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**And Then He
Kissed Me**

TERESA SOUTHWICK

Teresa Southwick
And Then He Kissed Me

«HarperCollins»

Southwick T.

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JUST ONE KISS...But it was sure one doozy of a kiss! Abby Ridgeway had always thought of Nick Marchetti as her boss and closest friend. The one person who'd always been there for her. But his not-just-friendly kiss had now awakened a confusing and unfamiliar host of emotions. And changed everything between them...It was as though she was up against a gale-force wind. Every instinct screamed for Abby to hold fast to that special bond they already shared. But her fast-beating heart wasn't letting her forget how right and perfect that one moment had been. Could Abby risk it all to turn one kiss into a lifetime commitment?

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Nick was the first man Abby had ever almost kissed.

Technically it wasn't her first time, but Nick was a man. Somehow she knew he would have done the deed with confidence, finesse and thoroughness. He'd made her pulse pound, her heart race, and stolen the breath from her lungs without even touching his mouth to hers. Oh, how she wished he had!

If she wasn't careful, he would see that. What if he took her up on the invitation? She would be out of the frying pan into the fire.

How could she keep him from seeing how very much she wanted to feel his lips pressed against hers?

Dear Reader,

Compelling, emotionally charged stories featuring honorable heroes, strong heroines and the deeply rooted conflicts they must overcome to arrive at a happily-ever-after are what make a Silhouette Romance novel come alive. Look no further than this month's offerings for stories to sweep you away....

In Johnny's Pregnant Bride, the engaging continuation of Carolyn Zane's THE BRUBAKER BRIDES, an about-to-bemarried cattle rancher honorably claims another woman—and another man's baby—as his own. This month's VIRGIN BRIDES title by Martha Shields shows that when The Princess and the Cowboy agree to a marriage of convenience, neither suspects the other's real identity...or how difficult not falling in love will be! In Truly, Madly, Deeply, Elizabeth August delivers a powerful transformation tale, in which a vulnerable woman finds her inner strength and outward beauty through the love of a tough-yet-tender single dad and his passel of kids.

And Then He Kissed Me by Teresa Southwick shows the romantic aftermath of a surprising kiss between best friends who'd been determined to stay that way. A runaway bride at a crossroads finds that Weddings Do Come True when the right man comes along in this uplifting novel by Cara Colter. And rounding out the month is Karen Rose Smith with a charming story whose title says it all: Wishes, Waltzes and a Storybook Wedding.

Enjoy this month's titles—and keep coming back to Romance, a series guaranteed to touch every woman's heart.



Mary-Theresa Hussey

Senior Editor

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And Then He Kissed Me

Teresa Southwick



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To Karen Taylor Richman, for your unwavering support and steady guidance. My profound gratitude.

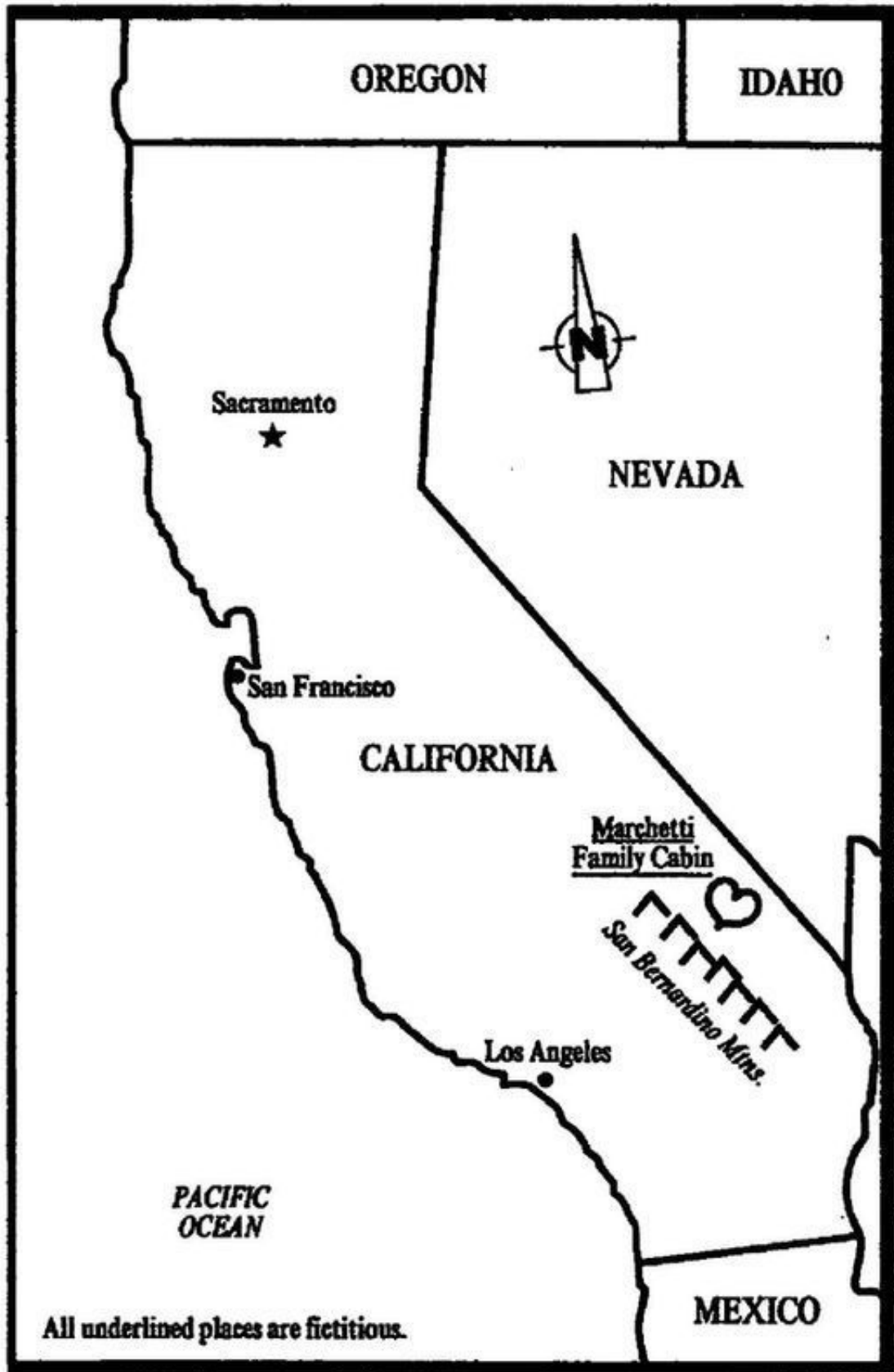
And Joan Marlow Golan, for understanding my vision and giving me the opportunity to write this book.

My sincere thanks.

TERESA SOUTHWICK

is a native Californian with ties to each coast, since she was conceived in the East and born in the West. Living with her husband of twenty-five years and two handsome sons, she is surrounded by heroes. Reading has been her passion since she was a girl. She couldn't be more delighted that her dream of writing full-time has come true. Her favorite things include: holding a baby, the fragrance of jasmine, walks on the beach, the patter of rain on the roof and, above all—happy endings.

