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PLAIN JANE
AND THE PLAYBOY

MARIE FERRARELLA

VALENTINE'S FORTUNE

ALLISON LEIGH



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Allison Leigh

**Plain Jane and the Playboy /
Valentine's Fortune: Plain
Jane and the Playboy**

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Mistaken seduction? PR man Paul is rich, successful and drop-dead gorgeous. He can have any woman he wants. Except elusive Autumn Plain Jane and the Playboy Marie Ferrarella Being swept into the arms of a tall, dark, handsome stranger only happened in fairy tales. Yet the rugged Texan who suddenly appeared at Jane's side was real enough and so was the soul-scorching kiss they shared as the bells chimed on New Year's Eve. Only Jorge wasn't the happily-ever-after type. Or was he? Valentine's Fortune Allison Leigh On the run and pregnant, Bethany knew she had to forget the brave firefighter who had saved her life. Then Darr Fortune tracked her down. Ever since he'd rescued the unconscious stranger, he knew he had to see her again. And when a blizzard stranded them together, Darr knew he'd risk it all for the enigmatic mother-to-be... Taking Autumn's plain sister Gwen out as a favour was supposed to be his ticket in. And Gwen is fun and smart and interesting; but Paul never planned on waking up with her! Autumn is exactly the kind of girl to fit in with Paul's parties-and-paparazzi lifestyle and Gwen is her total opposite So why is the sexy playboy so ready to dive back into bed with Gwen at the first chance he can get? Could he have set his sights on the wrong sister?

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PLAIN JANE AND THE PLAYBOY

“I’d like to kiss you at midnight. if that’s all right with you.”

He was actually asking if it was all right to kiss her on New Year’s Eve?

Someone in the crowd began the traditional countdown...

“Ten, nine, eight –”

“And you are?” Jorge asked.

“Seven, six, five –”

“Jane Gilliam.”

“Four, three –”

Was it his imagination, or was there a new spark in her eyes? She was definitely arousing him.

“Two –”

He drew her into his arms.

“You’re not really going to kiss me, are you?” Dream or not, it was still hard to believe. And yet she *so* wanted to believe.

“One!”

His lips covered hers as cries of “Happy New Year!” echoed through the crowded room.

Jane didn’t hear a single sound other than the pounding of her heart.

VALENTINE'S FORTUNE

“You always seem to be rescuing me.”

His arm around her seemed to tighten fractionally. “I can think of worse things.”

Her heart was climbing towards her throat. Her gloved hands slid over his, but she didn't know if that was to push his away or to keep him from pulling away. “Darr – ”

His head lowered. His jaw grazed her temple. “Just answer a question for me.”

She turned her head, looking up at him, and felt everything inside her grind to a breathless halt. “What?”

“The night of the fire, you said there was no one for us to call for you. No husband. No boyfriend. Was that the truth?”

“Yes.” That, at least, was the bald, naked truth.

“Good,” he muttered and pressed his mouth to hers.

Plain Jane and the Playboy

by

Marie Ferrarella
Valentine's Fortune

by

Allison Leigh



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Acknowledgements

Special thanks and acknowledgement are given to Allison Leigh for her contributions to the FORTUNES OF TEXAS: RETURN TO RED ROCK mini-series.

Plain Jane and the Playboy

By

Marie Ferrarella

Marie Ferrarella has written over one hundred and fifty novels, some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website at www.marieferrarella.com.
To Margaret Watson, for reams of e-mail and priceless support. Thank you.

Chapter One

Red, the extremely popular restaurant located in Red Rock, Texas, and the realization of a dream by José and Maria Mendoza, had closed its doors to the public this holiday evening.

But it was far from empty. The premises had been rented out to Emmett Jamison who, along with his wife, Linda, both former FBI agents, oversaw the Fortune Foundation, a philanthropic organization now in its fourth year. The guests at the New Year's Eve party included key personnel at the foundation, as well as every single member of the Fortune family who could walk or crawl within a fifty-mile radius.

Included, too, were a large number of friends, not the least of whom were more than several members of the Mendoza family. There were so many people packed inside the converted former hacienda—said to have once belonged to distant relatives of Santa Ana—that guests were spilling out onto the inner courtyard, despite the cold temperature. The press of bodies generated its own heat.

Good cheer abounded, mixing with the occasional strains of festive music, some of it coming from the old-fashioned jukebox, some of it from the five-piece band that Maria had hired at her son, Jorge's behest. Christmas carols meshed with both Mexican and country music. It was a veritable potpourri of everything that Texas stood for.

Almost everyone seemed to be having a good time, if noise could be considered a barometer of fun. The only true difficulty was in maneuvering through the throng, and in locating people the crowd had swallowed up.

So when Jack Fortune all but walked into his brother-in-law as Jorge finished placing a fruity, mixed drink on a comely young woman's table, he took advantage of the situation.

Hooking his arm around his brother-in-law's neck, Jack said playfully, "Hey, there's a vicious rumor making the rounds that Jorge Mendoza is actually here without a date." Hearing Jack's voice, Jorge relaxed, lowering the tray he was about to use as a weapon. "I've been defending your reputation," Jack continued, releasing his hold on Jorge, "saying that it just wasn't possible, this being New Year's Eve and all."

"I'm afraid that you've been wasting your breath, Jack," Jorge said, turning around to face the man who made his sister Gloria's world spin on its axis. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gloria making her way toward them. "The rumor's true. I didn't bring anyone to the party."

There was a very good reason for that, but Jorge kept it to himself. The current lady in his life, Edie, was hinting broadly about their relationship. She wanted an honest-to-gosh commitment from him, even though they'd only been seeing each other for about a month. And while it had been a very enjoyable month, with several memorable moments, none of it was earthshaking enough to prompt him to make the relationship permanent.

He felt sure that neglecting to invite her to share New Year's Eve would send her a message about his intentions. So he'd opted to go it alone tonight, thereby dodging a very real bullet with his name on it.

"Is it terminal?" Jack asked.

Confused, wondering if he'd misheard, Jorge leaned forward. "Is what terminal?"

"Your illness," Jack answered. "You're sick, right? That's got to be the reason you didn't bring anyone. I've never known you to be without female companionship for more than, what? Fifteen minutes at a time?" Jorge went through women the way his father, José, went through clean undershirts in a hot kitchen. "Legend has it you tried to pick up a candy striper in the nursery the day you were born."

Jorge laughed, shaking his dark head, his deep brown eyes crinkling. "I'm not sick, Jack. I thought I'd just help Mom and Dad out tonight. You know, wait on tables, tend bar, mix drinks—"

“Flirt with every woman under the age of a hundred,” Gloria interjected, completing her older brother’s sentence as she came up to join him and her husband. She hooked her arm through Jack’s, but her attention was clearly on Jorge.

“Right.” Jorge saw no reason to deny that charge. He believed in enjoying himself whenever he could. And flirting was his inalienable right. Flashing his thousand-watt smile, he repeated, “But I’m only here to help out. Besides,” he confided, “if I brought someone with me to this little fiesta, Mom would immediately think it was serious. You know what she’s like.” In her time Maria Mendoza had been on each of his now-married sisters’ cases. “She’d be writing out wedding invitations right after the stroke of midnight.” He considered that, then amended, “Maybe even before.”

“Mom just wants you to be happy, big brother,” Christina chimed in, coming in at the tail end of the conversation, her fingers firmly laced through her husband Derek’s. It took a little maneuvering to join the threesome.

Jorge gave Christina a lecherous wink. “Mom and I have a *very* different definition of happiness.”

“I’ll say,” Sierra agreed sarcastically, as she and her husband, Alex, came up to join the other two couples and Jorge in the impromptu family meeting. “Mom wants to see you married with a family and you just want to go from woman to woman, gathering honey like a drunken bee going from flower to flower.”

Jorge rolled his eyes. “A *happy* drunken bee,” he emphasized.

Gloria rolled her eyes. There was no changing a leopard’s spots and it seemed that there was no changing Jorge. He was going to be a playboy until the day he died.

“You’re hopeless,” she told him with a sigh.

Again, he saw no reason to deny the truth. He was what he was—a man who loved women. And from where he stood, there were so many women out there to love.

“Exactly,” Jorge responded, the same killer, boyish grin that had made many women weak in the knees gracing his lips. He leaned into Gloria, as if to impart something confidential. “I’d give up trying to change me if I were you. Now go dance with your husband, Glory,” he urged, then turned to his two other sisters. “You, too, Sierra, Christina. Don’t harass the help. I have drinks to make and pretty women to wait on,” Jorge told them just before he turned away and faded into the crowd as he headed back to the bar.

Gloria shook her head. A sigh escaped her lips. “There goes one unhappy man.”

Jack took Gloria by the hand, deciding that his brother-in-law had a good idea. He pressed his hand against the small of her back and slowly began to sway in time to the music. “Oh, I don’t know. He didn’t seem all that unhappy to me.”

Men could be so dense, Gloria thought, seeing only what was on the surface and nothing more. “Ever hear of the expression, laughing on the outside, crying on the inside?”

This was not an argument he was about to win, Jack thought, and he was far too shrewd a businessman to continue fighting a doomed battle. Especially not on New Year’s Eve.

“You’re absolutely right,” he told Gloria solemnly. “Jorge’s a very unhappy man.”

Gloria knew sarcasm even when it was disguised as surrender, but she didn’t want to fight. She did, however, want some kind of solution. She wanted Jorge to be as happy as she was. She’d found marriage far preferable to the single life—as long as it was to the right person.

“Can you come up with someone for him?” Gloria asked suddenly as he swung her around in the little bit of space he’d staked out for them.

“Then I’d be the unhappy man,” Jack pointed out. Gloria looked at him, puzzled. “You know Jorge doesn’t like us interfering in his life.”

None of them liked people butting into their lives, but sometimes, it was just necessary. For their own good. “I just don’t like seeing him so alone, Jack.”

Jack glanced over his shoulder. Jorge was behind the bar again, mixing drinks and talking to a well-endowed young blonde who seemed to be hanging on his every word. And having a great deal of difficulty remaining in her dress.

“Trust me, Glory. Jorge is never alone for more than four minutes at a time. Five, tops.”

Gloria looked at her brother. She had an entirely different take on the scene. The woman was a bimbo. Happily-ever-after didn't happen with bimbos.

“Men,” Gloria huffed.

Jack smiled broadly in response. “Glad you noticed that.” His eyes gleamed as he looked at his wife. She was every bit as gorgeous, as sexy, as the day he'd fallen in love with her. “What do you say, right after midnight, we—” Jack leaned in and whispered the rest of his thought into her ear.

Gloria's eyes widened and then her lips curved in deep appreciation. Thoughts and concerns about Jorge and his lifestyle were temporarily placed on the back burner. The far back burner.

“You're on,” she told her husband.

Pleased by her response, Jack continued dancing with his wife.

Maria Mendoza paused and momentarily stopped worrying if there was enough food to keep this crowd well fed, and just took in the happy revelers. Moving back, she found herself, quite by accident, bumping into Patrick Fortune, the retired president of Fortune-Rockwell and father of five of the people here. More importantly, a good friend for several decades.

“Your son is making my daughter very happy,” she said to Patrick the moment he was within earshot. Patrick had been the one she'd turned to several years ago, enlisting his help to find a suitable husband for Gloria, her once very troubled daughter.

Maternal pleasure now radiated from every pore as Maria spoke to the tall, distinguished, redheaded man at her side.

Patrick silently lifted his glass of white wine in the general direction of his son and daughter-in-law. He was as pleased by the union as Maria was. It was nice to see Jack happy for a change.

“That did turn out rather well, didn't it?” he said proudly.

“And it was all your doing,” Maria reminded him, more than willing to give credit where it was due.

Ever modest, Patrick didn't quite see it that way. “All I did was call him home to help Gloria get her new jewelry business on its feet. Chemistry did the rest.”

“Chemistry,” Maria allowed with a slight nod of her head. “And a lot of lit candles and prayers to the Blessed Virgin,” she added with more enthusiasm. And then she sighed, thinking of her two sons. “But no amount of prayers seem to be working when it comes to Jorge—or Roberto for that matter.” Both represented two rather sore spots in her very large heart. “Roberto didn't even think enough of the family to come home for the holidays.” He lived in Denver now, so very far away. She'd called her firstborn twice, only to get an annoying answering machine both times.

And no return call.

Patrick knew how hurtful that could be. “The boy's busy, Maria,” he told her gently.

“Boy,” she echoed the term her friend had used. “He's my eldest. How can Roberto be a boy when he's forty years old?”

She knew better than that, Patrick thought. “Because, to us, no matter what their age, they will always be our children. Our boys and girls.” Finished with his wine, he set the glass down on an empty table. “Which is why you worry, Maria,” Patrick pointed out. Good humor highlighted his aristocratic features. “Stop worrying,” he advised. “Things will turn out all right in the end. You did a good job raising them. They're good people. All of them. Once in a while, it takes a little extra time for them to find their way,” he told her. “But they always do in the end.” He smiled encouragingly at her. “You just have to have faith.”

Maria sighed. He really believed that, she thought. “You truly are an amazing man.”

Taking Maria's hand in his, he gave it a gentle squeeze. "Don't worry," he repeated. "And if it makes you feel any better," he added, "I'll look around and see if there's anyone suitable to put in Jorge's path."

"Thank you, old friend," Maria replied with enthusiasm.

"Maria," a deep male voice called out just then, slicing through the noise. "*Ven aca*. I need you." The blend of Spanish and English had an urgency to it. Maria turned to see her husband, José, waving to her, beckoning her toward the kitchen. "We are running out of your special tacquitos."

"Coming, my love," she called back. Saying "thank you" one more time to Patrick, the petite woman burrowed her way through the crowd of people to reach her husband.

Patrick Fortune remained where he was, watching the object of his old friend's concern a moment longer.

The last thing that Jorge Mendoza resembled was a troubled, lonely young man, he thought. Even though he claimed to be working, Jorge, ensconced behind the bar now, appeared to be having the time of his life. He was moving from one young woman to another, seemingly taking orders for drinks and lingering to flirt, most likely mentally compiling yet another list of names and accompanying phone numbers. The young man was a modern-day Casanova, clearly enjoying both his freedom and the hunt.

Eventually though, Patrick was convinced that Maria Mendoza's wayward son would realize that "freedom" and the hunt were definitely not nearly as important as the love of a good woman—the *right* good woman. And he was a romantic, Patrick thought. He believed that there was someone for everyone. There certainly had been for him.

