

A photograph of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a light pink dress, leaning over and holding the hand of a baby. The baby is wearing a white top and a pink skirt, and is walking barefoot on a green lawn. The background is a bright, hazy sky.

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7783-2866-7

A MOTHER'S TOUCH

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CONTENTS

THE WAY HOME	9
Linda Howard	
THE PATERNITY TEST	103
Sherryl Woods	
A STRANGER'S SON	197
Emilie Richards	

THE WAY HOME

Linda Howard

Prologue

The Beginning

Saxon Malone didn't look at her as he said, "This won't work. You can be either my secretary or my mistress, but you can't be both. Choose."

Anna Sharp paused, her nimble fingers poised in suspended animation over the stack of papers she had been sorting in search of the contract he had requested. His request had come out of the blue, and she felt as if the breath had been knocked out of her. *Choose*, he'd said. It was one or the other. Saxon always said exactly what he meant and backed up what he'd said.

In a flash of clarity she saw precisely how it would be, depending on which answer she gave. If she chose to be his secretary, he would never again make any move toward her that could be construed as personal. She knew Saxon well, knew his iron will and how completely he could compartmentalize his life. His personal life never bled over into business, or vice versa. If she chose to be his lover—no, his *mistress*—he would

expect to completely support her, just as sugar daddies had traditionally done over the centuries, and in exchange she would be sexually available to him whenever he had the time or inclination to visit. She would be expected to give him total fidelity while he promised nothing in return, neither faithfulness nor a future.

Common sense and self-respect demanded that she choose the upright position of secretary as opposed to the horizontal position of mistress, yet still she hesitated. She had been Saxon's secretary for a year, and had loved him for most of that time. If she chose her job, he would never allow her to get any closer to him than she was right now. As his mistress, at least she would have the freedom to express her love in her own way and the hours spent in his arms as a talisman against a future without him, which she would eventually have to face. Saxon wasn't a staying man, one with whom a woman could plan a life. He didn't tolerate any ties.

She said, her voice low, "If I choose to be your mistress, then what?"

He finally looked up, and his dark green eyes were piercing. "Then I get a new secretary," he said flatly. "And don't expect me to ever offer marriage, because I won't. Under any circumstances."

She took a deep breath. He couldn't have stated it any plainer than that. The wildfire physical attraction that had overtaken them the night before would never become anything stronger, at least not for him. He wouldn't permit it.

She wondered how he could remain so impassive after the hours of fierce lovemaking they had shared on the very carpet beneath her feet. If it had been one hasty

mating, perhaps they would have been able to ignore it as an aberration, but the fact was that they had made love over and over again in a prolonged frenzy, and there was no pretending otherwise. His office was permeated with sexual memories; he had taken her on the floor, on the couch, on the desk that was now covered with contracts and proposals; they had even made love in his washroom. He hadn't been a gentle lover; he'd been demanding, fierce, almost out of control, but generous in the way he had made certain she'd been as satisfied as he by each encounter. The thought of never again knowing that degree of passion made her heart squeeze painfully.

She was twenty-seven and had never loved before—never even, as a teenager, had the usual assortment of crushes or gone steady. If she passed up this chance she might never have another, and certainly never another with Saxon.

So, in full possession of her faculties, she took the step that would make her Saxon Malone's kept woman. "I choose to be your mistress," she said softly. "On one condition."

There was a hot flare in his deep-set eyes that just as quickly cooled at her last words. "No conditions."

"There has to be this one," she insisted. "I'm not naive enough to think this relationship—"

"It isn't a relationship. It's an arrangement."

"—this *arrangement* will last forever. I want to have the security of supporting myself, earning my own way, so I won't suddenly find myself without a place to live or the means of making a living."

"I'll support you, and believe me, you'll earn every

penny of it,” he said, his eyes moving down her body in a way that made her feel suddenly naked, her flesh too hot and too tight. “I’ll set up a stock portfolio for you, but I don’t want you working, and that’s final.”

She hated it that he would put their relationship—for it *was* a relationship, despite his insistence to the contrary—on such a mercenary basis, but she knew it was the only basis he could agree to. She, on the other hand, would take him on any basis he desired.

“All right,” she said, automatically searching for the words he could accept and understand, words that lacked any hint of emotion. “It’s a deal.”

He stared at her in silence for a long minute, his face as unreadable as usual. Only the heat in his eyes gave him away. Then he rose deliberately to his feet and walked to the door, which he closed and locked, even though it was after quitting time and they were alone. When he turned back to her, Anna could plainly see his arousal, and her entire body tightened in response. Her breath was already coming fast and shallow as he reached for her.

