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IN THE
FAMILY

Cherish

Tessa McDermid

Weddings in the Family

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Caroline Eddington faces a difficult decision. On the eve of her daughter's wedding, Caroline admits that her marriage to Nick could be over. The timing couldn't be worse, yet with an empty nest looming their problems seem bigger than ever. Still, something holds her back—something as simple as love. Remembering their own vows, their hope, Caroline knows Nick's been there through the good and the bad. But is that enough? Or have they grown so far apart, love alone can't bring them together again?

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Caroline stumbled and a tear slid down her cheek

She brushed it away before it landed on her dress and spotted the material. “I can’t stop crying,” she said, running her hand under her eyes to catch another tear. “I keep thinking about what life’s going to be like without the kids around—” She hiccuped and pressed her fingers to her lips.

She couldn’t finish the thought, even to her best friend.

Without the kids around, what if there’s nothing left between Nick and me?

A knock sounded on the door, startling her. “Mom?”

Her son’s voice recalled her to her duties. She swallowed, hoping her voice sounded normal to him. “I’ll be right there, Adam.” She backed away from Patty’s comforting embrace and steeled herself for the next few hours and what she had to do once she and Nick were alone....

Dear Reader,

I love listening to people’s love stories. How did they meet? When did they fall in love? Why do they stay together? Because they’re together when they’re telling their stories, I know the couples have some variation of a happily-ever-after.

For me, the exciting part is finding out what happened from the time they met until the present. What ups and downs did they have to survive? How did they keep going through the different trials and tribulations that come in life? Their stories inspire my own stories—and help me keep my marriage alive and well. I walked down that aisle planning for a happily-ever-after...and I believe Caroline and Nick had the same intention!

Once they said “I do,” they had to deal with twists and turns along their journey. I hope you enjoy finding out how Caroline and Nick deal with their marriage as much as I enjoyed writing about them.

Sincerely,

Tessa McDermid

P.S. I love to hear from readers! Please write me at tessa@tessamcdermid.com.

Weddings in the Family

Tessa McDermid



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

While Tessa McDermid writes fiction and nonfiction, she most enjoys writing about the love between a man and a woman. She and her husband live in the Midwest, along with their two sons, their Australian shepherd and several fish and lizards, proof that love takes many forms.

To Nadine and Paul; Steve and Nancy;
Alan and Catherine—and family weddings.
And to my husband, Bob,
who daily reminds me what a marriage should be.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A special thanks to Suzanne Arruda, my critique partner, for being willing to read pages any time; to Dana Sanders, a friend and fellow mom, for sharing her professional expertise; and to my editor, Johanna Raisanen, who gave me great ideas for revisions!

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REECIE'S WEDDING

The present

A PATCH OF LATE-AFTERNOON sunlight filtered into the room, giving it a slumberous feeling. Caroline settled into the deep leather chair, careful not to rest her head against the back and mess up the elaborate curls her hairdresser had deemed appropriate for the mother of the bride. The soft gray satin of her dress barely made a sound as she smoothed the material over her knees.

In less than two hours, her daughter would be married. By the time the sun went down, Caroline would be on her own with her husband.

Caroline's head throbbed, a dull ache behind her left eye. Gingerly, she rested her cheek against the cool leather and willed the pain to go away. She could do it; she'd done it before. She just had to concentrate on the center of the pain, visualize the ache flowing out of her body, dissolving in the air...

"Caroline? Are you in here?"

Patty's voice floated into the room. Caroline was tempted to ignore her, to wait silently in her chair until she was alone again.

But maybe it would help to talk to someone. And Patty had been there almost from the beginning.

"I'm over here."

Patty's heels tapped across the polished floor. Her dress was a soft green, the perfect foil for her auburn hair. Her hair's color had deepened over the years until it now had the patina of fine mahogany. Today she wore it in a smooth chignon at the nape of her neck.

I wore my hair like that when I was married, Caroline thought. I walked down the aisle in the same dress that Reecie's wearing right now, with my hair twisted into a soft bun so it wouldn't tangle in the cape.

The thought caused a pain to lodge in her stomach and she pressed her fist against the waistband of her skirt.

"Why are you sitting in the dark?" Patty rested a hand on Caroline's shoulder. "Are you doing okay?"

Caroline knew the question referred to her daughter's impending departure. She'd been asked variations of the question over and over during the weeks of wedding preparations.

Each time, she'd been able to blithely reply, "I'm fine." Having your youngest child and only daughter get married usually caused some turmoil in a person's life, but no one really expected you to say that.