"Looks like the family's out in full force," Jack commented, coming up beside his father, Emmett Jamison at his side. Gloria was a few feet away, talking to Emmett's wife, Linda, about a necklace Linda wanted fashioned.

"Most of them," Patrick corrected. Although his sister Cynthia's children were here, Cynthia was conspicuously absent, despite the invitation to attend. It looked as if the estrangement between them was going to go on a little longer, he thought. "Look, I wanted to run something by you, Emmett."

"Business, Dad?" Jack asked. "I thought you were the one who finally said all work and no play—"

"This is about family," he explained to Jack, then turned back to Emmett. "Nothing worse than having your own son preach at you, especially when he's throwing your own words back at you," Patrick told Emmett. "I was hoping you might find positions at the Foundation for several of my brother William's kids. It might help bring the rest of the clan closer together."

Emmett nodded, always open to anything the older man had to say. "I'll see what I can do."

Patrick patted him on the shoulder. "Can't ask for anything more than that."

Patrick Fortune and Jorge's sisters were not the only ones observing the playboy's progress from woman to willing woman. Jorge was also an object of awe for Emmett's adopted son, Ricky, who was nursing a very serious case of envy. Envy that encompassed both the charming Jorge and his best friend, Josh Fredericks. Josh was a suave seventeen and had a steady girlfriend, Lindsey, on his arm, while he, Ricky, was a very unsure-of-himself fourteen.

It seemed as if everyone here had someone but him—and that woman sitting over in the corner by herself, he noted. Jorge seemed to have not just one but a harem of women. Every single one who came up to the bar left with a smitten smile on her face.

How did he *do* that?

Working up his courage, Ricky finally made his way over to the bar, and Jorge. But when he reached the bar, all he could do was silently observe. Jorge was a master at work.

It took Jorge a few minutes to notice the teenager. Wiping the counter down in front of him, Jorge flashed a grin as he shook his head.

“Sorry, Ricky, afraid all I can offer you is a soda pop or a Virgin Mary.” The boy looked at him a little uncertainly. “That’s a Bloody Mary without the alcohol,” Jorge explained, lowering his voice so as not to embarrass the boy.

Ricky shook his head. “Oh, no, no, I don’t want anything to drink,” he protested, stuttering a little. Tongue-tied, he got no further.

Jorge threw the damp towel behind the bar and leaned forward, creating an aura of privacy despite the crowd. The boy looked like he wanted to talk, but didn’t know how to start. Jorge felt sorry for him. “Then what is it I can do for you?”

Ricky felt more uncertain than ever, more awkward than he had in a very long time. But it was now or never. Clearing his throat nervously, he looked around to make sure that no one in the area was listening.

“I want to know how you do it,” he finally said.

But Jorge couldn’t hear him. “What?”

Ricky repeated himself, this time a little more audibly. “I want to know how you do it.”

Obviously hearing did not bring enlightenment with it. “Do what?”

This was going to be harder than he thought. Ricky licked his lower lip, which had suddenly grown even drier than his upper one had.

“How do you get all these ladies to flirt with you?” he blurted out. “I’ve been watching you work all night and there had to have been at least twenty of them.” Old and young, they all seemed to bloom in Jorge’s presence.

“Twenty-six,” Jorge corrected with a quick conspiratorial wink, then said simply, “They’re thirsty.”

“They’re not coming over to the bar for the drinks,” Ricky protested. He might not be a smooth operator, like Jorge, but he was bright enough to see that ordering a drink was just an excuse, not a reason. “They’re coming to talk to you.” He paused to work up his flagging courage. “How do I do that?” he wanted to know. “How do I get them to come to me?” And then he added more realistically, “Or, at least, get them not to run off when I come to them.”

Jorge laughed gently, taking care not to sound as if he was laughing at the boy. He’d never had that problem himself. Women had always come on to him, even before he discovered the fine art of flirtation. But he could feel sympathy for the boy who seemed so painfully shy. “They don’t run off from you, Ricky.”

Ricky knew the difference between truth and flattery. “Yes, they do. I asked a girl in my class to come with me tonight and she said she couldn’t. She said—” He paused for a second, working his way past the embarrassment. “She said her mother wouldn’t let her stay out that late.”

It was a plausible enough excuse, Jorge thought, although the girls he’d known at Ricky’s age had bent rules, ignored parental limitations and come shinning down trees growing next to their bedroom windows just to see him for a few stolen hours.

“How old are you again, Ricky?”

The boy unconsciously squared his rather thin shoulders before answering. “Fourteen.”

“Fourteen,” Jorge repeated thoughtfully. “Well, she was probably telling the truth, then.” He did his best to appear somber. “When my sisters were each fourteen, my father would have chained them in the stable to keep them from going out with a boy, much less staying out until midnight.”

That didn’t seem like a good enough excuse to assuage his ego. “But it’s New Year’s Eve. Besides, times have changed,” Ricky pointed out.

The boy had a lot to learn, Jorge thought. “Parents haven’t,” he assured the boy. “And, if you want some advice—”

Ricky’s eyes widened and all but gleamed. “Please,” he encouraged enthusiastically.

“First, you have to have confidence in yourself.” He saw the disappointed, skeptical look that entered the boy’s eyes. Expecting the secret of the ages, he was receiving an advice column platitude.

“You can do it,” Jorge continued. “No girl is going to want to go out with you if you act like you don’t want to be around yourself. Understand?”

A little of Ricky’s disappointment abated. “I think so.”

Jorge nodded. Since no one was approaching the bar at the moment, he decided to be more generous with his advice. “And this next point is the most important thing you’ll ever learn about dealing with a woman.”

“What?” Ricky asked breathlessly, Ponce DeLeon about to uncover the fountain of youth.

Jorge lowered his voice. “When talking to a girl, always make her feel as if she’s the prettiest girl in the room.”

Ricky swallowed and glanced over at Lizzie Fortune, the girl who made the very air back up in his lungs. Lizzie was a distant Fortune cousin, just in town for the holidays. His heart had melted the moment he laid eyes on her this evening.

He didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell with someone who looked like that. And he doubted that Jorge’s magic formula would have any effect on Lizzie.

“What if she already *is* the prettiest girl in the room?” he wanted to know.

“Then it’s even easier,” Jorge told him. “You can handle any girl. Just have confidence in yourself, Ricky, and the rest will be a piece of cake.”

Ricky was still more than a little uncertain. Just breathing was enough for someone who looked like Jorge. But for someone like him, it wasn’t that simple. “And this always works?”

“Always,” Jorge said confidently.

But he could see that Ricky still had his doubts. The boy definitely needed a demonstration, Jorge decided. “Tell you what,” he proposed. “You pick any girl in this room and I’ll have her eating out of my hand in no time.”

Ricky’s eyes widened far enough to fall out. “Any girl?”

“Any girl,” Jorge agreed. “Just make sure she’s not married. We don’t want to start any fights here in my parents’ restaurant.”

Ricky was perfectly amendable to that. “Okay,” he agreed, bobbing his head up and down. He was already scanning the crowded room for a candidate.

Ricky stopped looking when his line of vision returned to the woman he’d spotted earlier, sitting by herself at a table. There was a frown on her face as she regarded her half-empty glass and she was very obviously alone. It was a table for two and there was no indication that anyone had recently vacated the other chair.

There was even a book on the table in front of her. Was she reading? Whether she was or not, there seemed to be an air of melancholy about her, visible even at this distance.

“Her,” Ricky announced, pointing to the woman. “I pick her.”

Chapter Two

Rising to the challenge, Jorge attempted to focus in the general direction that Ricky indicated.

The woman was clearly the stereotypical wallflower. She was sitting at the corner table all by herself, twirling a lock of long curly brown hair around her finger, the festive lights shimmering off her shiny green dress.

“Hey, man, I don’t want to get arrested just to prove a point,” Jorge protested. When Ricky looked at him quizzically, Jorge added, “She looks like a kid.”

Ricky shook his head. “She’s not. I heard her talking to someone earlier. She works for some kids’ literacy foundation, tutoring them and sometimes holding fund-raisers to buy extra books. I think it’s called Red Rock ReadingWorks,” Ricky volunteered. He looked at Jorge expectantly. “She’s gotta be at least twenty.”

Jorge grinned at the boy’s tone. He was thirty-eight himself, but he doubted Ricky knew that. “Then she’s ancient, huh?”

“Hey, I’m fourteen. Everybody’s ancient to me.” Feeling as if he’d just put one foot in his mouth, Ricky quickly added, “Except you, of course.”

Jorge’s grin widened. “Nice save,” he commented.

Ricky glanced back toward the girl at the table before looking up at his hero again. Jorge hadn’t made a move yet.

“Backing down?” he wanted to know.

Nothing he liked better than a challenge, although, given his experience, the young woman at the table didn’t look as if she’d put up much resistance.

“Not a chance,” Jorge told him. He looked around and then saw one of the restaurant’s employees at the far end of the bar. Perfect. “Hey, Angel,” he called over the din. The man looked in his direction and raised a brow. “Mind taking over for me for a few minutes? I haven’t had a break all night.”

Jorge was the owners’ son and what he wanted, he would have gotten without question even if he wasn’t so affable. Angel nodded and came around to the other side of the bar.

“No problem.”

Untying the half black apron secured around his slim waist, Jorge surrendered it to Angel. He felt invigorated. He was back in hunting mode.

Jane Gilliam had really hoped that coming to the party tonight would help her shake off the dark mood that had all but enshrouded her these last few days. Three days to be exact.

Three days since Eddie Gibbs had unceremoniously, and without prior warning, dumped her.

She probably wouldn’t have even known she was being dumped, at least not for a few more days, if it wasn’t for New Year’s Eve. She’d impulsively asked the man she’d been seeing for the last six months to this New Year’s Eve extravaganza that her close friend, Isabella Mendoza, had invited her to.

Eddie had listened to her impatiently and then he’d turned her down. She hadn’t been prepared for that and when she’d asked him why, Eddie had bluntly told her that he would be spending New Year’s Eve with someone else.

With his new girlfriend.

Jane could feel the sting of tears starting again and she passed her hand over her eyes, wiping them away. Up until that point, she’d thought that *she* was Eddie’s girlfriend. But somewhere along the line in the last month, a month in which Eddie had been making himself increasingly scarce, he had decided that he “could do better”—his very words, each tipped in heart-piercing titanium—and found himself someone else.

The only trouble with that was that he’d forgotten to tell *her*.

Jane let out a long, shaky breath. She supposed she should have seen it coming. After all, it wasn't as if she was a knockout. And cute guys like Eddie Gibbs didn't stay with mousy girls like her, at least not for long.

Women, Jane silently corrected herself. *Women*. She was twenty-five years old. At twenty-five, you weren't a girl anymore; you were a woman.

A very lonely woman, Jane thought glumly, looking into the bottom of her glass. The drink had long since become watered down, the ice cubes melting into what had once been a fruity piña colada. It had turned the liquid into an exceedingly pale shade of yellow.

She needed to get out of here, she told herself. At this point, she didn't know what she could have been thinking, agreeing to come here with Isabella. Seeing all these couples, whispering into each other's ear, clearly enjoying themselves, was just making her feel more hopeless.

More alone.

Besides, it was getting pretty close to midnight, when the New Year was ushered in with heartfelt, soulful, passionate kisses. Seeing all these couples wrapped in each other's arms, kissing in the New Year was much more than she was going to be able to stand.

Up until three days ago, she thought she'd be kissing Eddie at the stroke of midnight. Now, she thought dejectedly, she'd probably be the only one here who had no one to turn to as the glittering silver ball on the wide-screen, flat-panel television reached the bottom of the pole and sent off an array of wild, blinding sparklers to greet the incoming year.

She didn't need to see that.

Didn't need to feel like a loser.

Again.

Jane glanced at her watch. Less than ten minutes left before midnight. That didn't give her much time to make her escape.

As if anyone would notice her leaving, she thought mockingly. She'd come here with Isabella, but there had to be a taxicab out there somewhere, didn't there? This was a big night for inebriated people. Cab drivers made their money on nights like New Year's Eve.

"Freshen that up for you?" asked a deep, melodic voice directly above her.

Jane realized that the voice—and the question—belonged to one of the waiters. He was obviously asking about the drink she'd been pretending to nurse for the last two hours. She'd already set the glass aside. The colorful little umbrella was drooping badly, mirroring the way she felt inside.

"No," she replied politely, "I was just..."

The rest of her thought vanished, as did, just for a moment, her entire thinking process. All because she'd made the mistake of looking up at the owner of the low, rumbling, sexy voice.

The man who had asked the question was, in a word, beautiful. Not just handsome—although he was quite possibly the handsomest man, up close or on the movie screen, that she had ever seen in her life—but actually teeth-jarringly heart-stoppingly beautiful.

He had soulful brown eyes that she could have gotten lost in for at least the next ten years, and straight black hair that was just a little on the long side. Tall, lean, muscular, with jeans that emphasized his slender hips—and every move he made—whoever this man was, he made her think of a young lion.

On the other hand, his smile made her think of nothing at all, because just seeing it effectively turned her very intelligent and active brain to the consistency of last week's mush.

Struggling to collect herself and retrieve whatever might still be left of her composure, Jane did her best not to sound as if she was currently understudying the part of the head idiot of a very large village.

"Excuse me?"

"Your drink," Jorge prodded, nodding at the glass next to her elbow on the table. "May I freshen it up for you?" Lifting it to his nose, he took a sniff. "Piña colada, right?" he guessed. And then,

when she said nothing at all, he smiled again, completing the transformation of the organ that was in her chest from a functioning heart to a puddle of red liquid. “My parents have me tending the bar,” he explained, “and making sure that lovely ladies like you don’t have to wait too long to have their requests granted.”

Lovely ladies. How could someone so beautiful be so blind? she wondered. She wasn’t lovely, she was plain and she knew it.

The ball on the TV panel on the back wall looked as if it was going to begin its descent at any moment.

Get out of here, her survival streak ordered urgently.

Coming to, Jane shook her head. “No, that’s all right,” she told him as he reached for her glass. “I was just about to leave anyway.”

He looked at her in surprise. “Leave? Before midnight?” He made it sound as if she were doing something revolutionary.

Jane lifted her shoulders in a vague shrug. The left strap of her dress slipped off, sliding down her upper arm.

Jorge, his eyes on hers, reached out and very slowly slid the strap back into place.