Teresa also writes historical romance novels under the same name.



Chapter One
“No kissing, Nick.”

Abigail Ridgeway hurried past the wall of TV screens, all displaying the same Sunday football game.

“C’mon, Ab. What harm can a little kiss do?”

She stopped abruptly and turned. Six feet, two inches of Nick Marchetti made contact with some red-light parts of her five-foot-two-inch frame. He was her boss first, her friend second, and a hunk and a half she’d long ago placed a distant third.

She put a safe space between them now and looked up, way up. “This is not negotiable,” she said. “There will be no hanky-panky, and that’s final.”

“Your expectations are unrealistic.”

“Maybe. But you talked me into having this sweetsixteen birthday party for my sister. I should at least get to set the ground rules,” she said.

“Okay. But I’m warning you. A guy always wants what he can’t have.”

She grinned at him. “Is that personal experience talking? The man who has everything? When did anyone ever tell you no?”

Abby hadn’t thought his eyes could get any blacker, but they did. Intensity vibrated through him as he ran a hand through his short dark hair. His nose was straight, well-formed, and the wonderful masculine angles and planes of his face seemed to harden for a moment. She wondered what button she’d innocently put her finger on and how she could push it again. That was a wicked thought, and she made a mental note to work on her contrary streak.

But around Nick she sometimes couldn’t help it. He was always so self-possessed that it was hard not to cheer when she discovered a chink in his armor. He had everything: beauty, brains, body, booty—as in more money than he knew what to do with. Anything that brought him down to the level of peons like herself seemed fair.

“This isn’t about me, Abby. It’s about Sarah. A girl only turns sweet sixteen once. It’s a milestone. There should be some fanfare,” he said, neatly circumventing her question. “Even though she asked me to convince you to let her have a party, I know you want it to be a success.”

He’d turned the conversation back to her. In the five years she’d known him, she’d learned he was good at that. He had elevated the sidestep to an art form. “Okay. But Sarah is my responsibility. I’m her guardian. If my parents were still alive, maybe they would go along with your theory that a spirited game of spin the bottle is practically carved in stone at a teenage party. I disagree.”

“Maybe you’re right to be cautious. It’s a well-known fact that sixteen-year-old, hormone-crazed boys have the hots for older women.” He tapped her nose. “That would be you.”

She frowned up at him. “Is this some new management technique? Did you learn this at that seminar? Fractured reverse psychology?”

“You’re not buying it?”

Shaking her head, she said, “Call me crazy, but I think kissing games among teenagers that I’ll be responsible for is asking for trouble. Just a guess, instinct really. But that’s all I’ve got.”

“You’ve got me, pal,” he answered, slipping his hands into the pockets of his suit slacks. His sinfully expensive matching jacket parted with the movement, revealing a costly, crisp white shirt that hinted at the washboard stomach beneath it.

“Right,” she said, forcing her wayward thoughts in a different direction. “You’re awfully dressed up for late Sunday afternoon. I thought you were supposed to be off. Are you working today? Or do you have a date?”

“Both,” he said.

Nick Marchetti was a notorious workaholic. She glanced sideways at her reflection in the blank bigscreen TV next to her that doubled for a mirror. Smoothing her own rumpled suit skirt, she was abruptly reminded that she was on a break from work. Nick wasn’t the boss that she reported to on a daily basis. He was her boss, as in president of Marchetti’s Inc., big kahuna of the whole corporation.

She brushed a strand of her short blond bob back into place, fluffed her straight bangs, then turned and met Nick's gaze. "I didn't realize you had plans for the evening or that you were working. Was there something specific you needed when you stopped in to the restaurant?"

He hesitated only a moment before answering with a shake of his head. "Just the usual."

She nodded. "Lucky for me you were free to help with my shopping. Although I have to get back to the restaurant soon. Can we table the party-games discussion to another time? Right now I need the expertise you so generously offered. This electronic stuff is confusing. I don't know a woofer from a hooter."

"I think you mean tweeter," he said, his mouth twitching as he tried not to laugh.

"See? What I know about these little black boxes with their digital readouts would fit on the head of a pin."

"Well I certainly feel cheap, degraded and disposable." His voice dripped with hurt feelings. He was such a faker.

She put her hand on her hip. "What are you talking about?"

"You want my expertise on electronic stuff, but not teenagers." He heaved an exaggerated sigh. "I feel so used."

She wanted to laugh, slug him gently in the arm and tell him to stuff a sock in it. But she was afraid that would be too forward. Nick made it easy to fall into friendly and familiar behavior. But Abby had an unbreakable law: always remember your position. Translation: never under any circumstances overstep your boundaries. There was only one problem—she was never quite sure where the line was. Maybe because of their shared history.

She had Nick to thank for her very first waitressing job. When she was eighteen, her parents had died in an automobile accident. Sarah had been eleven then. With no relatives to help, Abby had suddenly and shockingly become responsible for herself, as well as mother and father to her little sister. Although a total stranger, Nick gave her a job when no one else would. She'd walked into the restaurant he was managing at the time and asked for work. Abby had vowed to be his best employee ever, and so far she'd done well. She had worked her way through the ranks to assistant-manager-in-training of the local Marchetti's. She never let herself forget her promise to do him proud.

At all times, she tried to maintain a professional demeanor around him. But then he would say or do something outrageous, and she would forget that he was her boss. The buck stopped with him. He signed her paycheck. Actually his brother Luke did, but it was almost the same thing. It was okay for him to think of them as friends, but she knew better.

"The party is a month away," she said, instead of the teasing words on the tip of her tongue. "We have plenty of time to debate the issue of spin the bottle. But this sale is over today. I promised Sarah a CD player for her birthday. Good, bad or indifferent, I need to make a decision. Are you going to help me or—" she glanced at the milling salesman "—let the circling sharks move in for the kill?"

He took her elbow and spun her toward the far wall filled with disc players and speakers. "You'd best thank your lucky stars that chivalry is alive and well." When she didn't say anything, he looked down at her and said, "What? No pithy comeback?"

She shook her head. "When you're right, you're right. I appreciate your help. If you'd told me you had a dinner date when you dropped in to the restaurant, I wouldn't have imposed."

"You're not imposing."

"You're sure I'm not keeping you?"

"Nope. I've got plenty of time."

She looked at the display of equipment. "Should I go cheap, expensive or middle of the road? Should I sacrifice quality for features? Or get top-notch basic for the least amount of money?"

Nick pointed to a unit. "This is a good brand. It has all the features Sarah could possibly want. Unless she's missing the same electronic gene that you are. I think the cost is reasonable."

Abby's eyes widened as she looked at the price tag. "Maybe it's reasonable for a Marchetti. But it's way out of the Ridgeway budget—even at forty percent off."

"I could—"

"That's very nice of you, Nick. But I can't allow you to do it."