Patty could stand the truth. Caroline tipped her head back and gave her friend a rueful grin. "Remember when we made those speeches at the beginning of each school year? How sending your five-year-old to kindergarten was the natural order of things, that as parents we were expected to watch our children grow up and grow away from us?"

Patty nodded. She and Richard had never succeeded in having children but she'd been as close as a parent to many of the students who had gone through her classroom.

"It's all crap." Caroline closed her eyes and sighed, feeling the air expand her lungs and then leave her body in a long release of misery.

"Caroline."

Caroline opened her eyes. "No, really, Patty. I don't want Reecie to go out into the big bad world, even if she does have a wonderful man at her side. I want her to be little again, sleeping in her crib where I can tuck her in each night."

"You didn't get this maudlin when Adam got married."

No, she'd been thrilled and excited at his wedding, dancing and smiling until her husband, Nick, finally had to drag her home so the caterers could finish clearing up and the DJ could leave.

But then, the rest of her life hadn't been about to change with her son's marriage.

A lump formed in her throat, making it difficult to swallow. Patty knelt down, the skirt of her gown swishing against the chair. "What's going on, Caroline? You haven't been yourself for days. It's more than Reecie getting married, isn't it?"

Caroline hesitated. She wanted to tell someone. But Nick deserved to hear it from her first.

A tic started behind her eye, the next stage of her headaches. She'd been getting them more and more frequently, partly, she knew, because she wasn't getting enough sleep. "I'm tired."

And she was. All the people in and out of the house, last-minute decisions. The trips and phone calls to clear up a misunderstanding about some aspect of the wedding.

"Reecie was in tears most of this past week," she said. "The florist called and had lost part of her order, could she remember how many flowers she wanted for the front tables? One of her bridesmaids left her dyed-to-match shoes at home." She shook her head. "Being the mother of the bride is very different from being the mother of the groom."

Patty rose to her feet. The sun coming through the paned window dappled her skirt with rays of pink and gold. "That's it? Just letting Reecie go?"

Caroline could hear the disbelief in her voice. Again, she was tempted to tell her everything. But she couldn't say a word to anyone until she talked to her husband. She owed him that much at least.

She pushed herself out of the chair and crossed the room with short, jerky steps, hindered in her urge to hurry by the long skirt of her gown. She linked arms with Patty. "It's harder to let them go than I thought it would be. I told Adam he couldn't go off to college until I put all his school pictures in that bus frame we bought from some school fund-raiser. He didn't think that was funny, especially since his junior-and senior-year pictures weren't in it. I just wish I had some way to hold Reecie back."

"You don't mean that."

No, she didn't. She wanted her children to be happy, to find someone they could love all of their lives.

That hadn't been her first goal. She was going to graduate from college, get her master's degree and change the world. A man hadn't been necessary for those dreams to come true. Then Nick had come into her life and she'd taken a detour.

And now she was going to ask him for a divorce.

The irony of the timing didn't escape her. How many times had she heard of couples who divorced after the last child left? She had thought they were overreacting about the empty-nest syndrome, but now she understood. Once the buffer of the kids was gone, it was so much easier to see what was missing in the relationship.

The sun dipped lower in the sky, only a few rays making their way onto the carpet. A bird flew by, its cheery song too loud in the quiet room. Soon she would have to paste on her party smile and join the crowd eager to see her daughter wed. And she did want Reecie to be happy.

Patty clasped Caroline in a light hug, her perfume wafting around the two of them, reminding Caroline of visits when they had sat on the guest bed in their respective homes, laughing and talking and catching up on everything since the last time they'd seen each other. "You're going to make it," Patty said. "You always do. You're one of the strongest women I know. You and Nick have years ahead of you."

Caroline stumbled and a tear slid down her cheek. She brushed it away before it landed on her dress and spotted the material. "I can't stop crying," she said, running her hand under her eyes to catch another tear. "I keep thinking about what life's going to be like without the kids around—" She hiccuped and pressed her fingers to her lips. She couldn't finish the thought, even to her best friend.

Without the kids around and with nothing left between Nick and me.

A knock sounded on the door, startling her. "Mom?"

Her son's voice recalled her to her duties. She swallowed, hoping her voice sounded normal to him. "I'll be right there, Adam." She backed away from Patty's comforting embrace and steeled herself for the next few hours and what she had to do once she and Nick were alone.

Even though, deep down, she wanted to believe that maybe, just maybe, Patty was right.