“Then you might as well begin now,” he said, and drew her to him.

Chapter One

Two years later

Anna heard his key in the door and sat up straight on the sofa, her heart suddenly beating faster. He was back a day earlier than he'd told her, and of course he hadn't called; he never called her when he was gone on a trip, because that would be too much like acknowledging a relationship, just as he insisted, even after two years, on maintaining separate residences. He still had to go home every morning to change clothes before he went to work.

She didn't jump up to run into his arms; that, too, was something that would make him uncomfortable. By now, she knew the man she loved very well. He couldn't accept anything that resembled caring, though she didn't know why. He was very careful never to appear to be rushing to see her; he never called her by a pet name, never gave her any fleeting, casual caresses, never whispered love words to her even during the most intense lovemaking. What he said to her in bed were always

words of sexual need and excitement, his voice guttural with tension, but he was a sensual, giving lover. She loved making love with him, not only because of the satisfaction he always gave her, but because under the guise of physical desire she was able to give him all the affection he couldn't accept outside of bed.

When they were making love she had a reason for touching him, kissing him, holding him close, and during those moments he was free with his own caresses. During the long, dark nights he was insatiable, not just for sex but for the closeness of her; she slept every night in his arms, and if for some reason she moved away from him during the night he would wake and reach for her, settling her against him once more. Come morning, he would withdraw back into his solitary shell, but during the nights he was completely hers. Sometimes she felt that he needed the nights as intensely as she did, and for the same reasons. They were the only times when he allowed himself to give and accept love in any form.

So she forced herself to sit still, and kept the book she'd been reading open on her lap. It wasn't until the door had opened and she heard the thump of his suitcase hitting the floor that she allowed herself to look up and smile. Her heart leaped at the first sight of him, just as it had been doing for three years, and pain squeezed her insides at the thought of never seeing him again. She had one more night with him, one more chance, and then she would have to end it.

He looked tired; there were dark shadows under his eyes, and the grooves bracketing his beautiful mouth were deeper. Even so, not for the first time, she was struck by how incredibly good-looking he was, with his

olive-toned skin, dark hair and the pure, dark green of his eyes. He had never mentioned his parents, and now she wondered about them, about the combination of genes that had produced such striking coloring, but that was another thing she couldn't ask.

He took off his suit jacket and hung it neatly in the closet, and while he was doing that, Anna went over to the small bar and poured him two fingers of Scotch, neat. He took the drink from her with a sigh of appreciation, and sipped it while he began loosening the knot of his tie. Anna stepped back, not wanting to crowd him, but her eyes lingered on his wide, muscled chest, and her body began to quicken in that familiar way.

"Did the trip go all right?" she asked. Business was always a safe topic.

"Yeah. Carlucci was overextended, just like you said." He finished the drink with a quick toss of his wrist, then set the glass aside and put his hands on her waist. Anna tilted her head back, surprise in her eyes. What was he doing? He always followed a pattern when he returned from a trip: he would shower while she prepared a light meal; they would eat; he would read the newspaper, or they would talk about his trip; and finally they would go to bed. Only then would he unleash his sensuality, and they would make love for hours. He had done that for two years, so why was he breaking his own pattern by reaching for her almost as soon as he was in the door?

She couldn't read the expression in his green eyes; they were too shuttered, but were glittering oddly. His fingers bit into her waist.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, anxiety creeping into her tone.

He gave a harsh, strained laugh. "No, nothing's wrong. It was a bitch of a trip, that's all." Even as he spoke, he was moving them toward the bedroom. Once there, he turned her around and began undressing her, pulling at her clothes in his impatience. She stood docilely, her gaze locked on his face. Was it her imagination, or did a flicker of relief cross his face when at last she was nude and he pulled her against him? He wrapped his arms tightly around her, almost crushing her. His shirt buttons dug into her breasts, and she squirmed a little, docility giving way to a growing arousal. Her response to him was always strong and immediate, rising to meet his.

She tugged at his shirt. "Don't you think you'd be better off without this?" she whispered. "And this?" She slipped her hands between them and began unbuckling his belt.

He was breathing harder, his body heat burning her even through his clothes. Instead of stepping back so he could undress, he tightened his arms around her and lifted her off her feet, then carried her to the bed. He let himself fall backward, with her still in his arms, then rolled so that she was beneath him. She made a tight little sound in her throat when he used his muscular thigh to spread her legs, and his hips settled into the notch he'd just made.

"Anna." Her name was a groan coming from deep in his chest. He caught her face between his hands and ground his mouth against hers, then reached down between their bodies to open his pants. He was in a frenzy, and she didn't know why, but she sensed his desperate need of her and held herself still for him. He entered