"You didn't let me finish."

"Excuse me, I shouldn't have interrupted. Speak your piece, then I'll refuse your offer to buy it for Sarah."

"I was going to suggest that you let me chip in. I don't know what to get her. You would be doing me a favor."

Abby knew this was one of his charitable gestures. He always found a way to make it seem as if it wasn't, but she had his number. His gift for creative maneuvering was probably the reason he'd taken Marchetti's from a successful restaurant to the fastest-growing chain in the Southwest. She wasn't sure why his benevolence suddenly rankled. Maybe because she was this close to finishing her degree, and would soon—finally—feel more independent. She didn't need his help. Along with her wicked streak, she would have to work on this inclination toward ingratitude that had only lately reared its ugly head.

Nick had been there for her when she had desperately needed someone. She had always tried to take care of things by herself, but he had never refused a request for help. Why did she now feel the need to do things on her own?

"I'll get the less expensive one," she said, pointing to another model by the same manufacturer. "It's a big-sister thing. I want to buy this for Sarah."

"What am I going to get her? I don't know much about sixteen-year-old girls."

"You knew she was dying to have a party."

"Kids love parties. That's not gender-specific. Besides, she told me. But the pressure of finding the right gift for a girl—"

"I'm sure Madison would be happy to help you pick something appropriate." Madison. A sophisticated name for a classy woman who was also beautiful, unusual—and Nick's girlfriend.

Abby had often seen them together. In addition to work-related functions, he frequently took her to dinner at the restaurant where Abby worked. He said he could always count on her to make sure the service and food were flawless. Abby figured he was showing off the beautiful, brilliant, back-East-educated Madison. She couldn't remember any woman in his life lasting as long as Ms. Wainright.

He had a funny look on his face. "Why don't you like her? Madison's a class act."

When had he learned to read her mind, Abby wondered? It wasn't that she disliked the other woman. Just that Madison left her feeling woefully inadequate. Madison was everything that Abby wasn't. She bent over a pile of boxes to check model numbers, in order to pick out the disc player she'd chosen. "I didn't say I disliked Madison."

"No, but your tone spoke volumes about your feelings. Would you care to put them into words?"

"It's not my place to say anything."

"Is it safe to say that you believe she's not my type?"

"Yes."

"Which means I'm not a class act?" He raised one black eyebrow, but humor sparkled in his gaze.

"You're putting words in my mouth."

"In the six months Madison and I have dated, she's been nothing less than charming, beautiful, smart and successful. She would be an asset to any man."

She would certainly be his equal: beauty, brains, body, booty. But he was right. For some reason Abby couldn't put her finger on, she did think Madison Wainright was wrong for him.

Abby often wondered how a great guy like Nick Marchetti, who was good-looking enough to tempt a card-carrying spinster, had managed to stay single. Since he'd introduced the subject, she brought up a question she just couldn't hold back.

"So why haven't you asked Madison to marry you?"

"Is there a rule somewhere that says if a man admires positive attributes in a woman, he has to propose to her?"

"Whoa. Just a little defensive, aren't we?"

"Nope. Not me." He looked sheepish. "Maybe. But only because my mother and sister have been on my case."

"Ever since Rosie got married and had her baby, you've softened on the settling-down issue. I get the impression that you're thinking about it."

"It's crossed my mind."

"So when are you going to ask Madison?"

He leaned a shoulder against the display rack and folded his arms across his chest. "When are you going to settle down?"

"I've been settled down since I was eighteen. I'm heading toward footloose and fancy-free. In slightly less than two years, Sarah will graduate from high school and go to college. I see the light at the end of the tunnel."

"You're still not dating, are you?"

Abby wondered how he could know that, when she was so careful to keep her personal and business lives separate. If he hadn't shown up at the restaurant and insisted, she wouldn't be shopping with him now. How could he know she didn't go out?

Then it hit her. Sarah didn't work for him and had no compunction about calling him up at the drop of a fingernail. She bent his ear with anything and everything that popped into her head. As far as Abby knew, he didn't mind. She figured if he did, any man who stood at the helm of a growing corporation could certainly clear the decks of one teenage girl if he wanted to. And Sarah was a talker. If talking was an Olympic event, her sister would take the gold.

"It's not like I can wiggle my nose and a man appears in a puff of smoke," Abby said. Now who was getting defensive, she thought, hearing that note in her voice.

"You can't tell me that men don't show an interest in an attractive woman like you."

She tried not to glow at his compliment, but was only partially successful. "I haven't noticed."

"Okay. I get the picture. You still shut them down cold. Let me give you a tip, pal. Guys need a little encouragement."

"Look, Nick," Abby said. She took a deep breath, trying to tamp down her irritation. If he had been just her friend, she would have given him an earful. But he was her boss, and she was struggling for a politically correct response. "Between work and school and raising Sarah, I don't have time right now. Once she's in college, it will be my turn. I'll have my degree in business. Right after I do footloose and fancy-free, next on my list is settling down."

Wait a minute. She had brought up the settling down subject—about him. Why was she suddenly defending herself? Oh, he was smooth. She'd hardly noticed him put her on the hot seat. Darn, he was good at shifting his backside out of the frying pan and putting hers in it.

"All work and no play," he said seriously.

"Okay, so Abby's a dull girl." She was teetering on the edge of the line she'd drawn, uncomfortable discussing herself with him. Two could play at turning the tables. "Are you going to bring Madison to Sarah's party?"

"Is she invited? I'm not even sure you want me. I was an afterthought."

"Nick, I've already explained that I didn't ask you to help me with the party because you're too busy."

"Is that all?" He frowned slightly.

“What else? Except that if I could afford the Green Bay Packers defensive line, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“So I’m a poor substitute for your first choice?”

“No. But you work cheap. What about Madison? Would you like to bring her?”

“You almost sound sincere about wanting her there.”

“It would be interesting to watch her play spin the bottle with a bunch of sixteen-year-old boys sporting sweaty palms and zits.”

“Chaperones don’t have to play. They referee.” He looked at her, then raised one eyebrow. “You like her, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Abby answered honestly. She wasn’t sure how he’d figured that out, but he was right. She admired and respected Madison very much. Which made the fact that she didn’t think Madison Wainright was the woman for him even more puzzling.

“So Madison is invited?” he asked.

“She doesn’t have to be invited. You’re allowed to bring a date.”

“I will, if you will.” he said.

“Don’t hold your breath,” she muttered.

A few hours after their shopping trip, Nick stood in front of Abby’s door. He had finished up his work early and didn’t want to go home and kill time waiting for his date. He wasn’t due to pick Madison up for an hour so he’d decided to stop at Abby’s.

He wasn’t sure why. Maybe because he hadn’t been able to get her out of his mind. Partly because of work issues he hadn’t discussed with her. But mostly her remark about not bringing a date to her sister’s party. A pretty girl like Abby should have guys beating a path to her door, but he was the only one there. And the sidewalk didn’t look any the worse for wear.

