the DNA swab and leave your contact information for the lab, that would be great. Five business days and we'll know."

"Okay." Gently, he put Charlie down in the crib.

Annie did the same with Sarah and miraculously the two didn't immediately start to cry. "Follow me."

They went to her small kitchen, where the sink was full of baby bottles and dishes waiting to be washed.

"I have the kits here." She grabbed one from the counter and handed it to him. He seemed to know what to do.

Mason took the swab out of the tube and expertly rubbed it on the inside of his cheek for the required amount of time, then packaged it up and filled out the paperwork. "That should do it."

"I'll send it to the lab along with the other one."

“Okay.”

“Thank you. Not to be rude, but would you please go?”

He started to say something, then stopped and simply let himself out the front door without a word.

Annie breathed a sigh of relief. The uncertainty would be over in five business days but somehow that didn’t ease her mind as much as she’d thought it would. After meeting Mason Blackburne, she wasn’t sure whether or not she wanted to share child custody with him. Not because he would be difficult, but because he wouldn’t. And that could potentially be worse.

“She researched pacifiers, Mom.” Mason stopped pacing the kitchen long enough to look at the woman who’d given birth to him. “I don’t know whether or not she’s a good mother, but both babies were clean, well-fed and happy. Well, one or the other was crying, but it was normal crying, if you know what I mean.”

“I do,” Florence Blackburne said wryly. “And it’s not like she staged the scene. She had no idea you were going to stop by.”

“That’s true.” He’d arrived home five days ago and told her everything. He’d started his job as an ER doctor and he was house hunting. None of it took his mind off the fact that he might be a father.

“That poor woman. Losing her sister and now raising two infants by herself.” His mom was shaking her head and there was sympathy in her eyes. “I don’t know what I would have done without your father when you and your siblings were born. And I only had one baby at a time.”

“Yeah. She looked really exhausted.” Pretty in spite

of that, he thought. He remembered Jessica and Annie looked a lot like her. But their personalities were very different. Jess was a little wild, living on the edge. Annie seemed maternal, nurturing. Protective. Honest. The kind of woman he'd want to raise his children. If they *were* his children.

The lab hadn't notified him yet, but this was business day number five and he kept looking at his phone to make sure he hadn't missed the call.

"Checking your cell isn't going to make the news come any faster. I'm sure the twins are yours." His mother gave him her "mom" look, full of understanding and support.

She loved kids and had four of them, never for a moment letting on that she'd sacrificed anything on their behalf. Mason was wired like her and badly wanted kids of his own. The woman he'd married had shared that dream, and the heartbreak of not being able to realize it had broken them up. The third miscarriage had cost him his child and his wife—he'd lost his whole family. If the experience had taught him anything, it was not to have expectations or get his hopes up.

"If only DNA results happened as fast in real life as they do on TV," he said.

"Did the babies look like you?" Flo asked. "Eye color? Shape of the face? That strong, square jaw," she teased.

"They actually looked a lot like Annie. Their aunt. Hazel eyes. Blond hair. Pretty." Something he didn't share with his mother was that Annie Campbell had a very nice ass. Her baggy sweats had hid that asset, no pun intended, until she'd bent over to pick up a toy on the floor. There was no doubt in his mind that a

shower and good night's sleep would transform her into a woman who would turn heads on the street. "DNA is the only way to be sure."

"That's just science. It's no match for maternal instinct. And mine is telling me that those babies are my grandchildren."

"Don't, Mom."

"What?" she asked innocently.

"If you have expectations, you're going to be let down." Mason could give a seminar on strategies to avoid disappointment. The only surefire approach was to turn off emotion. Not until the science said it was okay could you let yourself care.

Flo's face took on a familiar expression, the one that said she knew what he was thinking and wanted to take away his pain. The woman was a force of nature and if she couldn't do something, it couldn't be done. Wisely she stayed silent about his past and the situation that had left him bruised and battered. And bitter.

There was something to be said for Jessica's philosophy of fun without complications. But Annie was right, too. He hadn't used a condom and chose to believe the woman who'd said she had everything taken care of. Now he was on pins and needles waiting for the results of a test that could potentially change his life forever.

It was almost five o'clock and the lab's business hours were nearly over for the day. Maybe Annie hadn't sent the samples as soon as she'd planned to. She did have a lot on her plate with two infants. It was possible—

Mason's phone vibrated, startling him even though he'd been waiting and checking. He stared at the Caller ID for a moment, immobilized.