CHAPTER ONE

Their wedding

Thirty years earlier

NICK SWUNG THE CAR off the highway at the Mustang, Kansas, exit. He slowed down at the stop sign at the top of the ramp and glanced over at her. They were sitting hip to hip and his face was only inches away from her. But instead of grabbing a quick kiss, as he usually did when they stopped, he studied her carefully. “You’re not going to let your mother talk you into a big wedding, are you, Caro?”

“No.” She scooted away a few inches so she could see him easier. “We talked about this. We’re having a simple wedding with our families and a few friends. I haven’t changed my mind about that, Nick.”

His dark brown eyes were almost black in his intensity. “Your mom may try to change it,” he said, his voice low and deep. “She may want to give her only daughter a big wedding. But we don’t need a big wedding, right?”

She nodded. His family had money, she knew, much more than her family. Nick didn’t want their wedding to be a burden on her parents and she loved him even more for that consideration.

She didn’t care how they were married. She would have gone to the courthouse with him if she hadn’t known it would hurt her mother. She wanted to start their life together and each day that they waited increased her desire to be alone with him.

He leaned forward and nipped at her lips. His musky cologne and the hint of the outdoors that always clung to him made her inhale deeply. He ran every day, rain, shine or snow. They had met when he almost knocked her down. He had been racing a fellow runner back to the gym and cut across campus. She had been walking to a history class and the next moment, she was stumbling to keep her balance. He had kept her off balance ever since.

His breath warmed her skin and she shivered, wishing they were anywhere but on the road to her parents’ house. The college afforded them little enough privacy, the dorm rules stating that members of the opposite sex could only visit during certain hours of the day. Once in her house, her father would keep close tabs on their whereabouts.

So far, Nick had honored her request to wait until they were married before they went all the way. His patience was growing thin, though, and she couldn’t blame him. If she hadn’t been nervous that one of their roommates would return for a forgotten book or assignment, she would be tempted to go beyond their bouts of heavy petting.

A horn honked behind them. Nick pressed his foot to the gas and rolled through the intersection. Caroline slid across the seat until she could rest her head on his shoulder. “I love you.”

He picked up her hand and pressed a light kiss to her palm, then linked their fingers together. “I love you. What do you say we skip your parents’ house and drive to a motel for the weekend?”

Her stomach tightened at the thought of Nick and her in a motel room. “I—we—” She licked suddenly dry lips.

He chuckled. “I’m teasing, Caro. You already told your parents we’re coming.” Keeping his eyes on the road, he rubbed his chin against their joined hands. “Soon, though, I’m going to get you alone and naked. This waiting is killing me!”

She didn’t answer, knowing her desire matched his. Sometimes she wondered why she was so adamant about keeping her virginity until her wedding night. She knew her parents expected it, even though nothing had ever been said out loud to her. But she and Nick loved each other, she wore his engagement ring, they had a wedding date picked out.

And yet a tiny part of her worried about what would happen if they made love and then didn’t get married. Free love might be the norm for thousands of others in the country, but she had never been

able to get that close to someone she barely knew. Making friends every time her family had moved had been difficult enough. The thought of letting someone into her pants had been excruciating, at least until she'd met Nick.

Nick was the right man, she knew it. And, soon, very soon, they would be married and she could satisfy the urges that were getting stronger and stronger every time they were together.

“WE'RE NOT HAVING A big wedding,” Caroline said. Her father had taken Nick to the golf course and she had agreed to run errands with her mother. “Nick and I don't believe we need a lot of people around to prove our love for each other. Our family and a few close friends. That's all.”

“I understand, dear. Your father and I are just thankful you aren't shacking up, like so many of these so-called modern couples, without benefit of any legalities.”

“Mom!” Caroline sputtered. Had Evelyn Armstrong just said “shacking up”?

Her mother patted her hand. “Sweetheart, your father and I were young once, too.”

Caroline sat silent in her seat. Where was the woman who had nervously told her about the birds and the bees, blushing furiously the entire time. Caroline's engagement had suddenly elevated her from the baby of the family into the secret society of women.

Nick's family had reacted differently to their announcement two weeks earlier. His parents had made it clear when he went off to college that they would not pay his tuition if he was living with a woman. He had thought that by getting engaged the situation would be more palatable. After his call home, he had reported that they had said little, except that they didn't know if they'd be able to travel to both his graduation and a wedding that year.

A letter from his father had arrived later that week, detailing all the reasons why Nick needed to reconsider getting married at such a young age. Reading the first few lines, Caroline had become so angry, she had crumpled the sheet into a ball and tossed it across the room.