Her apartment was situated in a large complex with lots of shrubs and walkways. The entrance was tucked away between the stairway to the upper level and her storage unit.

He remembered helping her find the place after he’d advised her to sell her parents’ home. It seemed best. She couldn’t swing a mortgage payment, and she wouldn’t take money from him. The proceeds went into trust for the two sisters. Abby had a lot of responsibility to shoulder and selling gave her freedom from the upkeep and burden of a house, as well as a bit of financial security.

That was good. Because the one thing he’d learned to count on from Abby was pride. No handouts. She wanted to do things on her own, and she had.

He pushed the button to ring the bell, and moments later Abby opened the door. Surprise at seeing him made her big blue eyes bigger and bluer.

“Nick. I thought you were having dinner with Madison.”

“I am. In about an hour.”

“This is a long way from her high-rent district. What are you doing here?”

“Just killing time,” he said, unable to come up with anything he could share. “Do you mind if I come in?”

“Of course not. Sorry.” She stepped back so that he could enter.

He surveyed the living room as she closed the door behind him. It wasn’t large, but definitely homey and comfortable. A green-and-beige plaid couch and matching love seat sat at right angles to each other in the center. On one wall was an entertainment center with stereo, et cetera. He’d hooked it all up for her during an electronic crisis. It was one of the few times she’d called him. She didn’t know what to plug in where and was afraid she’d blow up her new VCR or old TV. There was a small dining area adjacent to the tiny kitchen. He knew the rest of the place consisted of two bedrooms and baths, plus a laundry area with apartment-size appliances.

The walls were filled with collages of family photos, knickknacks and inexpensive prints. Prominently displayed was a bronze-colored metal plaque proclaiming, What Doesn’t Kill Me Will Make Me Stronger.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Abby asked.

He shook his head. “Is Sarah here?”

“No. She went to the movies with a group of friends.”

“Any of them guys?” he asked.

“If they were I’d be clothed in camouflage and doing surveillance. I wouldn’t be standing here dressed like this,” she said with an expansive hand gesture that indicated her work attire.

She was wearing the same suit he’d seen her in earlier, but it was a more casual, sexier look. The jacket was off, as were her high heels. There she stood in her stocking feet, a run creeping its way up from her shapely ankle. Her powder-blue silk blouse looked disheveled, half in, half out of the waistband of her navy skirt. Tousled straight blond hair surrounded her oval face. She looked as if she’d just engaged in a heavy necking session with a guy who had rounded first and was fast approaching second base.

The image took him completely by surprise. He’d never thought of her like that before. What surprised him more was his own reaction to the idea of her being with a man.

Irritation bordering on anger.

Correction, he thought. He wasn’t angry at the idea of a man in her life, just the concept of that man actually reaching second base with her.

Since the day he’d met her, when she’d been eighteen trying to act thirty, he’d felt responsible for Abby. He’d taken the Ridgeway sisters under his wing. He’d given Abby her first job and watched her grow up. It was natural that he would want to protect her. But this level of intensity was weird, and he could only chalk it up to his encouraging her to date. Which he still thought she should do. It just meant that he would have to run interference for her.

She glanced at the watch on her slim wrist. “Isn’t it kind of late for a dinner date?”

He took off his suit jacket and laid it on the arm of the love seat before sitting down. “Madison is preparing for a big court case this week. She needed more time. You’re still filling in for Rebecca, aren’t you?” he asked.

Abby nodded. “She’s still on maternity leave. And I have to confess that wearing the manager’s high heels is a real eye-opener.”

“How so?” he asked. Although he already knew why. It was the reason he’d stopped into the restaurant earlier. But before he brought the subject up, he wanted to hear what she had to say. “You’re home a little early, aren’t you?”

She nodded, then tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “The dinner rush, if you can call it that, ended early, so I left.”

He could tell by the shadows in her eyes, the slump of her shoulders, the tension around her mouth that she was upset. “Tell me about it.”

Sighing, she sat on the other sofa, far enough away that there was no danger of their knees brushing. Instead of turning toward him, she faced straight ahead. Her body language screamed don’t cross that line. He frowned. At work she’d always made it a point to maintain a proper professional distance. Although lately he got the feeling she was trying to widen it. But this was her home. Here he thought they were friends, not boss and employee. Which was why he was letting her explain at her leisure the reason she was home earlier than usual.

“Business was slow. I had to send home a waiter and busboy tonight.” She met his gaze. “That’s the reason you were working today, isn’t it? It’s the reason you stopped in. You were checking things out.”

“Yes.” He didn’t bother to deny it. He’d been afraid that a slow evening was what had sent her home early. “But I can see you’re upset about sending employees home.”

“Of course I am. It’s not that I’m unclear on the concept.”

“I never said you were.”

“I know basic business principles. If the staffing ratio doesn’t match income, the profit margin shrinks.”

“That’s true.”

“Staff to a pattern.”

“Right.”

“The two newest employees are the first to go home early, and they’re the ones who usually need the money the most.”

“I understand.”

“Jack, the waiter, has a wife and baby. Larry is working his way through school.” Tensely, she twisted her fingers together.

Rank has its privileges, Nick thought. Low man on the totem pole was the most vulnerable. But all the logic in the world didn’t make it any easier to stomach telling an employee supporting a family that he wasn’t going to earn as much as he’d thought. Nick knew how hard this was for Abby. She had firsthand knowledge of being on a shoestring budget, the only thing between her and the wolves at the door.

Nick remembered a time he’d been in Abby’s shoes, professionally speaking. Tom Marchetti put his faith in OJT, on-the-job-training. His dad believed that Nick’s advanced degree in business only proved that he was capable of thinking. Each of his four sons had to learn the business from the bottom up. Nick had gotten his real education the summer his father had sent him to Phoenix, to supervise the opening of the first restaurant outside of California. His most lasting lesson had nothing to do with business, he recalled bitterly. His empathy for an employee had led to his orientation in the finer points of getting dumped, big-time, in a relationship. He would never forget it.

But that was his problem, not Abby’s. The restaurant where she was assistant manager was the first in the Marchetti’s chain, started twenty years before. Now the area demographics were changing and impacting business in that location. He was only mildly surprised that Abby had correctly guessed that was the reason he’d been there today to evaluate. She was a sharp cookie, with a very tender heart. She was just filling in, but had gotten her baptism of fire by telling that young father to go home early.

“So what are you going to do about the business?” he asked.

Startled, she met his gaze. “Me? I’m just the relief pitcher.”

“Isn’t it the reliever’s job to save the game?”

She looked at him thoughtfully for several moments. “I guess paying employees for twiddling their thumbs is unacceptable?” she said, half-hopeful.

“It is. Short of giving money away, what can management do?”

She thought for a minute. “Figure out ways to bring in customers.”

“That’s right. You’ve been to a few management seminars. What did you learn?”

“Mission, vision, philosophy,” she said without hesitation.