Jane felt as if her skin had just caught on fire. She was rather surprised that she didn’t actually spontaneously combust. The puddle in the middle of her chest became a heart again and instantly went into triple time, hammering so hard she was having trouble just catching her breath.

“Doesn’t seem to be much point in staying,” she heard herself saying, although she wasn’t conscious of forming the words.

“And why is that?” he asked gently.

Just the sound of his voice made her feel warm all over. It took her a moment to realize that he’d asked her a question and another moment to focus on the words, making sense out of them.

“People always kiss someone at the stroke of midnight on New Year’s Eve...”

Not sure how to end this sentence without sounding like a loser, Jane just let her voice trail off, hoping he’d silently fill in the rest of it himself. And have the decency to leave.

“And you have no one to kiss?” Jorge asked incredulously. His eyes swept over her. She could almost feel them. “A pretty lady like you?”

Jane could feel heat traveling up her cheeks and down her throat until all of her felt as if it were glowing pink.

“I just broke up with someone,” she finally told him.

Breaking up sounded a great deal better than saying she’d just been dumped, Jane thought. But even so, the lie weighed heavily on her tongue. She didn’t like lies, no matter what the reason, and here she was, hiding behind one so that she didn’t come across like the ultimate loser to a man she didn’t even know.

“His loss.”

The man said it with such sincerity she found herself believing him, even though there was no way he could have meant that. After all, they were strangers to one another. For all he knew, she was a shrew.

Jane picked up her purse, holding it to her chest. “Well, I doubt if he thinks so. He’s already found someone else.”

What made her say that? a little voice in her head demanded. Why was she always so hell-bent on the truth, on making herself seem like she wasn’t worthy of a committed relationship? The kids she worked with at the foundation loved her. Their parents were all grateful to her, praising her for making such a difference in the children’s lives. And she got along rather well with the people she worked with at ReadingWorks, as long as the parameters remained in place—she was a colleague. A professional. Her personal life—such as it was—stayed private.

“Then he’s a fool,” Jorge told her quietly. “And you’re better off without him.”

As he spoke, Jorge studied the woman before him. It was one of his favorite pastimes. Every woman, he'd come to discover at a very early age, had something that was attractive about her. Something special, no matter how small.

This one, he thought, was actually pretty, in a plain sort of way. And by that, he meant that she was pretty without having to resort to artfully applied makeup, like so many of the other women who were here tonight. She was slender, petite—he doubted if she could have been more than about five two—and she had beautiful hair held in place with two ornamental hairclips. They allowed her golden brown curls to cascade down her back like a waterfall.

But what really captivated him was her innocence. There was a certain sweetness to her, a vulnerability that he now detected in her eyes. He sincerely doubted that she was aware of it.

But he was.

Jane stood up. It was almost midnight and she really didn't want to feel like the odd woman out, not tonight. It would hurt too much.

But as she rose to her feet, the tall, beautiful young man with the sexy, velvet voice didn't retreat, didn't even take a step back. He remained exactly where he was, leaving less than a ribbon's worth of space between them.

So little space that she could actually feel the heat of his body radiating out to hers. Or was that just her body getting ready to burst into flame?

She swallowed. Why was he standing in her way? Was he laughing at her?

But he didn't seem as if he was laughing. His smile was too gentle, too kind.

Jane took a breath. "I really need to leave," she told him.

He slowly ran the back of his hand along her bare arm. "Would you stay if there was someone to kiss at the stroke of midnight?"

Goose bumps were forming on her arm at a fantastic rate. Her throat felt suddenly very, very dry.

Idiot, he's not saying what you think he's saying. He's just asking a question. Don't set yourself up to be a pathetic loser. Again.

But despite her stern, silent warning, Jane heard herself answering, "Yes." And then, to save face, she tried to make light of the situation. "Are you planning on dragging someone over here to kiss me?"

Eyes the color of warm chocolate on a cold winter morning held hers prisoner.

"No," he told her quietly.

Okay, now she really did feel like an idiot. Served her right for trying to flirt, or whatever she'd just done that might have passed for flirting. She wasn't any good at that—never had been.

Doing her best to salvage what was left of her badly damaged ego, Jane forced a smile to her lips. But all she could manage was barely half of one.

"Well, then," she murmured, attempting to get past him. "I'd better get going."

"No," Jorge repeated. "I'm not going to drag anyone over here—I'd like to be the one to kiss you at midnight." And then he looked at her with just the right touch of shyness. "If that's all right with you."

He was actually asking if it was all right to kiss her on New Year's Eve?

Was this some kind of a joke? Men like—what was his name, anyway? Men like him didn't ask permission to kiss a woman, they spent half their time fighting off women who were trying to kiss them.

Jane took another deep breath and held it for a moment, wondering whether she was dreaming. What other explanation could there be? How in heaven's name didn't he already have a girlfriend in tow on this occasion? She would have been willing to bet, until this man with the magnetic smile had approached her, that she was quite probably the only unattached adult here.

"What's your name?" Jane finally asked him.

“Jorge,” he replied. “Jorge Mendoza.”

Mendoza.

It was certainly a common enough name. Even so, Jane couldn’t help wondering if Jorge was somehow related to Isabella and if her friend had sent him here on an errand of mercy.

A mercy kissing.

Out of the corner of her eye, she took note of the TV screen. The glittering Times Square ball was definitely beginning to move downward now. Someone in the crowd raised his voice and began the traditional countdown, ticking off the seconds that were still left in this year.

“Ten, nine, eight—”

When the woman made no effort to identify herself, Jorge coaxed her a little. “And you are?”

Several voices joined in, more swelling their numbers with each passing second. “Seven, six, five—”

She wasn’t a bold person by nature, but if this was a dream, then there was no reason to worry about consequences. Nothing to be embarrassed about in the future.

“Jane. Jane Gilliam,” she told him. “Are you related to Isabella?”

“Four, three—”

“Cousin,” he told her. Was it his imagination, or was there a new spark in her eyes? He found his interest being piqued and discovered that she was definitely arousing him. “Distant,” he added for good measure.

“Two—”

Without any further discussion, his eyes on hers, Jorge drew Jane into his arms. He could feel her breathing become audible and found something very sweet about the almost hesitant anticipation he saw in her eyes.

“You’re not really going to kiss me, are you?” Dream or not, it was still hard for her to believe. And yet, she *so* wanted to believe.

“One!”

His lips covered hers as cries of “Happy New Year!” echoed throughout the crowded room, shouted from the announcer on the TV program as well as by the various people scattered about whose lips were not otherwise occupied.

But Jane didn’t hear a single sound, other than the pounding of her heart.

Chapter Three

She'd died.

There was no other explanation for the way she felt, Jane thought. She must have died and zoomed straight up to heaven. And not even the regular heaven, but some higher plane reserved for the incredibly saintly, incredibly fortunate. Because there was nothing remotely earthly about the feelings she was experiencing right at this moment.

To the casual observer, Jane was certain that it looked as if like nothing more than a traditional New Year's Eve kiss was being shared by two people at the stroke of midnight.

A lot the casual observer knew.

There were fireworks exploding in her veins, not to mention that her head was spinning wildly, threatening to throw her completely off balance and utterly out of control. Granted, her experience when it came to men and kissing was rather sadly limited, but even she knew that this was something unusual, something really and deliciously different. She'd never been on the verge of a complete meltdown before.

Jorge tasted incredibly sweet and he smelled even better. Everything about him aroused her.

Bold was a word that had nothing to do with her personality, outside of those times when she attempted to secure more funding for her nonprofit organization. But she felt bold now. Bold enough to press her enflamed body against Jorge's in an attempt to absorb every nuance, every fragment of this incredible experience that had taken her completely by surprise and swept her not just off her feet but off to another dimension.

Another universe.

Like a woman trapped in a mind-boggling, sensuous trance, Jane wove her arms around Jorge's neck, praying the dream she was having would never end. Praying that the moment she was in would stretch out until eternity. She'd never felt so alive, so wonderful before. And probably never would again.

He was rattled.

Few things ever rattled Jorge Mendoza. He was thirty-eight and eons away from being a boy, even though he still possessed not only a boyish grin, but boyish charm. Even in his teens, he'd been more man than boy, with a man's take on things. And heaven knew he'd kissed and been with more than twice his share of women.

Life had been good to him that way, he'd often thought, blessing him not just with exceptional looks but, more importantly, with a magnetic charm. Charm that now aided him in his professional endeavors—currently he was gathering financial backing for a trainer who raised the finest quarter horses in Texas—as well as in the seduction of willing women.

But none of that was on his mind right now. Instead, he felt complete and total, unabashed surprise. He hadn't thought that he could *ever* feel like this. Like there were rockets going off in his veins.

That kind of feeling hadn't happened to him since the first time he'd slept with a woman.

But this pretty, intelligent but obviously inexperienced young woman had just managed to do what no other woman had in the last twenty-four years. She'd jarred him down to his very foundations and made him feel like a boy on the brink of manhood again.

It was with incredible effort that Jorge managed to finally, albeit reluctantly, draw his lips away from Jane's.

Taking in a deep, steadying breath, he looked down at the young woman the way one might look at a soul-shaking revelation, attempting to analyze it. Very slowly, surprise gave way to abject pleasure.

"Happy New Year," he whispered softly against her hair.

“Right.” She was rather stunned that she could actually talk rather than simply gasp. “Happy New Year,” she repeated, each syllable accompanied by the mad beating of her heart. Hands down, this certainly was the best New Year’s Eve moment she’d ever experienced.

His dark eyes danced, smiling directly into her soul. “So,” he asked her, “what are you doing for the rest of the year?”

“Recovering.”

The honest admission had just slipped out before Jane could think to stop it. But being coy was not something she had any practice at, or, truthfully, any desire to become proficient in. There’d always been something off-putting to her about women who felt the need to play games with the men in their lives.

By the same token, though, she’d discovered that since she didn’t play games, it wasn’t very long before she had no one to even contemplate playing games with. The few men who had passed through her life would come on strong and when they didn’t get what they were after, they would just phase her out.

She refused to believe that all men were only after one thing—but so far, she had very little proof to the contrary. None, actually.

Jorge laughed at her response, amused that she was so honest. He was used to women who liked to be mysterious, to exercise their feminine wiles on him. In reality, a great many of them were about as shallow as saucers—not that he required much depth in his partner of the moment. It made things far less complicated that way.

But this one was different.

This one didn’t seem at all versed in the flirtatious give-and-take that went on between the male and female of the species. Rather than being as devious as a cat, she came across more like Bambi, with all of the famous fawn’s innocence.

A trace of guilt began to nibble away at him. Jorge was beginning to regret his bet with Ricky. He hadn’t counted on the fact that there might very well be feelings involved. And there were. He could see it in Jane’s luminous eyes.

He also hadn’t counted on the fact that he would be attracted to his target. Not just physically, but in a way that he couldn’t even quite put into words.

Jorge certainly couldn’t pin this feeling on alcohol consumption because he hadn’t really consumed any. Just one quick toast of white wine with his parents, sisters and their spouses before the Fortune Foundation party had officially gotten under way. But since then, he hadn’t had anything stronger to drink than a ginger ale.

No, Jorge couldn’t blame his reaction to Jane on anything other than the petite woman herself.

He wasn’t sure how he felt about that, so, for the time being, he decided not to think about it.

“You’re laughing at me,” Jane protested self-consciously, the aura of her out-of-body experience beginning to fade just a little.

The faint pink color he witnessed creeping up her rather seductive high cheekbones was oddly arousing, Jorge mused. With the rest of the evening stretching out before him, he decided he definitely wanted to get to know this woman better and discover what made her so different from the legions of other women he’d known—other than her obvious lack of sophistication and her innocent manner.

“I’m not laughing at you,” Jorge told her gently. “I’m laughing with you.”

Now even she knew that was a line. Or was he just poking fun at her? “You might not have noticed,” she pointed out quietly, “but I’m not laughing.”

Jorge didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he slipped his hand behind her head, cupping it.

For a moment, she thought he was going to kiss her again and she could have sworn that the wattage at Red went down several notches as the very room grew dark. She struggled to hang on to her consciousness.

“Sure you are,” Jorge told her. “I can see it in your eyes.”

The very remark coaxed a smile to her lips, whether out of nervousness or just because being so near to this dynamic, gorgeous man made her want to smile all over, she really didn't know. For the moment, she didn't care, either. What mattered was the proximity. She wanted to remain this close to Jorge for as long as humanly possible without having to resort to handcuffs.

God, she was babbling and her lips weren't even moving.

Things like this didn't happen to people like her, she thought again. And while it *was* happening, she was just going to go with it and enjoy it.

Because she knew it was never, ever going to happen again.

"If you say so," Jane answered, her voice deliberately low to keep it from cracking.

Did she have any idea how sexy she sounded, Jorge wondered.

He had a feeling that she didn't, that Jane Gilliam had probably gone through her whole life seriously underestimating herself. It didn't take a student of women to pick up on that. He could tell by her body language and by the very way she wore her clothes. She dressed nicely, but there was no sign that there had been any extra fussing, any extra care taken. The same applied to her makeup.

He caught himself wondering about her. Really wondering about her as a person, not a conquest.

Leaning his head against Jane's, he looked into her eyes, then he shifted so that his lips were near her ear. "Who are you, Jane Gilliam?" he asked her quietly.

His breath sent warm shivers up and down her spine, and she was afraid he'd see how very inexperienced she was—he'd probably already guessed that anyway.

Why had he kissed her, she wondered again. A man like this wouldn't have been alone any night of the year, especially not one that was considered to be the most important. She curbed the urge to ask, sensing that the answer might send her plummeting to the ground.

Jane felt as if she were trapped inside some kind of bubble—and bubbles always burst. There was no getting away from that. But not just yet.

Not just now.

Jane ran the tip of her tongue along her bottom lip. What was he asking her?

"Do you mean what do I do for a living?"

"That's as good a start as any," he acknowledged, aware that any one of a number of women he knew would have taken the question and given him some sort of existential, philosophical answer. Jane, apparently, was grounded.

His mother, he realized, would love her.

Jorge quickly glanced around, hoping that Maria Mendoza wasn't standing somewhere close by, taking all this in. She'd misunderstand immediately, especially since Jane was not like any of the other women he kept company with.

"I work for Red Rock ReadingWorks," Jane told him, tripping over the alliteration for the first time since she'd joined the organization. If she wasn't careful, any second she was going to start sounding like a chatty fool. "That's a nonprofit organization that—"

Jorge held up his hand to stop her before she launched into a lengthy description of ReadingWorks and all the services that it offered.