Nick had hugged her close, telling her that it didn't matter what his parents said, they were going to get married. “I don't need his permission, Caro. Let's see what he says. We don't have to agree with him.”

The letter had been addressed solely to Nick, her name never mentioned at all. Dr. Eddington had reminded Nick of the dedication that would be needed to complete his medical training. Being married would delay that and he wanted Nick to weigh his decision carefully.

“I'm not going to be a doctor,” Nick told her. “They want me to follow in their footsteps and I'm not going to do it.” He had tugged her close. “Instead of getting married at Christmas, let's plan a May wedding. I can finish my degree on their nickel.”

She had reluctantly agreed. Now that she had decided to marry him, she wanted to get started on their life together. But he was right. It would be smart to let their parents pay for their last semester.

“How about we get married graduation weekend?” he asked, kissing her cheek. “They can't complain about travel time that way.”

Her mother turned onto Main Street. The downtown area was being renovated and several new stores had sprung up over the last few months. Brightly colored awnings shaded the downtown sidewalk. Ornate lamp-posts identified the streets.

When her mother parallel parked in front of a shop with the name Radcliffe's discreetly lettered on the glass door, she said, “I thought we'd stop in and see Lily's shop first, and visit for a few minutes with her.”

Caroline did want to see her best friend. Lily's aunt had bought the old dress shop that summer and from her mother's letters, she knew it had become all the rage in their small town.

“I'm not buying anything, Mom. I have a white linen suit picked out that I can wear later for church and special occasions.”

“And I’m sure it’s lovely, dear. You’ve always had impeccable taste.” Her mother unlocked the car door and gracefully climbed out of her side. Caroline slid out and followed her mother across the sidewalk.

Her mother paused at the door. “All I want to do is see what she has to offer. You’re my only daughter and this is the only wedding I can truly help plan.”

A pang of guilt hit Caroline in the stomach. Her mom had been involved with the weddings of Caroline’s three older brothers, but only in a superficial way as the mother of the groom. “I’ll look, Mom. But that’s all I can promise.”

Lily rushed across the silvery-gray carpet as soon as the door opened. Her stunning red suit accented her curvy figure and slender legs. Caroline had only a second to wish she had put on something besides worn jeans and a peasant blouse before she was wrapped in a warm hug.

“Oh, Caroline! I still can’t believe you’re getting married!”

Neither could Caroline. Then Nick had asked her to marry him and she’d known she had to say yes.

Lily leaned back, her eyes roaming over Caroline’s face. Caroline stayed still during the scrutiny.

“You look happy,” Lily said.

“I am.”

“Then I’m happy for you.” She tugged Caroline over to an elegant gray sofa that sat perpendicular to the front door and perched on the armrest. “Let me see the ring.”

Caroline held out her hand. The simple round diamond caught the ceiling lights, sending shimmers of rainbows around the room. The brushed-gold band sparkled.

Lily smiled at Caroline. “We were going to be career women. We didn’t need men in our lives.”

“I can still be a career woman,” Caroline said.

Lily laughed. “Of course you can.”

Caroline wanted to say that she had fought her attraction to Nick. She didn’t have time for a romance. She was going to finish her degree and go on to graduate school. Shortly after they started dating, he had said something about their future together and she had broken up with him, alarmed at how serious he had sounded.

If she had been alone with Lily, she would have explained. How she had ignored him for two months, tamping down the feelings he had roused in her. Her plans didn’t include a man. She had watched her mother move from place to place, packing up their belongings and her four children whenever her husband changed jobs. Caroline’s father had been on a search for the perfect career and he had dragged his wife and children along with him.

But her mother was sitting with them and she couldn’t say anything in front of her. Her mom had never complained about the moves and had seemed content with her volunteer work and homemaker status in each of their new towns.

Caroline wanted more. She had made it clear to Nick that she wanted a career, that she couldn’t be happy staying home. He had agreed and she had accepted his ring.

“Do you have the drawings?”

Her mother’s question interrupted her thoughts. “Drawings?”

Lily hopped up from her seat. “I have some drawings I want to show you. I’ll be right back.”

She disappeared through a light gray curtain at the back of the shop.

“What is she talking about?” Caroline asked her mother.

“Be patient.”

Drapery in the same muted gray as the sofa flanked several alcoves, a simple backdrop for the dresses and suits that were displayed on faceless mannequins. Caroline had a feeling she couldn’t afford any of the clothes in this shop. Her childhood friend had moved from giddy schoolgirl to savvy retailer.