“Good, you can spout terminology. But what does it mean as far as Marchetti’s Inc. is concerned?”

“Mission?” She thought for a moment. “To provide high-quality, authentic Italian food at a reasonable cost, using customer-service skills to ensure clientele satisfaction,” she recited.

At least someone read the company memos, he thought wryly.

“Okay, so you can memorize.” He pointed at her. “What’s the important part of what you just quoted?”

She frowned. “Which part?”

“Clientele. Do you know your customer base?”

“The area is older. First-time home buyers are moving in. That means primarily young couples, some with children, some without. Most on a budget.”

“Right. How can you make them want to allocate some of their hard-earned, double-income dollars for a meal out?”

“Coupons, flyers, discounts. A special kids’ night. Maybe an all-you-can-eat deal on traditionally slower nights.”

“All good ideas,” he said.

“But don’t they deviate from the company vision—every restaurant is the same, right down to the menu?”

“That was my father’s vision. Times have changed. We can, too. Especially if you factor in philosophy.”

“Let the managers manage?”

He nodded. His three brothers were also involved in the family business. Joe was CEO in charge of personnel and hiring. “If my brother’s done his job, every restaurant has a dynamite manager, in which case all we have to do is stand back and let him or her do what he or she does best.”

“So if every location is made up of specific clientele, aspects of the operation could be altered accordingly?”

“Why not?” he asked. If every employee was like her, his job would be a snap. “Think about it, Abby.”

“I will.”

They grinned at each other for several moments. Nick hadn’t felt this exhilarated in a long time and sensed that Abby felt it, too. Excitement flushed her cheeks and sparkled in her eyes. Her full lips turned up, revealing a rare, beautiful smile. He couldn’t remember the last time talking business had been so much fun.

Then she blinked and her smile faltered. The serious, professional mask was replaced faster than you could say “fettuccine Alfredo.”

She glanced at her watch. “Wow, look at the time. You’re going to be late.”

He suddenly had an idea. “Come to dinner with us.”

Startled, she put a hand to her chest. “Me?”

He looked around. “I don’t see anyone else here. Of course, you.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Sure you could. Madison likes you. You admitted you like her. Give me one good reason why you can’t join us.”

“Okay. Car pool.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sarah and her friends got a ride to the movies with April Petersen’s mom and I have to pick them up.”

He couldn’t help wondering how many other things she’d missed because she’d become a mother at eighteen. He was helping her plan a milestone birthday for Sarah. Had anyone made hers special?

“What did you do when you turned twenty-one?”

She looked surprised, then shrugged. “I don’t remember. I suppose the usual—school, took care of Sarah, and work.”

“That’s against the law.”

“Huh?” she said.

“In my family there’s a traditional rite of passage into adulthood that involves going somewhere your ID will be checked. An unforgettable experience.”

“That’s really nice, but I don’t see—”

He grinned. “Obviously I owe you a twenty-first birthday.”

Chapter Two

Abby blinked away her shock. He felt responsible for her twenty-first birthday? She wanted to ask where that had come from.

Instead she said, “Aside from the obvious, that it’s now two years after the fact, why would you think you owe me that?”

“When you hired on, you became part of the Marchetti family. I don’t know where my head was back then.”

The dark look was back momentarily, as if he was remembering something unpleasant. He so rarely looked angry, she couldn’t help noticing that it had happened twice in one day. What bad memory had brought that expression to his face? Whatever it was, she had the most absurd desire to make it better.

She pushed the thought away and said, “That’s a no-brainer. Your head was where it always is.” She gave him a wry look. “Buried in business.”

“Maybe.” One corner of his mouth lifted, replacing his tension with teasing. “The fact is, you became an adult and the occasion was not properly acknowledged.”

“It was a long time ago. I don’t care—”

“I do,” he said in his I’m-the-boss voice that suffered no pithy comeback.

“It’s very nice of you to be concerned, Nick. But it’s over. Even if I wanted you to, there’s no way you can get that back for me.”

Abby made a conscious effort to wear a blindfold when she looked back on her life. The past held mostly bad memories. But the future was full of possibilities, as soon as it was her turn.

He glanced at the watch on his wrist and stood up, grabbing his jacket as he did. “I don’t have time to debate this right now. But you will have a birthday celebration.”

“If it involves pointy hats and spin the bottle, count me out.”

He laughed and opened the door. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of everything.”

Abby stood in the doorway, watching until his broad back was swallowed up by the darkness. She figured there wasn’t too much danger of kissing games for her. Like all the other guys in her past who had tried to plan something with her, Nick would find out she had responsibilities that pushed her own dreams aside.

But the thought of something wild and unpredictable was exciting—for the second and a half she allowed herself to fantasize. Then she filed the daydream under “footloose and fancy-free,” to be pulled out at a later, more convenient time.

Her turn would have to wait.

After dinner, Nick drove Madison home, then walked her to her front door. The building was in an exclusive area of town. This sophisticated high-security condo complex was exactly where a well-bred, up-and-coming female attorney should live.

Sometimes he forgot that Madison Wainright was in such a high-powered profession. She was petite, even smaller than Abby. The black knit dress she wore was a high-collared number that flared at mid-calf and hugged every curve in between. She chose clothes that she thought would make her look taller. From his vantage point she was woefully unsuccessful, since he was looking at the top of her red hair.

He preferred blue-eyed blondes. Although more important than the color of a woman’s hair was her sense of humor. He recalled Abby’s electronics-department comment about woofers and hooters. His mouth twitched again. She had said that on purpose. When she wasn’t hiding behind her professional face, Abby was fun.

So was Madison. Usually. Although he had a feeling her sense of humor had taken the night off. It could be she was preoccupied with the case she was working on, but he suspected he’d done something besides pick her up late to put the wrinkle in her briefs.

At her front door, he stood one step below the porch while she put her key in the lock. The outside light spilled onto the step and sparkled in her green eyes as she glanced hopefully at him. “Would you like to come in for a nightcap?” she asked.

“I wish I could, but there’s an early meeting tomorrow,” he answered.

“Okay. Thanks for dinner.” Her voice was brittle. She pushed the door open and started inside.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Good night, Nick.”

He moved beside her and put his hand on her arm. “Something’s eating you. What is it?”

“We need to talk.”

A shudder slithered through him. He had a feeling he wasn’t the only man on earth who had that reaction to those words. But he figured he had a better reason than most. The last time a woman had said that to him, his life had turned upside down.

He took a deep breath and said, “Okay, shoot.”

She hugged her black clutch purse to her chest. “You’re going to dismiss everything I’m about to say, but it’s time to say it. You don’t have feelings for me, at least not the way I want you to. Although, when you picked me up tonight, I hoped things would be different.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You were excited, practically humming with enthusiasm. I haven’t seen you like that in weeks.”

“I’m always upbeat, Madison. And of course I care about you.”

“See? I knew you would dismiss me.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets. “I’m not. I just don’t understand where you’re going with this.”

“We hadn’t finished our dinner salads before the other Nick was back, the one I can’t reach because he’s buried in business.”