"I'm familiar with ReadingWorks," he told her.

She clamped her jaw shut to keep it from dropping in surprise. "You are?" The next moment, Jane realized her oversight. "Of course you are. You said that Isabella was your cousin." And the pretty thirty-year-old dropped by the storefront building where ReadingWorks was housed often enough. Isabella probably had mentioned the place to him once or twice.

Jane felt self-conscious. She always did when attention was focused on her. She made an attempt to deflect it back to him. Besides, she really did want to find out a few things about this man who had set her on fire.

"What do you do?"

He glanced at the glass on the table, the one he'd initially offered to fill. "Well, tonight, I'm a bartender."

She sincerely doubted that bartending was Jorge's sole occupation. He looked far too vital, far too intelligent to be satisfied with mixing drinks and wiping down a counter.

"And other nights?" she prompted. "And days?" Jane added quickly when she realized what her initially innocent question had to sound like to him.

Broad shoulders shrugged casually beneath his royal blue shirt. His easygoing grin nonetheless created a knot in the pit of her stomach.

"A little of this, a little of that." He saw the curiosity in her eyes. She really wanted to know, he thought. Most women just wanted to see the size of his billfold—among other things. "I'm an entrepreneur," he added.

"That sounds interesting. Tell me about it."

She actually sounded genuinely interested, he thought. Before he knew it, he began talking about his latest venture.

Oh man, what an operator Jorge was, Ricky Jamison thought, standing over in a corner and watching his idol's every move. Because he was so far away and there was so much noise, Ricky couldn't hear what was being said, but he could certainly see what was going on. Within the space of a few minutes—and, from the looks of it, one hell of a kiss—Jorge had brought the bookish woman to a melting point.

Ricky sighed, shaking his head. His friend Josh and Josh's girlfriend, Lindsey, had their heads together over in the corner, sharing something private. Ricky felt a pang as he wished he had that kind of ability, to make girls fall for him.

When he was older, Ricky thought wistfully, he wanted to be exactly like Jorge Mendoza. The man was a god in his eyes.

Patrick Fortune rang in this New Year's the very same way he rang in all the others since he'd met his bride: by kissing Lacey.

His arm rested comfortably around his still-beautiful wife's shoulders as he surveyed the very crowded banquet hall. He recognized almost all the faces here, and that was his own doing—his and Maria Mendoza's. It wasn't every New Year's Eve that he managed to gather together so many members of his family under one roof. Sadly, not all of his five children and their spouses could make it. But on the bright side, his brother William and William's five children were all here, as well as Cynthia's children.

Bolder than sunlight, Cynthia had always marched to a different drummer and made her own rules, usually as she went along. Still, he wished she'd taken him up on the invitation and come. He wanted *all* his siblings here, all his nieces and nephews as well as his own children. Not because he had any special announcement to make, but just because he felt the need for their presence.

Family was everything.

The older he became, the more inclined Patrick felt to forget any past grievances that might have once caused him to turn his back on one member of the family or another. Life was too short—and it was getting shorter all the time. He'd thought that his cousin Ryan would live forever and Ryan had been dead now for four years. It seemed impossible, and yet it was true.

He still missed the man a great deal.

The swish of Lacey's dress as she turned toward him caught his attention.

"A penny for your thoughts," she said, leaning in so that he could hear her. He'd looked entirely too pensive for the last few minutes and she wondered if there was anything wrong.

Patrick laughed at the way she'd asked her question. "And that," he declared, his mouth curving in amusement, "is how our fortune continues to remain intact. Your frugality."

"Very funny." She threaded her arm through his as she looked up at him. He was still an exceptionally handsome man, she caught herself thinking. "Where are you right now?"

Patrick patted her arm. "Right here beside you, my love." He sighed. "Just missing Ryan, that's all. He used to love family gatherings like this."

Ryan Fortune had been a good man who always saw the best in people. Lacey liked to think that Patrick was the same way. She tightened her hold on his arm. "He wouldn't want you to be sad, Patrick."

Lacey was right. As always. He supposed that what had triggered his thoughts was seeing Lily tonight—Ryan's widow. Seeing her made him expect to see Ryan somewhere in her immediate vicinity. If only.

"No, you're right, he wouldn't. Just give me a minute to get my party face back in place," he teased.

Just then, someone bumped into him, hard. If there had been any more space between him and Lacey, he might have actually fallen into her, bringing her down with him. Patrick turned to look at the man who had stumbled into him.

"Sorry," the other man apologized. "I think I've had just a little too much to drink. I'm going to get some air," he said by way of an excuse.

"Good idea," Patrick agreed, addressing the words to the back of the man's head. He stared after him for a second. There was something vaguely familiar about the man, but most likely, it could have just been his imagination. He shrugged his shoulders and returned to the party.

The man kept going, weaving his way in and out of the crowd, working his way to the front door. Once he was confident he was out of Patrick's sight, his meandering gait ceased.

One down, he thought, a self-satisfied smirk playing along his thin lips.

Chapter Four

Jane still couldn't quite believe how this evening had turned out. If it wasn't such a cliché, she would have actually pinched herself to see if she was dreaming.

Jorge had not left her side since he came to ask her about refilling her drink and then remained to utterly rock her world.

She finally understood what that phrase meant. This had to be what Californians experienced when a 7.5 earthquake hit. Even though it was after one o'clock and the kiss that had all but turned her brain to mush, was an hour in the past, the ground beneath her feet still felt as if it were moving. Her insides were still in a state of flux.

But Jorge hadn't moved on.

After he'd kissed her, all but burning off her lips, he'd stayed with her. Talked with her.

And made her feel beautiful.

Even when the man behind the bar had finally managed to get his attention and signaled to him in an obvious entreaty to return to his post, rather than seizing the excuse and leaving her, Jorge had laced his fingers through hers and had taken her along with him when he went to talk to the bartender.

"Hey, man, I need you to take over now," Angel said to him, stripping off the black half apron he'd donned earlier.

Jorge made no effort to take the apron from him. Instead, he said, "Ask Carlos to take over," mentioning the name of one of the waiters working this evening. "He owes me a favor."

Angel sighed, stashing the apron beneath the bar for the time being. "If you say so."

Jane felt a little guilty, taking Jorge away from the job he was supposed to be helping out with. "I'm keeping you."

Jorge turned toward her and smiled into her eyes, creating yet another huge tidal wave inside her stomach. "If that's what you want," he murmured.

Jane forgot to breathe again.

When she remembered, after a beat, she tried to draw it in subtly and then release it slowly. She was sure he'd noticed.

God, but she was acting as sophisticated as an escapee from a fifteenth-century nunnery. She really was going to have to get a grip on herself.

But Jorge was like no other man she'd ever met.

He was still holding her hand and that, somehow, was impeding the flow of blood to her brain. She had to concentrate in order to think.

"No, I meant..." She searched for the right words. "That I'm taking you away from your work."

"Not my work," he corrected her. "I'm just helping out, remember?"

Right, she thought, he'd already said something about that, about being a businessman, an entrepreneur, not a bartender. Damn, her head felt like a sieve, with all the information she was receiving just leaking out of every pore. She wasn't like this normally. Ordinarily, she absorbed details like a sponge and retained absolutely everything.

Not this time.

"And for the most part," Jorge was saying, his low, sexy voice working its way under her skin, thrilling her, "the party's beginning to wind down."

Even as he said it, a wave of cold air wove through the room as the front doors opened and several people made their way out into the night. It was mild as far as winters around here went, but there was no denying that it was still cold.

More than anything, Jane didn't want the evening to end. But even Cinderella had to go home at midnight, and she'd already beaten Cinderella's record by an hour.

Without thinking, Jane ran the tip of her tongue along her lips. She could still taste him. If she closed her eyes, she could still feel the pressure of his lips against hers.

This was definitely one New Year's Eve she was going to remember for the rest of her life—no matter how long she lived.

As if sensing what she was thinking, Jorge asked, "Can I take you home, Jane? Or did you drive over here by yourself?"

Why did that sound as if she was such a loser, coming to a New Year's Eve party by herself? Besides, she hadn't come alone, she'd come here with Isabella.

But it had been a long time since she'd seen her friend. Scanning the immediate area now, she couldn't find Isabella.

"I came with Isabella," Jane told him, still searching through the sea of faces for a glimpse of her friend.

The answer coaxed out another smile. "Isabella won't mind if I bring you home," he assured her.

Jane stopped searching and looked at him. "But how will she know? Isabella might get worried if she can't find me."

Now that was downright refreshing, Jorge thought, impressed. He'd hooked up with any number of women at parties who'd left girlfriends—and boyfriends—wandering around looking for them without so much as a second thought. Their focus was exclusively on their own pleasure.

Jane Gilliam was certainly different from the type of woman he was accustomed to. Maybe she deserved closer scrutiny, he mused. Her kiss had been a definite surprise. Maybe there were other surprises to be uncovered as well.

"Don't worry," he told her, "I'll leave word at the hostess desk for her. She's bound to ask there if she can't find you."

Jane hesitated—but not too much. She *really* wanted to be with Jorge for as long as possible.

"Well, if you think it's all right."

She couldn't keep from smiling. Everything inside her was cheering. The evening wasn't ending yet. She'd gotten a reprieve. Who knew, once they got to her apartment, maybe he'd stay a while for coffee and conversation. She loved listening to the sound of his voice.

Amused by her shy eagerness, Jorge ran the back of his knuckles along her cheek, then watched, fascinated, as a small nerve along her cheekbone winked in and out as if it was flirting with him.

"I think it's all right," he assured her.

From across the room, Maria Mendoza was in the middle of instructing several of the busboys to subtly begin gathering up dishes that had clearly been abandoned when she suddenly noticed her son talking to a young woman. Not just talking to her, but leaning in the way he did when he'd singled someone out.

Squinting, Maria looked closer. For once, the woman who had caught her son's attention didn't look as if she was modeling all the makeup offered at a department display counter. In fact, she looked almost sweet. There was nothing brash or flashy about her. And the dress she was wearing wasn't cut down to her navel.

She was the kind of young woman, Maria thought as she abruptly stopped addressing the busboys, that she would have personally hand-selected for Jorge.

She knew her, she realized. Jane...something. Jane Gilliam, that was it. She'd met her once through Patrick Fortune. He spoke very highly of the young woman's selflessness and her dedication to the children she worked with, as well as her passionate pledge to help every child to learn how to read.

Several times during the evening, she'd noted that the poor girl was sitting off by herself. At one point, Jane had even taken out a book from her purse and had begun to read. While everyone else had been enjoying themselves, the shy young woman clearly felt cut off by loneliness.

Well, she obviously wasn't lonely anymore, Maria thought, pleased. Not with Jorge talking to her. Jane seemed to be hanging on his every word.

Maria's mother's heart swelled with hope and joy. Could Jorge finally, *finally* be growing up? Could he finally be abandoning that wanton side that had him going from one shallow beauty to another? Had he left that life behind him to turn his attention to a woman of substance?

She fervently hoped so. Maybe all those prayers to St. Jude, patron saint of hopeless causes, were finally paying off.

"Señora Mendoza?" Luis, one of the busboys hesitantly tried to get her attention. "You did not finish telling us what you wanted us to do."

She needed to get over there, Maria thought, to find out if what she was seeing was real. "Do what you are paid to do, Luis," Maria told the young man. He needed to show a little initiative if he ever hoped to be anything more than just a busboy. "Must I do all the thinking for you?"

Luis looked a little chagrined as he bowed his head. "No, Señora."

Maria patted his arm. "Good, then get to it, please."

Even as she spoke, she quickly began making her way through the revelers who were still left. But her eyes never left her target: Jorge and the young woman. Though no longer in her thirties, Maria prided herself on still being very quick on her feet when she wanted to be.

She made it to her son's side before he had a chance to get away.

Placing a hand on his shoulder, she could see that she'd caught him by surprise. Good. "Are you leaving, Jorge?" she asked innocently.

"Yes, in a few minutes, Mama." And then, for form's sake—and because he loved her—he added, "If you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind," Maria assured him magnanimously even as her eyes covertly darted toward Jane and then back again. "You've been a great help tonight. Your father is very grateful. There were more people here than were expected."

Maria paused, waiting. But Jorge was not taking the hint. He wasn't making any introductions. Maria was not shy about taking matters into her own hands. It was how she'd gotten to where she was now.

She turned toward Jane, a bright smile on her face. "Hello, you might not remember me, but we met—"

It was only around good-looking men that Jane found herself almost hopelessly tongue-tied, feeling about as sharp as a button. When dealing with the rest of the world, she became friendly and cheery, which was more her natural state.

She smiled warmly now at the older woman. "Of course I remember you, Señora Mendoza. Mr. Fortune introduced us last year. He speaks very highly of you every time your name comes up."

She was gracious as well as sweet, Maria thought. "As he does you," Maria responded.

For a moment, Jorge almost felt as if he were on the outside looking in. It wasn't a situation he was accustomed to. Moreover, his mother's behavior was a bit of a surprise. She wasn't usually this friendly with any of the women he charmed.

Bemused, Jorge looked from Jane to his mother. He could read his mother's mind as clearly as if the words had been written on a huge billboard and hung around her neck.

Sorry, Ma, not going to happen, he thought.

Granted, Jane was special in her own unique way and he had to admit that he was attracted and somewhat captivated by her, but neither condition meant that he was about to suddenly abandon his bachelor life for this woman with the huge, soulful brown eyes. At most, he'd get further acquainted with her, spend a little time pleasuring them both, and then move on. It was his way.

"I was just about to take Jane home," he told his mother. "She came with Isabella, so if you see her, just let her know that I've taken care of Jane's transportation for the evening."

“Of course.” Maria’s smile was just a tad strained as she offered it to Jane. Turning, Maria began to leave but at the last moment, she buttonholed her son and whispered a warning into his ear. “Don’t you hurt this one.” Releasing him, she smiled broadly. This time, there was nothing forced about it. Before leaving for good, she looked over her shoulder at Jane and said, “I hope I will see you again very soon.”

Me, too, Señora. Me, too, Jane couldn’t help thinking, even though she knew the chances of that happening were very, very slim.

Jorge waited until his mother disappeared into the crowd. The woman really did have eyes in the back of her head, he thought. Turning to Jane, he inclined his head and asked, “Ready?”

He wouldn’t believe just how ready she was, Jane thought. “I just have to get my coat,” she told him. She pointed vaguely in the general direction of the coatroom.

