

*The Daddy Agency*



*Monique DeVere*

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# **The Daddy Agency**

**by**

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The Daddy Agency

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Cover Art by *Monique Simpson*

**Blurb:**

When Jamie-Leigh Stephenson found out she was pregnant, she dropped out of university, turned her back on her dreams of becoming a psychologist, and gave up Daniel Jacob—the love of her life and father of her child.

Now ten years later, he walks into her office. Has he come to sign up to her Daddy-for-hire agency? Or has he finally come to claim his girls?

## *The Daddy Agency*

Jamie-Leigh Stephenson marched at a no-nonsense pace through TDA's reception—also known as *The Daddy Agency*. A company she'd started three years ago.

She had to be in Somerset by six pm, and the last thing she needed was to have to deal with a no-show *Daddy* on a sunny Saturday morning in August.

Jamie paused at the receptionist's desk, her ten-year-old daughter, Nicole beside her. "Did you get a hold of Lee, Sandy?"

Sandy shook her head, disrupting her shoulder-length blonde curls. "I tried all the numbers we have for him. Landline is going straight to answer phone, and mobile is permanently off."

Jamie drummed her long fingernails on the desktop beside an antique glass vase of sweet smelling Arum Lilies, the upright stems stood proud beneath salmon-orange trumpet-shaped flowers. "I'll deal with Lee on Monday. In the meantime, we need to find a replacement *Daddy* for the Richards'."

Sandy waved the handset she held loosely in her fist. "I was just about to ask Cameron to fill in for Lee. Then I'll inform Miss Richards about the change." She began to punch in a series of numbers, then paused. "By the way, a guy walked in about half an hour ago. Said his name is Dr Daniel Jacob, and that you and he go way back. I told him you won't have time to see him, but he insisted on waiting."

The stunning information knocked the speech right out of Jamie. The room dipped beneath her feet, sending her head into a faint spin. Had she heard correctly? Did Sandy say Daniel Jacob was here?

"I put him in your office." Sandy pointed down the hall as if Jamie didn't know where her office was located.

Daniel was behind the closed door at the end of the long, apple-white corridor? Daniel, whom she'd ran away from to protect? Whom she hadn't seen in over ten years?

She looked down at Nicole. She'd been honest with her daughter from the start. Nicole knew she had a dad, and that things hadn't worked out between him and Jamie. She also knew her father had no idea she existed.

In the years since first asking about her father, and finding out he wasn't going to be part of her life, Nicole hadn't seemed bothered by not having her dad around. In fact, she'd claimed to be perfectly happy with the agency's *Daddies* she'd adopted. They all doted on her, and were always eager to fill-in as father figures for Nicole.

"How long did you say he's been here?"

"About half an hour."

"Did you tell him I wasn't due in today?"

Sandy looked up from the handset and gave a mischievous smile. "Actually, what I said was 'the modelling agency's next door'."

"Sandy."

"By the time he came in, you'd agreed to stop by to sort out the Lee debacle. I told him you didn't usually work on Saturday because you spent it with your daughter."

"You *told* him I have a *daughter*?"

"I didn't know it was a secret."

"It's not." Jamie put her hand to her head, hoping by squeezing her temples it'd help her to think. "Can you watch Nicole for me while I meet with Daniel?"

Sandy nodded and began to press the keypad buttons again.

Nicole tugged on Jamie's floaty yellow chiffon top. "Mum, can I go out back?"

Since 'out back' was a secured garden area with seating, and Nicole's usual hangout when she was at the agency, Jamie didn't normally mind. But today they were on their way to visit her parents.

Nicole had finally agreed to wear a dress and her white Maryjanes to see her grandparents in Somerset. Knowing what a tomboy her daughter was, Jamie was reluctant to allow her outside unsupervised.

“I won’t be long, Nikki. Hang out here with Sandy. I don’t want you to get grubby. Heaven knows I’ll never hear the end of it from *the parents*.”

She was halfway down the corridor when Nicole called to her. “If I promise not to get messy, can I go out back?”

Maybe it was best if Nicole wasn’t around when she and Daniel faced each other again. “Okay. But DO NOT get mucky. I’ll be back in a minute, we have to leave shortly.” She punctuated each word with a pointed finger.

Her daughter gave her a huge grin. “Yes, Mum.” She turned and took off through the side door before Jamie could change her mind.

She resumed her trek toward her office. Shaking with nerves, she wiped her hands on her designer jeans before closing her fingers over the door handle. She hesitated, then released the handle and turned away.

She couldn’t face Daniel.