Funny, he thought. That’s almost what Abby had said to him earlier. “You make me sound like a schizophrenic, Madison.”

“You are. At least now you are. When we first met, you were attentive. You courted me. It’s what made me fall—” She pulled herself up to her full five feet, one inch, a bit more with heels, and looked him in the eye. “Now you’re like two people. The fun-loving Nick and the one who’s only interested in profits over the last year. The latter is the guy I always see. I’m not sure I like him.”

“Next you’ll accuse me of having an evil twin.”

“That’s what it feels like.”

“You’re exaggerating—”

“Am I? Think about it, Nick.”

He did, trying to remember, and came up empty. He put his hands on her waist and felt her stiffen. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She shook her head. “It’s all right. This probably wasn’t the right time to bring it up.”

“I get the feeling you’re holding something back.”

She smiled a little sadly. “You’re very perceptive when you want to be. I’ve been wondering lately if we shouldn’t take a break from each other.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I saw the look in your eyes earlier when you explained that Abby Ridgeway was the reason you were late.”

“That’s right. Abby and I were talking business.”

“That’s not the way it looks to me. I suspect you have feelings for her that have nothing to do with business.”

“Your imagination is working overtime,” he said, a little hotly.

“Really?” Her chin lifted. “When’s the last time you kissed me as if you really meant it?”

That stopped him cold. He thought back and came up empty. Then he tried to pull her into his arms. “We can remedy that,” he suggested.

She stiffened again and refused to mold herself against him. “If I have to remind you, it takes the magic out of the moment,” she said.

“I’ve been preoccupied—”

She shook her head. “Like I said, this is the wrong time. I’m pretty beat. And I have to be in court early.”

“All right.” He hesitated. “How about a long weekend soon? To talk this through?”

“I don’t think so.”

Nick kissed her cheek. “I’ll call you.”

“You don’t have to. Good night,” she said. Moments later, she disappeared inside and he heard the dead bolt slide shut.

With his hands in his pockets, Nick slowly walked down the stairs to his car. The conversation with Madison had rattled his chain. Feelings for Abby? That was absurd. They were nothing more than friends.

He was perfectly content with Madison and things the way they were. She was an intelligent companion and did him proud when she accompanied him to business functions. But he couldn’t remember the last time he’d really kissed her and to be honest, he hadn’t missed it.

But Madison wanted more. She was a wonderful woman and deserved more. He’d come to a fork in the road. Or maybe it was more like facing the three doors on a game show.

Behind door number one was a question mark. Door number two was Madison. He liked and respected her. She was beautiful, brainy and would be an asset to any man. His parents admired her. More than once his mother had hinted that procrastination was dangerous. He grinned. Hint was the wrong word. Flo Marchetti had as much tact as a charging rhino. She’d come right out and asked him if he was waiting for divine instruction from the burning bush.

He’d given her some spin about not being ready to settle down. If he and Madison were right together, nothing would be changed by waiting. At the time, he’d believed that. But he sensed that he and Ms. Wainright had just experienced a fish-or-cut-bait situation. He’d bet his new red Corvette that she wanted a family vehicle. She wanted the M-word. Marriage.

The only M-word he could give her was maybe. After his sister married his best friend and his niece was born, he’d started thinking. What would it be like to come home to a special woman? Children? To have all the hours at work mean something in terms of having a family of his own. He’d thought about asking Madison to marry him. But the thought always made him want to run far and fast in the opposite direction.

Then there was door number three—life as he knew it. He had a dynamite career. Building the family business along with his brothers was about as good as it got. Family. An image of Abby jumped into his mind. They were friends. Madison was dead wrong about there being anything romantic between him and Abby. Hadn’t he told her just a few hours before that she was practically a relative? As in a little sister.

He’d tried to be there for her over the years. At first he’d called regularly and dropped in on her and Sarah to make sure they were okay. Abby always put on a brave front. She only came to him in crisis situations. Or to connect cable and hook up her stereo, he thought with a grin. He’d stepped into the big-brother role, to watch over her. But work commitments and Abby herself prevented him from keeping tabs on her as he felt he should. Sarah wasn’t shy about calling, but Abby was different. If not for the info her sister gave him, he wouldn’t have a clue about how Abby spent her free time.

He teased her about not dating, but didn’t really know what was holding her back. But that was a separate issue. Something else was bothering him now. He had told her tonight that she was practically a member of the family.

Some relative he was. Relatives didn’t ignore a birthday as important as number twenty-one. He wondered if the world-famous greeting-card company had a sentiment for a situation like this.

He opened his car door and slipped behind the wheel. A greeting card wasn’t good enough. A grand gesture was what he needed to wipe the slate clean. Then he would see about mending fences with Madison.

Abby heard the knock at her door. Annoyance trickled through her at the interruption. It was nine in the morning on her day off. She was up to her elbows in dust, wax and cleaning solutions. She had built up a head of steam and was prepared to scour the place from engine to caboose. But first she had to get rid of the door-to-door salesman.

She opened the door and said, "I'm not interested—"

Nick grinned down at her. "Hi. And how do you know you're not interested?"

"I thought you were selling something."

"Not exactly. Are you going to invite me in?"

"The place is a mess."

"Is it fatal?"

"Sarah and I have built up immunities." She returned his smile and opened the door wider. "Enter at your own risk."

"Thanks."

She rested her sweatpants-clad hip against the back of the love seat and folded her arms across her chest. "To what do I owe this visit? Is everything all right? Did the restaurant burn down? A fire in the kitchen? Mutiny in the ranks?"

His dark brows drew together. "Has anyone ever told you you're a glass-is-half-empty sort of person?"

"Yes. So before my imagination really gets revved up, you might want to tell me what you're doing here."

"I'd like to think it's a good thing." He looked down at her. "I'm here to invite you to dinner."

"Dinner?" Abby resisted her inclination to feel Nick's forehead for signs of fever and delirium.

What in the world was he thinking? Going out with the hired help? He was too young for a midlife crisis. Although she'd never seen that particular gleam in his eyes. And he wasn't wearing his customary suit. It was Saturday, but his reputation for working seven days a week was legendary. So she didn't often see him in casual clothes. And a good thing, too.

His jeans and the long-sleeved white shirt rolled to the elbows highlighted his masculinity. Casual clothes on Nick were dangerous to her unbreakable rule. Work attire was comfortable and safe. Besides reminding her that she needed to maintain a professional relationship, his suit jacket hid that great butt—

Whoa, Abby. Don't go there. This was shaky ground. He was her boss. She had no business critiquing his anatomy, even if it did kick up her heart rate. What was her world coming to?

No good. That's what. And not fair, since she was dressed in gray sweats and no makeup, a scary proposition at best.

She pushed her hair out of her eyes. "I can't drop everything."

"You don't have to drop anything," he said. "In fact I recommend against dropping breakables."

"You know that's not what I meant. I have things to do."