There was a crowd around the desk, Jorge noted. No sense in their both standing around, waiting their turn. He’d have better luck getting to the front of the line if he went alone.

“Why don’t you give me the claim number?” Jorge suggested. “I’ll go get it for you.”

She wasn’t accustomed to such attentive gallantry. Usually, she was the one running the errands. Flipping open the clip on her clutch purse, she began searching through it.

“It’s here someplace,” Jane murmured. She was forced to go through the purse twice before she finally located the small, square card with the red claim number on it. “Here it is,” she announced triumphantly.

Jorge took the claim number from her, his fingers lightly, deliberately brushing against hers. He could see by the look in her eyes that he’d succeeded in sending yet another shock wave dancing through her body. Her reaction amused him and yet, there was something almost touchingly sweet about it.

It was enough to make him feel guilty—if he wasn’t enjoying himself so much.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised. “Don’t go anywhere.”

There wasn’t a chance of that, she thought. Not even if they used dynamite. “I won’t,” she promised.

Jane watched as he walked away, utterly mesmerized by the rhythmic movement of his hips. Utterly mesmerized by everything about him.

Jorge really seemed to like her, she thought, stunned and awed and very thrilled. She had no idea why someone like him would have even stopped to give her the time of day, but right now, she didn’t want to dig too deeply. Didn’t want to risk the chance of all this suddenly fading away. For now, she was going to ride this wonderful wave for as long as she possibly could.

Sighing, she closed her eyes and smiled to herself. Maybe, just this once, nice girls didn’t have to finish last.

“Didn’t I tell you he was terrific?”

Jane picked out the young voice from amid a sea of others and opened her eyes again. For a second, she thought whoever was speaking was talking to her. But as she turned around to look, she saw that the owner of the voice, a young teenager who looked about fourteen, maybe fifteen, but just barely, was talking to another, slightly older looking youth.

She turned back around, not wanting the boys to think that she was eavesdropping on their conversation.

But it was hard not to. The younger of the two sounded so enthusiastic.

“All I had to do was point someone out and he had her eating out of his hand in less than five minutes,” he marveled. “He said it was easy, that all it took was just a matter of making the girl think she was the prettiest one in the room, the center of his attention. But it’s gotta be more than that,” Ricky insisted.

“Well, du-uh,” Josh responded condescendingly. “When you look like Jorge Mendoza, all you have to do is stand still and half a dozen drooling women come running to you. It doesn’t exactly take an Einstein to figure that out, Ricky.”

“I don’t know,” Ricky countered. “I mean, he’s a great-looking guy and all, but this woman I picked out, she looked a little standoffish. I really didn’t think Jorge could melt her as fast as he did.” He shook his head in quiet admiration. “But five minutes after he came up to her, he was kissing her.” He paused to laugh softly. “*Really* ringing in the New Year, if you know what I mean.”

The one called Ricky was grinning broadly. She could hear it in his voice, even as Jane’s heart froze in her chest.

“I think he’s taking her to his place,” she heard the young teenager speculate to his friend. “That wasn’t part of the bet, but—”

“You actually bet him, you idiot?” the other teen asked incredulously.

Ricky bristled. “Not money,” he protested. “It’s just that I didn’t think he could do it *that* fast. I just said the word. Like ‘I bet you can’t.’”

She heard the other boy scoff. “I could have told you that you’d lose.”

Jane felt sick. For a second, she was afraid she might throw up.

They were talking about *her*.

That was why Jorge had approached her out of the blue—because he’d made a bet with a teenager who wasn’t even old enough to shave yet.

How stupid of her to think that a guy like Jorge Mendoza would be attracted to her. To think that he might have even liked her a tiny bit.

A bet.

Jane could feel angry tears forming in her eyes. She couldn’t remember ever, *ever* feeling this humiliated. This awful.

She couldn’t stay here, couldn’t wait for him to come back. She never wanted to see that honeytongued bastard again. Who did he think he was, making her the object of a bet? she thought angrily.

Clutching her purse to her chest, Jane swung around and forged a path to the front door. She bumped into people as she went, murmuring halfhearted excuses as she passed them.

It was cold outside. Remnants of snow from the last storm crunched beneath her high heels, but she didn’t care.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she searched for a passing taxi to flag down.

There were none out on the street this time of night. Why? Didn’t they know it was New Year’s Eve?

Shivering, she hurried down several blocks and then took shelter in the doorway of an office building. She placed a call to a taxi service on her cell phone and waited for her ride.

And cried angry tears.

Chapter Five

“Patrick, if you want me to take that suit to the cleaners tomorrow, please don’t forget to empty out your pockets,” Lacey told her husband the next morning as she popped her head into the master bedroom.

The bright morning sun was trying to push its way into the room despite the heavy drapes at the windows that barred its passage. It was one of the rare mornings that Patrick actually slept in.

Sitting up now, Patrick ran his hand through his tousled reddish hair. Despite the odd hint of white, he still looked boyish, especially with sleep still hovering around his eyes.

He reached for his glasses on the nightstand and put them on. The world came into focus, as did the digital clock next to the lamp.

He always thought of himself as energetic—except when compared to his wife. “Lacey, it’s New Year’s Day. It’s a holiday. What are you doing up so early and why are we talking about dry cleaning?”

She crossed to him and stood before the bed that she had vacated more than an hour before.

“I’m up, dear husband, because, in case you’ve forgotten, we’re having some of the family over for a late lunch today, and I’m talking about dry cleaning because someone,” she looked at him pointedly, “spilled coffee on his jacket last night.” She ran her hand along his stubbled face affectionately. “And just because it’s a technical holiday doesn’t mean that the world suddenly stops spinning.”

“Technical?” he echoed, just a little perplexed at her meaning.

“Technical,” she repeated. “Do you have any idea how many sales are going on at this very moment as you are lounging around in your PJs?”

Getting out of bed, Patrick groaned. “I could never understand that. Why would anyone want to get up that early just to go shopping? What kind of bargains could they possibly offer to warrant that?”

Sometimes the man she loved could be adorably naive, Lacey thought. She laughed at the look on his face, then stopped to pick up the shirt he must have dropped on the floor last night—or early this morning. He’d been pretty tired as she recalled.

“Spoken like a man who has never had to search for a bargain in his life.”

“My biggest bargain,” Patrick freely confessed as he came up behind her and enfolded his wife in an affectionate embrace, “was finding you and making you my wife. Anything that happened after that would only be deemed anticlimatic.”

“You do know how to turn a lady’s head,” she told him with a warm smile. “But I’m not going to be distracted.” Draping his shirt over her arm, she looked around for the suit she’d mentioned. “Where are the rest of your clothes from the party?”

He released her. “The cleaners aren’t having a sale, are they?” he asked, amused.

“I just want to put the suit aside while I think of it,” she told him. One finely shaped eyebrow arched over a sparkling green eye. “Remember leaving your house key in your pants pocket the last time? Remember wasting all that time, looking for it?”

Patrick inclined his head. “Point well taken,” he allowed with a sigh.

He moved to his side of the walk-in closet. He’d meant to hang the suit back up, but somehow, it had only made it to the floor of the closet. Picking up the pants and jacket, he quickly checked all four pants pockets.

“Empty,” he announced, handing the slightly wrinkled gray slacks to Lacey.

“And the jacket?” she asked as she dropped the pants on top of the shirt she had over her arm.

He checked the right pocket. He distinctly remembered taking out his wallet and depositing his keys beside it on the bureau. But as he slipped his fingers into the left outer pocket, he frowned. His fingers had come in contact with something.

It was a folded piece of paper and he opened it up as he removed the paper from his pocket. He had no memory of putting it in his pocket, no memory of anyone handing it to him.

He scanned the small sheet quickly, his frown deepening slightly.

“Not so empty, is it?” Lacey teased, then saw his expression. Something was clearly wrong, Lacey thought. “What’s the matter?”

Not waiting for him to answer, she came closer in order to read the note, which was printed in large block letters.

“ONE OF THE FORTUNES IS NOT WHO YOU THINK.”

It was Lacey’s turn to be puzzled. She looked up at her husband for enlightenment. “Who gave this to you?”

He turned it over in his hand. There was nothing on the back. “I have no idea.”

A touch of apprehension wove through her. “A note just turns up in your pocket and you have no idea where it came from?”

Rather than crumple it and toss it into the wastepaper basket, he placed it on the bureau. This required closer scrutiny. But not when Lacey was around. He didn’t want to alarm her.

“That about sums it up,” he agreed.

It was Lacey’s turn to frown as anticipation got the better of her. “Do you think that it’s some kind of warning?”

“I think it’s some kind of waste of paper.” Patrick handed her the jacket. “Here you go, one suit, as per your request.” And then he gave her a quick, courtly bow. “Now, if milady doesn’t mind, I’d really like to take a shower.”

She nodded, the note already relegated to a thing of the past unless something more about it came up. Right now, she had a lunch to oversee.

“When you’re done with your shower,” she told him, “I’ve got a few things I need you to do.”

He grinned and kissed her quickly. He’d expected nothing less.

“Of course you do.”

But as soon as Lacey was gone, Patrick picked up the telephone next to the bed and called his brother, William.

Younger by a year, William had an offbeat sense of humor. This might have been his idea of a joke, although, truthfully, Patrick did have his doubts that William’s humor was *this* offbeat.

“Bill,” he began when his brother picked up on the other end. “It’s Patrick. Happy New Year,” he prefaced, getting the amenities out of the way, even though he’d just seen his younger brother less than nine hours ago at the party.

“Same to you,” William responded. “You know, this is rather a coincidence, you calling like this. I was just debating calling you.”

There was an unsettling note in William’s voice that caught his attention. “Oh?”

“Yeah.”

William paused, hunting for the right words. He’d found himself later in life than Patrick had, finally making a niche for himself with Fortune Forecasting, a company that predicted stock market trends. But ever since his wife had died last year, he’d lost his focus again and had felt adrift. He’d begun to look toward Patrick for guidance again.

“Now this is going to sound a little off the wall,” he finally said, “but I just found this note in my pocket this morning. It says—”

“—One of the Fortunes is not who you think,” Patrick completed.

For a second there was stunned silence on the other end of the line. And then William laughed nervously. “So it was you.”

He’d obviously missed something, Patrick thought. “Excuse me?”

"It was you," William repeated. "You were the one who put the note in my pocket," he elaborated when Patrick made no response. "I've got to say, this isn't your usual style, Patrick. What's the point?" he wanted to know.

"I have no idea what the point is," Patrick said, sitting down on the bed. "I didn't put the note in your pocket, William. As a matter of fact, I found an identical note in mine. Someone slipped it into my jacket." He tried to think of when that could have happened. The restaurant was fairly crowded all night. He'd been jostled any number of times during the evening.

He heard William sigh. "Well, that makes three, then."

"Three?" Patrick repeated, not sure where William was going with this.

"Three," William said again. "I just got off the phone with Lily," he said, referring to their late cousin Ryan's wife. "She just called. Someone slipped a note into her purse. She had no idea what to make of it. I told her I thought it was someone's inebriated idea of a joke."

Patrick looked at the note in his hand. "That was my first thought, too."

"And now?"

"And now I don't know," he admitted truthfully.

He was getting a very uneasy feeling about all this. Why would someone target all three of them with this note? And were they intended as warnings—or threats?

"What do you want to do about this?" William asked.

"We sit tight until something else happens."

William sounded clearly disturbed. "Who do you think the note's referring to?"

As far as that went, Patrick hadn't a clue. "It still might be a joke, albeit a poor one."

"Nobody comes to mind?" William pressed.

There had been no long-lost second cousin, twice removed on the scene, no reason to believe that members of the family weren't who they were supposed to be.

"No one," he assured his brother. "Listen, I know you're coming over for lunch this afternoon. Bring the note with you. And tell Lily to do the same."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Nothing yet," Patrick said truthfully. "But it certainly wouldn't hurt to circle the wagons, just in case."

There was silence on the other end of the line and for a moment, Patrick thought William might offer an opinion or solution of his own. But when he finally spoke, it was just tacit agreement on his part. "I'll pass the word along to Lily."

"Thanks. I'll see you all later," Patrick said just before he hung up the receiver.

He was fairly certain he'd managed not to sound as concerned as he felt. It could very well be nothing, just some fool yanking their collective chains. But he was a Fortune and, contrary to the name, he and his family had had their share of adverse dealings.

It never hurt to be prepared.

Jorge stood in the center of the still-crowded restaurant, looking around. He felt exactly like the Prince must have just after Cinderella fled from him at the stroke of midnight.

Except that he was holding a light gray coat instead of a glass slipper. When he'd returned from the coatroom, she wasn't standing where he'd left her. She wasn't anywhere at all.

He spent the next twenty minutes scanning the room and describing her to people, asking them if they'd seen her. Finally, when he talked to the bartender who'd ultimately taken over for him, Carlos said he'd thought he'd seen her pushing her way to the front door. And yes, the man added, she wasn't wearing a coat, which had made him think it was rather odd.

Why, Jorge wondered. Why had she suddenly taken off like that? What would have made her leave without saying anything to him?

And without her coat? It didn't make any sense to him.

Everything about the woman aroused his interest.

Frustration ate away at him. He had no phone number for her, and no address either. He told himself to just go home and forget about it. But he couldn't.

Draping her coat on one arm, he took out his cell phone and dialed Information. With one hand pressed against his ear to drown out the surrounding noise, he gave the operator Jane's name and waited for a response.

She was unlisted.

It figured, he thought. Biting back a curse, Jorge stared at the coat he was holding.

What had made Jane bolt out of here like that? She'd given every indication that she liked being with him. So then what—?

"Did one get away from you?"

The question, spoken so close to him, nearly made him jump. Gloria was standing right behind him. Her husband Jack was next to her.

Jorge saw her looking at the coat, an amused expression on her face. Not what he needed right now, he thought. Squaring his shoulders, Jorge shifted the coat to his other arm. He'd already made up his mind that he was going to find Jane Gilliam and give her back her coat—and ask for an explanation—no matter what it took.

"Not for long," he told Gloria, his voice cocky. And then, just for a moment, he dropped his guard. "Did you see the woman I was with earlier?"

"The one Mama liked so much?" Gloria countered innocently. Maria had brought all three of her daughters' attention to Jorge and the woman he was talking to. "Yes, I did," Gloria added quickly before he could profess any denials. "She didn't look like your usual arm candy." Gloria patted his face affectionately. "Looks like you're finally growing up a little, big brother."