Not yet.

She stopped and turned back to the door. If not now, then when?

Without giving herself time to reconsider, Jamie threw open the door and breezed into the room. At least, she hoped her nervous shuffle passed as a cheerful entry. “Hello, Daniel. How lovely to see you.”

Only, ‘lovely’ didn’t begin to describe the incredible excitement she felt at seeing him again. He turned from gazing through the window behind her desk. The same window that looked onto the building’s back garden.

Had he seen Nicole?

“Hello, Jamie.” His deep sensual tone vibrated through her, melting the meagre barrier she’d erected before entering the room.

She wanted to throw herself into his arms, put all the missing years into one searing kiss. But stayed her ground. She had yet to find out why Daniel had come.

He seemed in no hurry to continue. Just held his hands behind his back, his dark tailored suit accentuated his toned physique, adding an air of sophistication and success.

He stared at her as if committing every feature to memory.

Her heartbeat sped up, drumming against her breastbone in a way she hadn't experienced in years. Not since the last time she'd seen him, when they'd exchanged a lingering kiss at the entrance to the university's library. She'd known to Daniel the kiss had meant, *see you at home later*. While to her, it had represented *goodbye*.

"It's been a while," he finally said. "How have you been?"

"Productive." She slipped her hands into her jeans pockets in a surreptitious effort to dry her sweaty palms. "And you? You look well."

He wore his dark hair shorter than she remembered. He'd always been male-model handsome, but the absent years gave him a captivating edge.

A rustle from the doorway had both Jamie and Daniel turning to see Nicole standing just inside the office door.

"I want to hire you to be my Dad." She looked directly at Daniel. Mud smudged her right cheek where she must've brushed her hand across her face.

One look at the grass-stained dress and lop-sided ponytail and anyone could see how mismatched this pair would be. Jamie closed her eyes against the sight, puffed out a defeated breath. How did one little girl get so frightfully messy in so short a time?

Before she uttered the ticking off that tripped to the end of her tongue, her daughter hurried over to them, hand outstretched toward Daniel.

"Hi, I'm Nicole. I hope you don't mind me interrupting, but I didn't want to miss the opportunity to hire you." She grinned up at Daniel, her child's hand lost in his strong masculine hand. Jamie hoped he didn't notice that the dimple in Nicole's right cheek matched the one in his when he smiled.

"Please to meet you, Nicole." Daniel's hazel-green eyes sparkled as he smiled, clearly amused by the girl. "I'm Daniel—"

"Haven't got time to stand around. We need to talk *and* walk." Still holding Daniel's hand, Nicole pulled him along behind her. We're about to go to visit with *the parents*." She gave a mock shiver. "They're horrible. Every time we visit, they make Mum cry. Maybe if I had a Dad they'd be nice to her, and stop saying that my Dad didn't want her. Or that he left her alone and preg—"

“Nicole!”

She pulled up short and swivelled around to face her mum. Nicole hung her head, remorse evident in her tone as she dropped Daniel’s hand. “Sorry, Mum.”

Jamie was aware that pure mortification reflected from her face. Surely, her daughter knew better than to blab personal information to an entire stranger.

Only Daniel wasn’t a total stranger. She’d been deeply in love with him once—and he with her. They’d planned to get married upon graduating university, had even dreamed of opening a practice together. But she’d been forced to give up the love of her life along with her dreams when she’d discovered she was pregnant with Nicole.

“I do apologise for my daughter’s outburst.” Jamie held Daniel’s gaze, despite the urge to hide her blazing face behind her hands. She straightened her back, and glanced toward Nicole who kept her gaze on the patch of mud caking the tips of her Maryjanes. “She isn’t normally quite so rude.”

She would’ve liked to add—*nor is she usually this messy*. But in actuality, Nicole seemed to be always up a tree or digging in mud. From her very first summer as a toddler in the garden at home, Nicole had discovered a fascination with stones. This had progressed from picking up every one she found, to digging for them.

“No need to apologise.” Daniel slipped his hands into his tailored trouser pockets, and ran his eyes over Nicole. His gaze reflected something Jamie couldn’t quite place, but made her stomach flip-flop. “We were all kids once.”

This time when he looked at Jamie she saw the knowledge in his eyes.

*He knew Nicole was his daughter.*

Is that why he was here? To claim Nicole? Or even try to take her away? The thought sent a shiver of dread through her. Daniel wouldn’t do something so cold-hearted—would he?