He looked at his watch. "If I pick you up at seven-thirty, will that give you enough time?"

"There's never enough time," she said.

He shook his head sympathetically. "You need to have some fun, Ab."

"No, I don't." That came out so witchy. She sighed. "I don't mean to be rude, Nick, but just which part of no didn't you understand?"

"The N and the O." He folded his arms over his chest and grinned down at her.

"You know we could have had this conversation on the phone," she said.

"I had a feeling you would resist the idea. I thought it might take some convincing, and it's not as easy to get rid of me in person."

Abby let out a long breath. If she had known he was selling something, she would never have opened the door. And her day off had started out so well. She had formulated a plan. Life was so much easier that way. If she deviated from her daily goals, there would be more to do tomorrow.

Her outline of the day hadn't included convincing Nick that she couldn't forget her responsibilities and go play with him.

"Let me explain this to you," she said. "No is a negative response to a proposition or situation. It means I can't accompany you. But I appreciate the thought. It's very sweet—"

"Look at it this way, Ab. If you're going to do footloose and fancy-free someday, you need experience. You're the one who's facing the light at the end of the tunnel Carefree abandon doesn't just happen. It needs single-minded training, determination, practice and sacrifice."

"So going out to dinner is actually the first lesson in Footloose and Fancy-Free 101?"

"Yeah." He grinned. "The prerequisite is Spontaneity 100."

She shook her head. "It's very nice of you, Nick. I'd rather do anything than search and destroy dust bunnies in this place," she said, grimly looking around her living room.

"But?" he prompted.

"I have responsibilities. If I don't take care of them, my little boat will capsize. I have too much to do."

"Name three things that will tank you if they're not done because you go out to dinner tonight," he said, confidence oozing from him.

It wasn't easy arguing with Mr. Perfect. If only his hair was sticking up in the back, or there was dirt on his handsome face or lettuce between his teeth. Anything that would put him on the level of someone like her. But that would never happen. He would always be at the head of the banquet table, and she would be in the corner trying to corral the dust bunnies.

"I'm waiting," he said. "Three reasons you can't throw caution to the wind and go with me."

She had a sneaking suspicion he knew what she would say, and was prepared to bob and weave, and block her at every turn. "Okay. My classes."

"It's Saturday. You don't have a class today."

"But I'm up to my ears in homework, and Sarah may have plans and need transportation."

"So do your homework this afternoon and I'll alert Ma to be on call with the Beamer for Sarah tonight. What's your third excuse?"

"The health department."

"What?"

"They're going to shut this place down if I don't clean it."

She squirmed uncomfortably when his black eyes narrowed on her. "You're reaching with that one. What are you afraid of, Abby? Me?"

"Of course not." That was only half-true. She was cautious of him, or rather spending time with him that wasn't work-related.

She understood work, and her place in the scheme of things. He was proposing a Cinderella scenario. Take her to dinner—translation, the ball. Let her have some fun and see how the other half lives. But at midnight the fairy tale would be over. He was right. She was afraid—to see the other side. Afraid of facing life after her matching horses and golden coach turned back into a pumpkin and dust bunnies.

Nick Marchetti was Prince Charming in a business suit. He was handsome, funny, and didn't have to worry about paying his electric bill if he used too much power during a heat wave. He was so far out of her league, it wasn't funny. When it was her turn at the plate, she wanted to swing away. She wanted to have fun. She wanted to date. She wanted enough time to nurture a budding relationship.

It wouldn't be easy to take the first step; so she would wait until her life simplified and she had the time to devote to a man. She had enough scars to convince her that unless she waited for her turn, the romance in her crystal ball was doomed to failure. When she had a clear field, she would give it a try. But what guy could compare favorably to Nick?

All of that wasn't the worst. What scared her most was that the delicate balance between work and friendship would be somehow altered. After her parents had died, she'd assumed adult

responsibilities. She hadn't known how to handle the legal matters, let alone how or what to do with the house. Nick had stepped in and advised her. Besides her sister, their relationship was the brightest part of her life. Knowing he was there, whether she needed him or not, had gotten her through the rough times. She didn't want to jeopardize what they had.

"Look, pal, I'm only talking about a couple of hours. An evening. A belated twenty-first-birthday dinner. You would be doing me a favor."

"Oh, really." A grin broke through. She loved watching Maneuvering Marchetti in action. And what a stretch! Two and a half years after the fact, how was he going to turn her belated twenty-first birthday celebration to his advantage? "How?"

"Let me count the ways." He held his hand up and touched his index finger. "Number one—clear my conscience. Number two—make my star employee happy. A happy employee is a productive employee."

"So this is all about you?"

"Not entirely. You haven't heard number three yet."

"Okay. Lay it on me."

He held up three fingers and wiggled them. "If you don't lighten up and have a little fun, you're heading for a midlife crisis of astronomic proportions. As an honorary Marchetti," he said, pointing at her, "you're entitled to a free, all-expense-paid dinner where you will be instructed by yours truly in the finer art of celebrating a milestone birthday. While there, you will get a long-overdue lesson in having fun."

Temptation tugged at Abby and stirred something dormant in her soul. She longed to do something wild, something spontaneous and completely out of character. Her whole body vibrated with excitement. The prospect of plain Abby Ridgeway spending the evening with the fabulous Nick Marchetti was the stuff of fantasy.

Then her cautious, practical nature reared its ugly head and told her to turn him down.

"I don't know, Nick," she said, not quite able to listen and obey her sensible side.

"Then consider this—if you say no, I'm planning to throw you over my shoulder and carry you off. I thought you'd learned never to mess with a Marchetti determined to have his way." He sighed. "Somehow I suspected it would come down to brawn over rational thought."

Abby found she was leaning toward a yes, and it wasn't his phony threat of physical force. How could she turn him down? He seemed to want to do this and had taken steps to make it happen, including thinking of Sarah. A girl who said no would have to have her head examined.

"Then in an effort to preserve my dignity, the answer is—okay." Then she thought of something and said, "What should I wear?"

"A cocktail dress. This is an occasion for dressing up. I have a special place in mind."

She touched his arm, ignoring the tingle in her fingertips. "Thank you, Nick."

"No need to thank me. On top of the motivations I listed, there's one I left out. Ma says I've been working too hard and should have some fun. Maybe now she'll get off my back."

She met his gaze and gave him a stern look. "You're lucky to have her."

"That was a joke. Now I'll leave you to your responsibilities." He tapped her nose. "I'll pick you up at seven-thirty. Be here. Be ready. Be prepared. No excuses."

Chapter Three

"Oh, Nick—" Words failed Abby.

They had just been seated at a window table in an exclusive restaurant high above the San Fernando Valley, and she looked down at the lights.

"You like it?" he asked.

She smiled at him. "I'd sure hate to be responsible for the electric bill. But yes. It's wonderful." She gazed at the sight again. "It takes my breath away."

"Yeah," he said.