If she was baiting him, he wasn't about to bite, Jorge thought. He had more important things on his mind. "You didn't happen to see where she went, did you?"

Gloria shook her head, surprised. A woman avoiding Jorge? This had to be a first. "Sorry."

"Maybe someone told her about your reputation and it scared her off," Jack speculated as he helped Gloria on with her coat.

Gloria felt a tug on her heart, empathizing with her brother. She was certain this had to be the first time he'd ever experienced rejection on any level.

"If it helps any, I think I heard Jack's father say she works for Red Rock ReadingWorks. I could ask Mama to make sure—"

The second Gloria mentioned the organization, Jorge remembered Jane mentioning the name.

"ReadingWorks," he repeated. "That's right." Grateful, he kissed his sister's cheek. "Thanks."

Something different was going on here, Gloria thought, looking at her brother more closely. She'd never seen him like this about a girl. But then, as far as she knew, no girl had *ever* pulled a disappearing act on Jorge. If anything, it was always the other way around.

"Any time," Gloria murmured. She'd teased him about finally growing up, but maybe, just maybe, there was something to it.

If so, she thought, Mama was going to be thrilled.

January 2 was a typical cold winter day.

Jane shivered as she made her way to Reading-Works' front door. She was going to have to dip into her savings and buy another coat, she thought glumly. Wearing three sweaters, one on top of another, just didn't do the trick.

Maybe her coat was still at the restaurant, she thought hopefully. She'd call over there during her first break and inquire.

And pray that she didn't run into Jorge Mendoza.

Pushing open the front door, the warm air that met her was lovingly welcomed. At the same time, goose bumps formed all over her body.

Like the ones she'd felt when Jorge had kissed her New Year's Eve.

What in heaven's name could she have been thinking? Men like that didn't give women like her the time of day—unless, of course, there was a bet involved, she thought sarcastically.

Served her right for being so naive.

With a sigh, she shook her head. Well, it was a new year and it was back to reality for her. Time to put impossibly foolish dreams behind her.

Walking into the lounge where all the teachers gathered for their breaks and lunch, she saw that a number of her coworkers were clustered around the main table. At first, she thought that someone had brought in cookies. But then she saw that what had captured their attention was a huge profusion of flowers, nestled in a large basket that was in the center of the table.

Someone had gotten flowers, she thought with a touch of envy. She had no idea what that felt like, to have someone care enough about you to send flowers and publicly acknowledge his attachment to you.

"Who's the lucky girl?" she asked, trying to sound cheerful as she joined the group.

Sally Hillman turned to look at her, a huge grin on her lips. "You are."

Jane stared at her, positive she'd heard wrong. "What?"

"Joyce couldn't help herself," Harriet Ryan, another tutor, volunteered. Embarrassed, Joyce, the general secretary, made a strange, disparaging noise. "She read the card. Why didn't you tell us you knew Jorge Mendoza?" she wanted to know.

"When did you meet him?" another woman asked.

"Where?"

"Details, girl, give us details," Sally begged. "The rest of us are dying to know."

The questions all melded together into one cacophony of voices and noises as Jane leaned over the table and plucked the card from the basket. She felt as if she were moving in slow motion.

"New Year's Eve ended much too soon," the card said. "With affection, Jorge."

"With affection," Joyce echoed, looking over her shoulder at the card she'd already read. A huge sigh followed. "You've been holding out on us," she accused Jane.

"Yeah," Harriet chimed in. "Not very nice of you, Jane. Give."

And five sets of eyes turned their eager faces toward her.

Chapter Six

Unlike her former beauty queen mother—or maybe because of her—Jane had never liked being the center of attention. It made her uncomfortable.

“There’s nothing to ‘give,’” Jane told Harriet.

The women exchanged exasperated looks with one another, as if they thought she was holding out on them.

“Oh, come on, Jane,” Cecilia Evans, the oldest of the group, pressed. “A man doesn’t send flowers and sign his name ‘with affection’ if something isn’t going on. Especially not a hunk like Jorge Mendoza.”

Cecilia drove the point home. “*How* does he know you work here?”

Jane looked back at the flowers. They would have had her floating on air—if she didn’t know what she knew. She almost wished she hadn’t overheard those boys gossiping.

Most likely, Jorge had sent the flowers because he’d had qualms of conscience.

But then, she backtracked, why should he if he didn’t know that she knew?

This was all getting very complicated. All she wanted to do was get to work, do what she did best, and forget about everything else.

Some people were meant to have romance in their lives and some weren’t. She belonged to the “weren’t” group and she was just going to have to learn how to deal with that and accept it.

More than anything, Jane didn’t want to talk about Jorge or the flowers or anything that had to do with why they might have been sent. But she had never learned how to be rude or cut people off. She’d certainly never learned how to tell them to butt out.

So she lifted her shoulders in a vague shrug and admitted, “I told him where I work.”

“When?” Joyce demanded excitedly. “When did you tell him?” The slender blonde shook her head when information didn’t immediately come spilling out of Jane’s mouth. “If I’d met Jorge Mendoza, every single last detail would have been up on my blog three minutes after I got home. Maybe two.”

“I don’t blog,” Jane said, seizing on the stray item.

“You don’t talk much, either,” Cecilia grumbled. Two of the other women chimed in their agreement.

Jane pressed her lips together, suppressing a sigh. It wasn’t her intention to seem secretive about the matter. It was just that she knew that these flowers, didn’t really mean anything and honest though she was, she certainly wasn’t about to tell her friends that Jorge had kissed her on a bet.

Some things you just didn’t talk about. To *anyone*.

Looking at the circle of eager faces surrounding her, she decided to give them just the bare bones and hope they’d be satisfied with that.

“I met him at the New Year’s Eve party I went to at Red, the one Emmett Jamison and his wife threw for the Fortune Foundation. I went representing ReadingWorks,” she added quickly, in case any of them thought she had a special in with the elite circle of people the Fortunes usually associated with. As the one who had worked at ReadingWorks the longest, she’d been the logical one to invite. “I was afraid if I didn’t go, it might insult Mr. Jamison.”

They all knew that the Foundation had given ReadingWorks sizable grants in the last couple of years, and it was largely because of the Foundation that ReadingWorks’ doors were opened to the children whose parents could not afford to pay for private tutoring.

“Right,” Harriet said, waving her hand at Jane’s explanation. “Get to the good part,” she urged. “How did you meet Jorge?”

“Is he as good looking as his pictures?” Sally asked.

Jane had to be honest. She always was. There were times when she considered it almost a congenital defect. “Better.”

“So? Get on with it,” Sally begged. “There had to be a lot of people there.”

“There were.” It had been so crowded and so noisy that she had trouble concentrating on her book when she’d taken it out.

“So how did you two meet?” Cecilia wanted to know. “Don’t skip anything,” she ordered before Jane could say answer.

“He asked me if I wanted to freshen up my drink—he was tending bar for his parents,” Jane explained.

She knew she was being disjointed, that the facts were tumbling out like grains of rice from a hole in the bottom of the box, but it was hard for her to collect her thoughts under all this scrutiny. Especially since she was still having trouble reconciling herself to the fact that the single greatest experience of her young life was tied to a bet, making her—in her mind, at least—the butt of a cruel joke.

The fact that Jorge had sent a note like that with flowers just served to confuse and complicate everything that much more.

“And then?” Sally urged when Jane didn’t elaborate. “This is like pulling teeth,” she complained. “What did you do to get him to send you flowers?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Jane protested. *Except run away.*

Maybe that was it, she thought. Maybe he *was* feeling guilty because she’d bolted and he suspected that she knew about the bet.

Joyce frowned. This obviously wasn’t making any sense to her, or the others. “So that was it? He asked you if you wanted your drink freshened and then he just disappeared?”

“Well, no.” Jane thought about the way he’d looked at her and a smile curved her mouth involuntarily. “We talked a little. And then it was midnight and—”

The mere memory made her body tingle.

Joyce’s eyes widened. “He kissed you?”

Jane nodded her head. For a split second, a wave of heat washed over her as, despite her best efforts to block it, the memory replayed itself in her head.

“Yes.”

“And? What was it like?” Sally demanded.

Jane had never mastered the art of nonchalance. Besides, there had been nothing nonchalant about the way Jorge kissed. He had literally made the earth move beneath her feet. No matter what his motives were, she had to give him his due in that department.

“Pretty terrific.”

“And you’re seeing him again,” Sally assumed eagerly, skimming her fingertip down along a plump, pink rose petal.

Despite everything, a sliver of sadness skewered through Jane as she answered. “No.”

The other women looked at each other.

“But he sent flowers,” Harriet insisted. “How can you not see someone who sent you flowers?” *Because he doesn’t want to see me. He just doesn’t want to feel bad.*

Jane kept the words to herself, searching for some kind of plausible answer that would make the others back off and leave her alone. This was hard enough to deal with without pretending that she was starryeyed and walking on air.

Just then, April, the administrative assistant, came into the lounge. Excitement pulsed from every pore as she announced, “Jane, there’s someone here to see you.”

Thank God, Jane thought. She didn’t care who it was as long as it gave her an excuse to get away from this impromptu Spanish Inquisition before the thumbscrews came out.

Jane glanced at her watch, trying to remember her schedule for the day. It was a little early for her first student, Melinda Perez, to be coming in. She wasn't due for at least another hour. But that was all right.

"Bring Mrs. Perez and her daughter to the classroom," she told April.

April shook her head, her straight dark hair bobbing from side to side like black windshield wipers. "It's not Mrs. Perez."

That caught her off guard. Mothers usually brought their children, not fathers. Maybe Mrs. Perez wasn't feeling well.

"Okay, show Mr. Perez and his daughter to the classroom. Better yet," she decided, moving toward the doorway, "I'll do it."

April stayed where she was, a ninety-eight-pound roadblock. She looked unsettled, Jane thought, and rather dazed, wearing what could only be termed a silly grin on her face.

"April, is something the matter?" Jane asked.

"It's not Mr. Perez either," the young girl said breathlessly.

Confused, Jane walked out into the hallway and saw why April was acting so flustered.

Jorge Mendoza stood just inside the doorway, with her winter coat draped over one arm and what looked like a picnic basket suspended from the other.

The grin on his lips was guaranteed to raise body temperatures by at least five degrees as far away as the next county.

"Hi, Jane. You forgot something at the restaurant the other night," he told her, his voice low and melodic as he held her coat slightly aloft.

By now, all of Jane's coworkers had poured out into the hallway. She could feel them standing behind her, a hyperventilating Greek chorus.

Just what she needed, an audience.

How much worse was this going to get? And why, knowing what she did, did her kneecaps feel as if they were dissolving right out from under her?

"Thank you," she murmured, accepting the coat he held out to her.

God, but he was even better looking in the light of day than he had been at the restaurant. But what was he doing here?

Maybe he'd made another bet, she said to herself.

Jorge drew a little closer to her, aware that they were both under intense scrutiny. "Could I see you in private?"

Her uneasiness heightened. What was he up to? "I've got students coming in."

"Not for another hour," Jorge countered. He saw the surprise in her eyes and smiled. Nodding toward April, he said, "I checked."

"I can cover for you," Harriet volunteered. "I don't have anyone coming in until this afternoon."

"I can cover for you, too," Sally chimed in eagerly, her eyes never leaving Jorge.

His smile widening, Jorge gave a slight bow of his head. "Thank you, ladies. I promise I won't keep her too long."

Jane wanted to say something about the bet. Right here, right now, she wanted to give this too-handsome-for-his-own-good-or-anyone-else's a dressing down. Wanted to tell him that if he'd discovered a conscience and was here to make amends, she didn't want any part of that. She just wanted to be left alone.

She wanted to say all that. But the desire to get all of that off her chest was outweighed by the fact that she'd always hated making a scene. Jane absolutely despised displays of temper, maybe because she'd been the target of her mother's so often when she was growing up.

Whatever the reason, she swallowed her retort and kept it to herself, refusing to vent in front of her coworkers.

"All right, we can go to my classroom," she told him, resigned.

He laughed softly under his breath as he threaded his arm through hers. “First time I’ve ever looked forward to going to a classroom.”

Several members of her Greek chorus giggled. Doing her best to ignore them—and the heat traveling up her body where Jorge was holding her—Jane led the way to the room where she did her tutoring. Jorge dropped his hand, allowing her to cross the threshold first.

Shutting the door behind her, Jane turned to look at him.

Charade over, she thought. Time to dig up that backbone of yours, Janie.

“Why did you come here?” she asked him.

He nodded toward the coat she was still holding. “I thought you might need your coat.” He also wanted to know what had caused her to run off the other night, but for the moment, that could wait.

Jane had to admit that she was grateful to be reunited with her coat, but that still didn’t explain the other thing he’d brought with him. “And you decided to pack it in a picnic basket?”

He set the basket down on the desk. “No, I packed some of my father’s famous enchiladas and nachos in the basket, along with—” He rattled off several Mexican delicacies that he’d brought, ending with chocolate chip sweet bread.

The latter had always been her weakness and guilty pleasure. Had he known that?

No, of course not. How could he? Not even the people she worked with knew that about her. For the most part, she was a very private person. It had been a lucky guess on his part, nothing more.

“Why would you do that?” she wanted to know. She wasn’t ordinarily suspicious, but after the other night, she’d decided that being cautious was a much wiser path for her to take.

Jorge opened the basket and took out a checkered tablecloth, which he proceeded to spread on the floor right behind her desk and chair. She watched him in surprised silence. Was he actually planning on pretending they were having a picnic?

“Because it might help make you forgive me,” Jorge told her and then added an extremely soulful, “I’m sorry.”

I’m sorry.

Her heart twisted in her chest. What was it about those words that could always make her forgive a myriad of transgressions and make her want everything to be right again? Was she just terminally kind-hearted—or a pushover?

Jane was tempted to say something about overhearing the two teens talking about the bet he’d made, but she hesitated too long and Jorge was talking again. Talking and burrowing his way into a heart that should have, by all rights, been hardened against him.

But wasn’t.

“I don’t know what would have made you run off like that, especially without your coat, but if it had to do with me,” Jorge continued as he placed two plates and two sets of cutlery down on the tablecloth, “I really am sorry.”

His wording made her realize that he had no idea that she’d overheard the two teens talking. And he probably had no remorse for making that kind of bet. This was a matter of ego. He was voicing a blanket apology because he just didn’t like having a woman walk out on him.