Desperate to find out Daniel’s reason for finding her, Jamie walked over to her daughter, leant close to her, and gave her small shoulders a reassuring squeeze. “Honey, can you give us a minute? I’d like to speak with Daniel in private, okay?”

Nicole nodded and left the office, throwing Daniel one last cheeky grin before closing the door behind her.

Jamie braced herself to encounter a possible nightmare as she faced Daniel. “Why are you here?”

He closed the space between them with a couple of leisurely strides, took her hands, and clasped them in his big warm ones. “I came because I love you. I’ve had a hard time finding you, Jamie. Why did you leave me?”

The raw admission and heartfelt question twisted the guilt in her stomach. However, she wasn’t ready to risk her heart so soon. “I needed a change of pace. You know how it is.” Her voice hitched on the fib. She forced a smile and tried to hide the turmoil coiling her insides.

“You don’t have to pretend, Jamie. I know what happened.” Without warning, he pulled her into his arms.

No matter how hard she tried to resist, she found herself leaning into his embrace, melting against him as she slid her hands around his toned waist. Tears pricked a warning just before her vision blurred. She swallowed past the lump of hope in her throat. “You do?”

Daniel nodded. “A deathbed urge to clear her conscience had my mum confessing.”

Jamie held her breath and waited. The manipulative Irene Jacob could have told her son anything. Jamie doubted Daniel’s mum would’ve shown herself in less than glowing light to her only precious son.

“She told me she discovered you were pregnant and tried to pay you off. But when you wouldn’t take the money, she begged you not to ruin my life along with your own. She said she more or less ran you out of town.”

As confessions went, Irene’s was pretty close to the mark. “I had to agree with her, Daniel. The pregnancy would’ve ruined your life. You would have dropped out of university to get a fulltime job to support us. You would’ve ended up hating me, and I couldn’t bear that.”

“So you dumped me without giving me a say?” The pain in Daniel’s voice squeezed at Jamie’s soul. “How do you know I wouldn’t have found a way to support us *and* finish my psychiatry degree?”

Jamie had to clear the emotion from her throat, break eye contact before she made a fool of herself by crying all over Daniel. “I knew from the beginning I was making a terrible mistake, but the urge to protect Nicole from the horror of growing up with bickering parents, like I’d done, kept me from seeking you.”

He looked at her with a decade of pain in his gaze. “I spent a long time being angry with you, Jamie. And all the time, I was being manipulated by my mother.”

Jamie placed a finger against his lips to stem the flow of recriminations. “She loved you. She was simply trying to protect you. As a mum, I understand that desire.”

He captured her hand, linked his fingers through hers. “How can you not hate my mum when she took everything from you? A father to your child. Your future husband. Your psychology degree...your entire future!”

“She didn’t take it, Danny. I made the sacrifices I thought I needed to at the time. Things turned out okay.” After all, she had a beautiful daughter and a thriving business. And if her heart ached from loneliness, it was something she’d learned to live with over the years.

“You’re a very generous lady.” He dipped his head and kissed her. Jamie responded immediately, winding her arms around his neck, her fingers stroked the soft hair at the nape of his neck. Her lips softened and parted, allowing the tip of his tongue to slip against hers. She couldn’t prevent the tiny mewl of pleasure that escaped her throat.

When he broke the kiss, his gaze was dark with a lifetime of promises. “It’s been ten years in the making.” He smoothed a lock of her tawny hair between his fingers. “I’ve never stopped loving you, Jamie-Leigh. Will you *finally* marry me?”

“Yes! *Oh, yes!*” She pulled his head down for another kiss, whispering against his lips, “I never lost faith that you’d come for us, but how did you find me?”

Daniel’s eyes crinkled with humour. “I remembered you once said you wished you could hire parents for special occasions, so you wouldn’t have to suffer through your parents’ public arguments. I knew if anyone would start a Dads-for-hire-agency, it’d be my Jamie.”

The knowledge that if she hadn't started the agency Daniel may never have found her, had Jamie giving God thanks for the courage to step out in faith. "I think it's time you officially met your daughter." She slipped her hand into Daniel's, and turned toward the door.

He tugged her back around and into his arms. "Then we'll all go to visit your parents. I want the world to know I came to claim my girls."

Daniel sealed his declaration with a kiss that made Jamie forget all about visiting the dreaded *parents!*

Thank you for downloading *The Daddy Agency*. Keep an eye out for Monique DeVere's latest contemporary romance, *Divorce Etiquette*, coming November 18<sup>th</sup> 2009 from The Wild Rose Press.

Please visit the on-line bookstore at [www.thewildrosepress.com](http://www.thewildrosepress.com).