She darted a glance at him and realized he wasn't looking outside. He was staring at her. Her breath caught for the second time in thirty seconds, and it had nothing to do with the view and everything to do with the intensity in his gaze. He'd never looked at her like that before.

"Is something the matter?" she asked. "Lipstick on my teeth? Mascara under my eyes? Is the dress wrong?"

He shook his head. "You look just fine," he answered.

"Then why are you staring at me?"

"It's just—" He shrugged, a gesture that told her he didn't have the words. Maneuvering Marchetti always had the words, so this was a noteworthy occasion. Noteworthy good or bad, she wasn't sure.

"Just what?" she prompted. A personal compliment from her boss bent her rule. But heck, just for the evening she could relax. Couldn't she?

"You don't look like this at work," he finished lamely.

"Does that mean the outfit is okay?" It was the only decent dressy thing she owned. She'd worn the long-sleeved, short-skirted, black, lace-covered sheath to the company Christmas party the year before. Obviously he didn't remember. She ignored the prick of disappointment. It was better to overlook what you didn't understand, and couldn't do anything about even if you did.

Just then the waiter appeared. "Can I get you something from the bar?"

Nick ordered a Scotch. Abby asked for a glass of white wine.

The waiter cleared his throat, looking embarrassed. "Miss, may I see some identification, please?"

Stunned, Abby reached for her small clutch purse, grateful that she'd thought to bring her driver's license. She handed it over for his examination. Nodding he said, "I'll bring your drinks right away."

Abby glanced at Nick who had a cat-who-ate-the-canary expression on his face. "Okay," she said. "I get it. That's what you whispered to the maître d' when we walked in."

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about."

"Come clean, Nick. You put him up to asking me for ID."

"If this was really your twenty-first birthday, they would have done it on their own. You don't look much older than Sarah."

She wasn't sure she liked that. "Thanks, I think," she said ruefully. But his attention to the small detail warmed her heart.

The waiter returned and placed their drinks in front of them, then slipped away while they leisurely looked at the menu. Nick sipped his Scotch, then rested his forearms on the small circular table. "Why don't you date, Ab?"

Where had that question come from and did she really want to answer it? she wondered.

"How do you know I don't?" she asked evasively.

"Sarah gives me a regular update on the trials and tribulations of the Ridgeway sisters. She says you might as well be a nun."

"She's so boy-crazy." Abby laughed, shaking her head. "In her opinion, anything less than total preoccupation with the opposite sex means you must be convent bait. But I suppose I was the same way at her age."

"Sarah says you're making her wait to go out alone with a guy until she's sixteen," he said. "When did you start dating?"

"Sixteen. And then I couldn't go out alone. It had to be group activities." She toyed with the stem of her wineglass, turning it so that the pale liquid caught the candlelight. "At the time, I thought my parents were from the Dark Ages. Now I see their wisdom. But times have changed. Kids grow up much faster today. I worry so about Sarah, and I don't know if she'll listen to me. I wish my mom and dad were here."

“Two parents and a united front are definitely the way to go, especially when you’re raising a teenager.”

“Even when the two parents aren’t exactly united,” she said. If the accident hadn’t taken their lives, her parents might have stayed together. If they’d gotten the chance, it was possible they could have worked out their problems. Now Abby would never know. Mostly she’d learned to deal with the guilt of her part in the accident. But every once in a while it snuck up on her.

“What does that mean?” he asked, a puzzled frown creasing his forehead.

She shrugged. “Nothing. I love my sister. I want her to have all the advantages I didn’t. I’ll do my best to take care of her all by myself.”

“Like I said before—you’ve got me, pal. Dial M for Marchetti and I’m there.” He grinned. “I’ll help you keep Sarah in line. But you changed the subject. Why don’t you date?”

“No time.” She fiddled with the small cocktail napkin beneath her glass. “I had too much to do after Mom and Dad died.”

“You never went out?” The shock on his face was almost comical. “But you were only eighteen.”

“I tried a couple of times. But it didn’t work. Too complicated.” She looked out the window, searching for a way to change the subject. “I’d like to discuss this plan I have for the restaurant—”

“Hold it.” He held up one finger for silence. “Didn’t I explain tonight’s rules?” When she shook her head, he continued. “Then let me do it now. We are friends out for the evening to have fun. There will be no discussion of work. Period.” He sipped his drink. “Now, tell me how dating was complicated.”

She thought back, dredging up the memories. The problem with dredging was that you brought up a lot of stuff better left stuck in the muck. Like the pain. But she knew there was no point in putting Nick off. When he wanted something, he was like a dog who wouldn’t let go of his favorite bone.

She’d best get it over with. “First of all, I needed a free period of time that coincided with my date’s.”

“What else?”

“I had to find someone to watch Sarah and be able to afford to pay them.”

“Okay.” There was no emotion in his voice, but he was frowning thoughtfully as if this was a newsflash to him. “I have a feeling there’s more.”

“I was working, going to school and taking care of my sister. She demanded a lot of time back then. It was pretty traumatic, losing both parents at once.”

“I can only imagine.” He reached across the table and rested his hand over hers. Wrapping his strong fingers around her own, he brushed a delicate caress across her palm, then squeezed reassuringly.

She wanted to lose herself in the warmth of that tingle-evoking touch, but warned herself not to go there. He could tell himself from now till next Tuesday that they were buddies out on the town. But she couldn’t—wouldn’t—forget that he was head honcho of the corporation she worked for. And it wasn’t her job she worried about. Nick wouldn’t fire her unless she turned into a psycho-stalking embezzler, who couldn’t assistant-manage her way out of a paper bag. She worried that their relationship would change. Until she could spare the time, there was no point in investing energy in anything that even remotely smacked of fascination, flirtation or infatuation.

In spite of her fears, she couldn’t bring herself to move her hand away. This was one isolated night that teetered on the edge of magical. It was unlikely that she would ever do this again. What could it hurt to let him hold her hand?

“Sarah got hysterical if she lost sight of me,” she continued, relaxing a bit. “There just never seemed a perfect time to go out. The few guys who had the courage to ask me eventually got tired of waiting for me to line my ducks up in a perfect row long enough for a fast-food dinner and a movie.” She smiled brightly, hoping it camouflaged the pain. “Finally, they just gave up on me.”

Time had passed, but apparently not enough. The memory still hurt. The shock of losing her parents. The loneliness when her friends stopped calling because she never had time for them. Working at the restaurant. Waiting tables for dating couples, young people in love. Knowing it couldn't happen for her.

Abby had made up her mind to put romance on a back burner until Sarah was in college. That hadn't happened yet.

Her tingles grew tingles when Nick gently squeezed her fingers again. "The best things in life are worth waiting for, Ab. Those guys were young and stupid."

Either his touch, or her few sips of wine had made her far too warm. She eased her fingers out of his hold and folded her hands, resting them on the table. "Were you ever young and stupid, Nick?"

His dark, unreadable expression clicked on. "Isn't everyone?" he asked.

Answering a question with a question always piqued her curiosity. "I don't believe you ever made a mistake in your life."

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