She had to keep reminding herself of that, but being so close to him was having a definite effect on her thought process. As well as on her whole body.

What was the point of telling him that she’d overheard? That she knew she was nothing more than a bet to him? Saying it wouldn’t change anything. So she looked away and said, “I had an emergency.”

Two glasses joined the plates, cutlery and napkins. “What kind of an emergency?” he asked mildly.

She hadn’t expected him to probe. Resorting to fabrications wasn’t something that came easily to her, not even to save face. “The kind that made me hurry away,” Jane responded vaguely.

Jorge looked at her for a long moment, then nodded. "Okay, you don't want to talk about it. I can respect that."

Too bad you can't respect me, Jane thought. But out loud, she said, "So, you see, you didn't have to go to all this trouble—"

"Well, since I did 'go to all this trouble,'" he said, echoing her words with a smile, "we might as well sit down and eat." Taking off his jacket, he folded it up into a square and then placed it on the floor in front of the place setting. He gestured for her to sit down on it. "Might be more comfortable that way," he explained.

She looked down at the food Jorge had placed on the tablecloth. It did look awfully good, she thought, especially since all she'd had today was half a Pop-Tart and yesterday, her appetite had deserted her completely and she'd hardly eaten at all.

"Okay," she agreed, sitting down on the jacket. She felt the material give beneath her. "I guess it wouldn't do any harm to eat."

"Nope, no harm at all." He got down on the floor, crossing his legs lotus-fashion. "You know, I like to think that I'm pretty good at reading people—"

About to start eating, she raised her eyes to his face. "Then maybe you're in the wrong place. We just read books here."

For as long as he could remember, women had come on to him. He'd never had a woman back away. But Jane Gilliam was definitely backing away, blocking all his best moves and his efforts at breaching her walls. Why? It wasn't ego, but curiosity and a certain fascination that spurred him on.

"Did I do something to upset you, Jane?" When she didn't answer, he took a guess. "Was it the flowers? Was sending them here embarrassing?"

She supposed that was as good an excuse to use as any. "It did put me on the hot seat."

Jorge laughed. Whenever he sent flowers to a woman, he always made sure there was maximum exposure involved, not because he was sending them but because he knew that women liked other women to see that they were the center of someone's attention. Jane was definitely different. And that really piqued his interest.

"You don't like all that attention, do you?" he guessed.

"No," she answered truthfully. "I don't."

"I have to admit, you are nothing like a lot of other women I've known." And right now, he thought, he had to admit that he was drawn to her because of that.

Jane had no doubt that he had known enough women to populate a small city. "I've always been a private person," she told him.

"A little mystery makes things interesting."

She hadn't meant it like that. *Femme fatales* were mysterious, not her. What you saw was what you got, she thought. But before she could say anything, Jorge was leaning forward.

Invading her space.

Making her pulse jump.

"Do you mind?" he asked.

The words left her lips in slow motion. "Mind what?" she asked in a hushed voice as he took her chin in his hand.

"You've got a little sauce right there." Moving his thumb slowly across the corner of her mouth, Jorge wiped the sauce away. "Got it."

He smiled at her just before he licked the side of his thumb.

Jane couldn't draw her eyes away. The sauce disappeared between his lips.

He'd done it again.

He'd made the air stand still in her lungs. If this kept up, her brain was going to malfunction because of a lack of oxygen.

If it hadn't already.

Chapter Seven

It took Jane a second to pull herself together and she had a feeling that he knew it. But there was no self-satisfied smirk on his face, no hint of a superior smile on his lips. If he did know what he was doing to her, he wasn't showing it.

She still had no idea why Jorge was here, sharing a picnic with her. Was this all part of his initial bet, or had it evolved into some elaborate plan to prove that he could get any woman he wanted with minimal effort? Was there some prize waiting for him at the goal line, depending on her reaction to him?

But even if it was that, why should she be his target? It wasn't as if she had some sort of reputation for being a removed, yet desirable ice princess. There was no one beating a path to her door. She was just an old-fashioned girl, someone her grandmother would have called a sweet bookworm—and her mother would have ridiculed.

If she held on to that thought, on to the knowledge that at best this was just some kind of a fleeting whim on Jorge's part—for whatever reason—then maybe she could keep a tighter rein on herself and not get carried away.

Or grow hopeful.

Just enjoy the moment, as you would if you were getting lost in a book, she ordered herself as she continued eating what, in all likelihood, was the best chicken enchilada she'd ever had. Books always ended and so would this. She had to remember that whatever was going on, however wonderful it might feel for the moment, it was all just fiction. Just like the books she loved to read.

Before she realized it, she'd finished eating. Picking up the napkin he'd put out, Jane wiped her fingers. "That was excellent," she told him.

"I'll pass that along to my father," he told her. "He'll be pleased." Jorge reached for the covered serving dish that he'd placed back in the basket. "There's more if you like."

"No, one was fine," she said quickly before he could place another enchilada on her plate. "I'll explode if I eat another one. Besides—" she smiled, nodding at the plate of stacked chocolate chip desserts—"I need to leave room for the sweet bread."

He liked the way her eyes seemed to light up when she smiled. "So you have a sweet tooth."

"Guilty as charged."

Jorge placed a sweet bread on a napkin and put it in front of her. "I'll remember that for next time."

"Next time?" she echoed.

Two small words, neither of which, by themselves, were unclear. But in this situation, combined and emerging from his mouth, she found herself unable to absorb them or figure out precisely what they meant—because Jorge couldn't possibly be saying what she thought he was saying. Wasn't this idyllic indoor picnic just a one-time thing?

"The next time we get together," Jorge elaborated and then suddenly stopped as a thought occurred to him. She'd been alone at the party, but that didn't necessarily mean that she was unattached. "Unless—are you seeing anyone?"

Not anymore, she thought. "No. I already told you I wasn't."

Her answer produced another smile on his lips. She stared at it, mesmerized. "Then it's all right if I see you again?"

If she didn't know better—and she did—she would have thought that Jorge was acting almost shy. But that was impossible. Jorge Mendoza had never had a shy day in his life. In a relatively small town like Red Rock, everyone knew everyone else, or at least *about* everyone else. And she knew about Jorge, knew that the impossibly handsome man went through women like tissues.

At thirty-eight, was it possible that Jorge had gone through every desirable woman in Red Rock and was now trolling for female companionship down at her level? Not that she thought of herself as beneath him, but the women he tended to pursue came from a more sophisticated social circle than she did. Their idea of charity meant writing a check while hers meant getting down in the trenches and becoming personally involved.

"If that's what you want," she heard herself answer. She watched his expression intently, waiting for him to shout, "April Fool's" even though they were four months shy of the date.

"Yes," Jorge told her, "that's what I want."

Even as he said the words, it intrigued him that he really, *really* meant them. Sure, he had always liked women—loved them—but he had to admit, even though it unnerved him a little, that he had never quite felt this way before.

In general, he was captivated by vivacious women who liked life in the fast lane. Women who knew that having any long-term designs on him would only be futile.

Until New Year's Eve.

This one was different, he thought, not for the first time. This one was not the kind of woman you enjoyed for an unspecified amount of time and then moved on from. Jane Gilliam was the kind of woman his mother would have called the marrying kind.

Jorge knew himself, knew that he had no desire to get married, to be tied down to one woman. But be that as it may, he couldn't seem to get himself to just walk away.

The coat he'd been left holding in his parents' restaurant could have easily been delivered to Jane in a number of ways, none of which involved his putting in an appearance. But he hadn't wanted to just ship the coat off to her. He'd wanted to bring it to her in person. And find out why she'd left the restaurant so abruptly.

More than that, he realized, he'd wanted to see her again.

He told himself that it was to prove that there'd just been something about that particular night that had attracted him to her—and now it was gone.

But seeing her, seeing that strange combination of vulnerability mixed with an endearing innocence and sense of wonder, was stirring something in him. Something that he couldn't quite identify.

Something, he thought, that made him a little uneasy. Maybe he should leave well enough alone and leave it nameless. Because, at bottom, it was something that had the potential to scare the hell out of him because he couldn't seem to exercise control over it. And he didn't like not being in control.

"Why?" Jane heard herself finally asking.

She was being stupid, she silently upbraided herself. Any other woman would have just eagerly absorbed the attention, however fleeting, of easily the best-looking man in Red Rock. By questioning she was almost guaranteed to chase him away.

And yet, she had to know his motives.

She liked things to make sense and this just didn't.

She was familiar with some of the women Jorge had been seen with and there was just no way she fit into that category. She was neither drop-dead gorgeous, nor the owner of a body whose curves could make a grown man weep.

She did have, Jane knew, a good heart, but that wasn't something that was visible to the naked eye and she was fairly certain that Jorge wasn't out to add a girl scout to his extensive collection of conquests.

"Why?" he repeated her question incredulously, not sure what she was asking.

"Yes." Summoning her courage, she decided to be direct. "Why do you want to see me again?"

No one had ever asked him that before. Every woman had just jumped at the chance. Jane was a challenge all right. "Because I'm attracted to you, Jane," he told her. "Isn't that why most men and women date one another?"

Date? He was asking to date her? As in seeing her more than once?

For one wild, wonderful moment, Jane felt as if she'd suddenly slipped into the Twilight Zone. Lost for words, she bit into the sweet cake she'd been holding in her hand. Her mouth full, she stalled for time, desperately trying to understand what was going on here.

She couldn't make herself believe that she'd hit the jackpot.

Maybe it was karma, something Isabella had mentioned to her on several occasions. The young woman felt that life was a series of checks and balances. Isabella had told her more than once that someone as good as she was was definitely on track to be on the receiving end of something wonderful.

She figured that the New Year's Eve kiss had wiped that slate clean—until she'd overheard those two boys talking.

Jorge glanced at his watch. He was due at a meeting with a client soon. Besides, the receptionist had told him that Jane had someone to tutor in less than an hour. Even so, he felt a reluctance to get up and leave.

Standing up, Jorge extended his hand to her. She accepted it almost hesitantly. Somewhere in the back of his mind, it struck him that the feel of her hand in his seemed very right somehow. He tamped down the thought.

Still holding her hand, he pulled Jane up to her feet and wound up pulling her closely against him.

Sparks began to go off up and down her body, sending out alarms, quickening her pulse. He made no effort to put space between them. Instead, he just stood there, holding her. Making her warm.

And then her heart all but stopped as she watched him lower his head. Their lips met.

And Jane felt herself slipping into a dark, velvet-lined abyss.

Hardly aware of what she was doing, Jane laced her arms around Jorge's neck. Her body leaning into his, she kissed him back as if her very life depended on it.

And maybe it did.

Because if she hadn't kissed him back with such verve, she would have surely gone under for a third time and drowned in ecstasy.

All in all, she thought in her heart of hearts, that wouldn't be such a bad a way to go, dying with a smile on her lips.

"I guess I'd better be going," Jorge murmured, drawing back his head.

But even as he said it, he continued holding her, his hands resting on the swell of her hips. He could feel desire coursing through his body. She was arousing a hunger in him that couldn't be addressed at the moment.

But soon, he promised himself. And as soon as that happened, he knew that this attraction would fade.

It always did.

"You said you had students to tutor soon and I don't want you getting in trouble on my account."

Too late, she thought.

Jane searched her empty brain cavity for something to say. She'd never been a brilliant conversationalist, but until now, she'd been able to hold her own. That wasn't the case anymore.

"They should be here soon," she finally managed to get out.

Finally letting her go, Jorge bent down and quickly scooped up the plates and utensils, wrapping them inside the checkered tablecloth. Securing it, he dumped the whole thing into the picnic basket.

Jane heard the dishes clink against each other. Thinking that he might wind up breaking them, she cautioned, "Be careful."

He looked into her eyes, soft brown eyes that he'd discovered he could easily get lost in.

"I'm trying to be," Jorge told her honestly. But he wasn't all that sure how that was working out for him. Because if he were really being careful, he wouldn't have allowed his curiosity to bring him here. "Why don't you give me your home number and I'll give you a call?" he suggested.

Even she had heard that line before, Jane thought. She'd give him her number, but she wasn't going to hold her breath, waiting. He'd forget about calling her the minute he got into his car. Sooner, maybe.

But that was all right. This had been very, very nice while it had lasted.

Tearing a piece of paper from the spiral notebook on her desk, Jane wrote down her name and number, then added in parenthesis: the girl you kissed at midnight on New Year's Eve. Finished, she folded the sheet and handed it to him.

Taking the paper, Jorge unfolded it and read what she'd written. The smile that played on his lips was ever so slightly lopsided. He refolded the paper and slipped it into his pocket.

"You didn't have to write that down. I know who you are, Jane."

She lifted her shoulders in a quick shrug. "Just in case you come across that note sometime later and can't place the name," she explained casually.

He found her lack of ego refreshing and appealing. Some of the women he'd been with couldn't walk by a mirror without glancing at their reflection, checking to see that every hair was in place, that their makeup was picture-perfect, and that they were still as alluring as they had been an hour ago. In comparison, Jane seemed far more genuine.

"Even then I'll be able to place the name," he assured her.

She sincerely doubted it. She wasn't the kind of woman who left a lasting impression and she'd made her peace with that. "Thank you for the early lunch," she said.

Jorge gave her a slightly courtly bow and said, "My pleasure," just before he kissed her hand.

And then, as her heart launched into double time, he was gone.

But she had no time to savor the last hour or to even review a single sweet moment because suddenly the door opened again and the room was filled with every woman who worked at or volunteered at ReadingWorks. And every one of them was eager for information.

Harriet moved close to Jane, a wide grin on her face. "I guess you must have had a *really* nice lunch."

"Yes," Jane admitted, "I did." Her thoughts lingered on the feel of his lips moving over hers, stirring things inside her that had never even been touched before. No wonder he had such a following. The man was a fantastic kisser. "It was very nice."

Jane discovered that it was impossible to keep the smile both out of her voice and from her lips.

She still didn't have a clue what was going on but one kiss from Jorge and nothing else seemed to matter. At least, not for now.

This was not the time nor the place to daydream, she upbraided herself. They had work to do. The first of the students would be arriving any second.

"Workstations, ladies," Jane announced abruptly, calling a halt to any other personal questions that might be forthcoming.

She could hear cars pulling up in the parking lot. The first wave of students were being dropped off by their parents. It was time to stop obsessing about a man who was nothing more than a wonderful fantasy and turn her attention to something that actually had substance. Teaching children to read.

"Fine," Cecilia acknowledged with no small reluctance. "But don't even think about leaving without telling us everything that happened." Her eyes narrowed as she looked at Jane. "If you know what's good for you."

Nodding, Jane played along. She did know what was good for her. And it had nothing to do with Jorge Mendoza. But just for now, she could pretend that it actually did.

After all, what could it hurt?

"You, it could hurt you," Isabella insisted later that evening over the phone. It seemed that rumors were already making the rounds and, concerned, Isabella had called her friend the moment she'd heard. Jane, Isabella was convinced, was far too innocent for the likes of her cousin. "Don't get me wrong, I love Jorge. Every woman over the age of eighteen months loves Jorge, but that doesn't

mean that he's the kind of guy you should fall for. That would be a huge mistake, Jane," she cautioned. "He'll break your heart. He won't mean it but he can't help himself. He's just one of those guys who can't stay put."

"Don't worry," Jane tried to sound nonchalant. "I'm aware of his reputation."

"Good. Keep that in mind."

Sitting down in the easy chair she'd splurged on when she'd moved into this apartment, Jane kicked off her shoes and then raised her feet. It had been a long day. "What I don't know is why he wants to go out with me."

There was silence on the other end of the line, as if Isabella were searching for an explanation. "Because maybe, just maybe, he's growing up and he realizes that all the other women he's been with are just bimbos. Trust me, none of them are good enough to walk on the same side of the street as you."

She laughed softly. Isabella was very sweet. "I don't think that walking is what Jorge had in mind with them."

She heard Isabella sigh. "That's just it. He's a lover of women." Because they were cousins, albeit distant, she tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. "I don't want you getting charmed by him until he can prove that he's finally matured."

Too late, Jane thought. She'd already been charmed. Right down to her toes. And dazzled as well. The only thing she had going for her was that she knew that it was only going to last until the next beautiful woman caught his eye. She was just a filler, a way for him to kill time.

But that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy herself. And she'd decided right after he'd kissed her today that she fully intended to.

Chapter Eight

In a hurry because traffic had made her late getting home, Jane had just slipped one arm into her coat sleeve when her cell phone rang. Taking a second to inhale deeply—she could swear she still detected a hint of Jorge's cologne on the wool—Jane dug into her purse to retrieve the phone.

Slipping the other sleeve on, she answered the call, interrupting the second chorus of a popular Elvis classic that was her ringtone of choice.

"Hello?"

A deep voice chuckled. "You sound breathless. Did I interrupt something?"

Jorge.

The sound of his voice brought everything to a screeching halt—except for her stomach, which was in the middle of flipping over. It took her a couple of seconds to pull herself together. He was actually calling her. When she'd given Jorge her phone number, she'd never expected him to use it.

"No, you didn't interrupt anything." She didn't sound very convincing, Jane thought, not even to her own ear.

"Good. Listen, I was just in the neighborhood and wondered if you'd mind if I dropped by."

Her pulse scrambled, even as disappointment washed over her. She would have liked nothing more than to say yes and have him come over, but there were people—children—waiting for her. And children remembered promises that were broken.

She had.

"I would really love to see you," she said without any attempt at guile. And then regret filled her voice as she took hold of the doorknob and turned it. "But I was just on my way—"

The last word stuck in her throat. There, leaning against her doorjamb, phone pressed to his ear and a spectacular smile gracing his sensual lips, was Jorge.

"Out," Jane said, finally managing to get the last word out.

Closing his phone, Jorge straightened as he slipped it back into the hip pocket of his jeans. It was close to six o'clock in the evening and he'd been pretty certain he'd find her home.

Just not looking like this.

His eyes swept over her, taking in her outfit and the fact that her hair was confined in two playful pigtails. Amusement played on his lips.

"And just where is it that you're going?" he asked. "Clog-dancing?"

Her coat was hanging open. Beneath it was a wide, colorful skirt and a black vest laced up the front worn over a gleaming white peasant blouse. She had on knee-high white socks and a pair of Mary Janes.

Was she role-playing, he wondered, his interest definitely aroused. Was there a kinky side to this otherwise shy, bookish woman that he hadn't even suspected?

Just went to show that no one was as uncomplicated as they seemed.

"No." She looked down at her feet. "These are shoes, not clogs." Realizing that her answer didn't begin to address the question in his eyes and wary of where his imagination might be taking him, she hurried to explain. "I'm reading *Heidi* to the kids in Red Rock Memorial Hospital." He was still looking at the outfit she had on. The interest in his eyes intensified. "Dressing up like one of the main characters makes the story more vivid for them."

His grin went directly under her skin, raising her body temperature. "Tell me when you get around to reading them the story of Lady Godiva."

To his further amusement and delight, he saw a blush begin to rise up her throat, coloring her cheeks. He didn't think women blushed anymore. Certainly not the ones he typically dated.

Jane cleared her throat, looking away. "That's not on the list."

“Too bad.” His eyes pinned her in place. “Maybe you could give me a private reading sometime.”

C'mon, Jane, the kids are waiting. Get a grip. You can go to fantasyland some other time.

“I don't think you really need to be stimulated or motivated,” she told him, those being just some of the reasons she volunteered her time at the children's ward in the hospital.

Right now, Jorge thought, he was plenty stimulated. He had no idea that “cute” could be such a turn-on. “You look very Heidi-ish,” he finally said.

She'd never thought of Heidi as being sensual before. She did now. “Thank you,” Jane murmured.

Twirling one of her pigtails around his finger, he kept his eyes on her face. “Sure I can't get you to postpone this?”

She sincerely doubted that she'd ever been so tempted to go back on her word in her life. But she *had* given her word and all she had to think about were all the times that her parents broke promises they had made to her, or worse, forgot that they had made them at all, and that made up her mind for her.

It killed her to do it, but Jane flashed an apologetic smile and shook her head. “I can't. I gave my word. They're waiting for me.”

“This is new for me,” he had to admit, “losing out to a bunch of kids.”

“Hospitalized kids,” she emphasized.

“Hospitalized kids,” he repeated dutifully. And then he really surprised her. “Mind if I tag along?”

The air was cold and she quickly secured a button, pushing it through its hole before locking the door behind her. He was kidding, right?

“You want to come to the hospital with me?” she asked incredulously.

“Yes.”

She tried to picture him in the ward, surrounded by small children. It wasn't easy. “Why?”

He wasn't used to being questioned as to his motives. She was definitely keeping him on his toes. “I never read *Heidi* as a kid.”

Now *that* she believed. “I'm in the middle of the book,” she warned.

If that was meant to make him change his mind about coming along, it failed. “Don't worry, I'll catch up,” he assured her. “I've been told I'm bright for my age,” he teased.

She was out of excuses and if she was being honest with herself, she liked the idea that he wanted to come with her. It made him seem more human to her.

“All right,” she agreed, “if you're sure you want to do this. My car's parked over here.” She nodded in the general direction of the carport and then led the way to her space.

Jorge kept pace with her and then watched the way the wind played with the ends of her hair as she unlocked her side of the car. Opening the door, she hit the lock release. His door was opened.

“Is this part of your job, too?” he asked as he got into the small, economical foreign vehicle. “Reading to kids in hospitals?”

“No.” Leaving her purse on the floor between her and the door, she put on her seat belt. “I wanted to do something meaningful and this was the only thing I could think of—entertaining the kids at the hospital by reading to them.”

His seat belt was giving him trouble. He had to extend it twice before he could get it to fit into the slot.

“Wouldn't it be easier just to donate a couple of video games and maybe a secondhand game console?” he suggested.

“Easier, maybe,” she agreed looking over her shoulder as she pulled out of her spot, “but not nearly as rewarding.” Books had always been her saving grace, her safe place to go when things became difficult to deal with. “Books spark the imagination.”

He thought of some of his friends' kids. They spent hours glued to a television set, their fingers flying across a keypad. "So do video games."

She supposed video games had their place, but she had never cared for them. "Most video games are about blowing things up. Books build minds."

There was a note of passion in her voice, as if she were defending old friends. "Bet you read a lot as a kid," he said.

She'd taken a lot of teasing for that, but that had helped her develop a tougher outer shell. "Anything I could get my hands on," she confirmed. "I loved to escape into stories." It wasn't until the word was out that she realized her mistake.

"What were you escaping from?" Jorge asked, his curiosity aroused.

If she'd had more time, she would have come up with some vague, acceptable story. But the question was here and now. She had no choice but to fall back on the truth. "Parents who yelled at each other and ignored me."

He hadn't anticipated that kind of an answer. His parents had always been there for him, even when he hadn't deserved it. Sometimes he forgot that he was one of the lucky ones and that not everyone grew up with a support system to fall back on.

Not that he ever did, he thought, but it was still nice to know it was there if he needed it.

"Must have been rough," he sympathized.

She shrugged, glad that she had an excuse to avoid his eyes. The last thing she wanted to see there was pity.

"Other people had it worse." She suppressed a sigh. There was no changing the past. "They were just two people who should have never gotten married. To anyone," she added. Her father had been completely into his work and her mother had been completely into herself. They didn't need outsiders in their lives and they certainly didn't need to be responsible for a child. "I used to wonder why they got married in the first place."

Jorge thought of all the times he'd seen his father sneak up behind his mother and steal a kiss or nuzzle her. He'd grown up thinking that all parents loved each other and demonstrated their affection.

"Did you ever ask them?"

"I asked my mother once," she recalled. "She said it seemed like a good idea at the time." A rueful smile curved her lips. "One of the longest conversations I ever had with her."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" Having someone sympathetic to turn to could help take the edge off rejection.

Jane kept her eyes on the road, even as her mind revisited the past. Even with the distance of time, it was painful to recall. She shook her head. "One mistake was enough for them."

"Is that what they told you?" Jorge could feel his temper suddenly materializing out of nowhere, flaring and aimed at people he wouldn't have recognized if he tripped over them on the street. How could people say something that hurtful to any kid, let alone their own?

"In a way," she recalled. "When I was six, one of the girls at school bragged about getting a new baby sister over the summer. I came home and asked my mother if we could get one and she looked at me for a long time and then said that when people made mistakes, they were supposed to learn from them, not make another one." She could feel his eyes on her and she flushed, glancing at him. "I didn't understand what she meant at the time, but I figured it out later."

The sadness in her voice was hard to miss. But there was no condemnation.

"And you're not bitter?" he asked in amazement. A background like that was perfect for producing loners and serial killers, yet here she was, sweet and generous to a fault, working at a job that he knew for a fact paid very little, just because she wanted to help children.

"Wouldn't change anything if I was," she theorized. "Besides, they did the best they could."

Jane's reasoning eluded him. "How do you figure that?"

"I never went hungry." *At least, not for food*, she thought. "I had shelter, clothes and a library card." Mentioning the last item made her smile fondly. It was one of her best childhood memories. "My father took me to get it when I was seven. The only outing I remember with him, actually," she confessed.

There were no picnics, no trips to amusement parks, no family vacations in her past. She grew up in a house with two self-involved adults, very much alone.

Maybe the man was a workaholic, Jorge thought. "What did your father do for a living?"

"He was an engineer. Aerospace," she added. A sigh accompanied her next statement. "He was away a lot. NASA had him on speed dial," she said with a small laugh. "I think he just used work to get away from my mother." And inadvertently, her, she added silently.

"And your mother?"

Her mother.

There were no fond memories when she thought of the woman, no nostalgia, no sense of any connection at all. Her mother was just a beautiful woman who happened to have the same address as she did.

"My mother peaked at nineteen. She was Miss Texas in the Miss USA Pageant that year. She came in third and said that she was cheated." Jane shrugged, as if she wasn't sure whether or not to give that claim any credence. She did know that, as far as looks went, she had always been a huge disappointment to her mother. "After that, she became a professional shopper."

"She shopped for other people?" He'd heard of those, but thought they were generally employed by celebrities who had trouble going out in public. There was no one like that around here.

"Not other people. She shopped strictly for herself." She remembered feeling hopeful the first few times she recalled her mother coming home with shopping bags full of things. But there was never anything in them for her. And after a while, she stopped hoping. "She was only happy when she was buying things. That was why my parents argued rather than talked to each other," she explained. "My father claimed that she spent money faster than he earned it."

"And did she?"

The short laugh had a sad sound to it. "Absolutely."

Making a left turn, Jane pulled onto the hospital compound. She hadn't realized that she'd talked all the way here. It certainly hadn't been her intention to go on and on like that.

"Well, there you have it." She tried to make a joke of the fact that she'd revealed so much, "My whole life story. Not exactly a page-turner, was it?" There was a parking structure straight ahead. She drove into it and parked her vehicle in the first space she could find. Turning off the engine, she turned to look at him. She was surprised that Jorge hadn't tried to jump out of the car. "I didn't mean to bore you."

"I wasn't bored," he protested. If anything, he'd gained new respect for her.

"Now you're just being polite." She released her seat belt. "Shoelaces have more exciting backstories than I do."

Jorge grinned. The novelty of a modest woman hadn't grown old yet. "I don't usually talk to shoelaces," he told her.

She laughed shortly. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, I do," he acknowledged, "and you're wrong." He saw her raise her eyebrows in a silent question. "I don't find you dull or boring."

This bet that Jorge had going—the one that involved her—it had to be for quite a lot of money, she thought. She couldn't conceive of any other reason for him to be so accommodating, so nice to her.

Picking up her purse, she then leaned over the seat, reaching into the back for a large book whose edges were gilded in gold. On the front cover was a young woman who, at first glance, Jorge thought, bore a remarkable resemblance to Jane. A second look made him realize that it was the hairstyle and the clothes that were responsible for the likeness.

However they both had a fresh-faced appeal, he noted, although Jane was obviously older. But definitely not by much. She could have easily passed for a schoolgirl.

Jane got out of the car. Waiting until he followed suit, she hit the security lock. They walked toward the hospital's main entrance.

She tried to give him one last out. "You know, the hospital has a really good cafeteria. The food's not as good as what your father prepares, but the coffee's decent. You could wait there if you wanted to."

Reaching the entrance, he waited for her to go through the electronic doors first. "Why would I want to do that? I came along to see you in action, not to drink watered-down cafeteria coffee."

"It's not watered down," she assured him. "As a matter of fact, it's pretty strong. Designed to keep sleepy interns on their feet."

In action.

He said he wanted to see her in action. Somehow, she'd never thought of those words being associated with her. *Action* referred to the dynamic people in the world. She wasn't dynamic, she was just a person who did whatever needed doing.

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