Lily came back into the room and sat on the couch next to Caroline, a large book in her hands. “The sketches are still pretty rough. When Evelyn mentioned that you were coming home, I immediately thought of all our conversations about weddings. I couldn’t draw fast enough.”

She bent the cover back, creating an easel, and flipped through the pages. She rested the book on the low glass table in front of the sofa. “What do you think?”

Caroline took one glance at the page and knew she was in trouble. “Oh, Lily!” she breathed.

“Do you like it?”

At the tremor of uncertainty in her friend’s voice, she reached over and touched the back of Lily’s hand. “It’s wonderful.”

“I knew you wouldn’t like a lot of frills and ruffles so I kept the lines clean and simple.” Lily ran a finger over the pencil drawing, trailing across the long skirt that flared out just before it touched the floor.

Lily had drawn two views, the front and the side. The sleeves were long and fitted, ending at the wrists with a tiny flare on the top that matched the hem. The smooth lines flowed over the natural curves of the body, without being too suggestive.

“I remembered you didn’t like veils, so…”

Lily flipped to another page. The cape was as simple as the gown, a sheer column that flowed down the page. Caroline knew she wanted this dress. She would marry Nick at a wooded altar, forest animals their only witnesses, if that was what he wanted. But she would meet him in this dress.

She could feel her mother’s satisfaction emanating from the seat across from her. She didn’t care. The gown was gorgeous. Exactly like the dress she had always imagined she would wear when she met her prince.

Only better. Much, much better.

“I’ll use soft, draped material, very sheer, for the cape,” Lily explained. “And I found the perfect lace to edge it with. A delicate design with tiny purple violets tucked into every few inches. You always wanted violets at your wedding.”

Caroline was touched at how much her friend had remembered from those late-night whispers. “I don’t know where that thought ever came from. Something I must have read in a story or saw in a movie. I always thought violets would be the perfect flower.”

Just like this was the perfect dress.

She glanced at the dresses hanging in the window, their elegance visible to anyone walking down the street. Lily and her aunt had brought city chic into their little town.

And with that, no doubt, they had brought city prices.

She sat back on the sofa, her head resolutely turned away from the sketches. “It’s lovely, Lily, but Nick and I are going to have a simple wedding. No fancy wedding gowns.”

“She has a white linen suit she can wear after the ceremony,” Evelyn explained.

Caroline nodded, a lump in her throat. Her suit seemed terribly unromantic next to that lovely dress. But she had promised Nick.

“You won’t have to pay a dime,” Lily said into the silence. “We’ll want to take pictures, of course, and have it featured in the Living Section of the newspaper. This will be our first major design and could set us up for lots of commissions.”

Caroline dared another peek at the dress. “Not a dime?” she whispered.

“Not a dime.” Lily gave her a bright grin. “I know I shouldn’t be helping a traitor to our cause, but you still are my best friend.”

Caroline sighed. “I want the dress, Lily. But this doesn’t change anything, Mom.” She sent her mother a long look. “No big wedding.”

“Of course, dear.” Evelyn picked up one of the fashion magazines that were tucked into a basket next to her chair. “Now go with Lily and be measured. Your father and Nick will be home soon and we don’t want to keep them waiting for their dinner.”

Caroline followed Lily into a backroom. “I don’t trust her,” she said quietly.

Lily picked up her measuring tape. “I wouldn’t either.”

“Do you know something?”

“No.” From beyond the curtain, they could hear Evelyn chatting with Lily’s aunt. “But you’re the only daughter and I can’t see her letting you get away with a simple wedding.” She nudged Caroline’s shoulder. “Go in there and take off your clothes. We need to get you home so your menfolk don’t go hungry.”

“You wait,” Caroline grumbled, stepping into the small changing room and closing the shuttered half door. “I’m going to be dancing at your wedding before long, too.”

Lily chuckled. “Someday. Right now, I’m more than happy to be a bridesmaid.”

Caroline peeked her head over the half door. “I don’t know if I’ll have any bridesmaids. We’re having—”

“—a simple wedding!” Lily finished with her. “I know. I wasn’t asking. Just saying that I have no one in the wings waiting to be a groom. I’m happy watching my friends get married.”

Once again dressed, she told Lily and her aunt goodbye. Her steps were slow as she walked to the car and she tapped her head against the window once she was seated and buckled. “Nick is going to kill me,” she muttered.

Her mother started the engine. “Why? How is he going to know about the dress unless you tell him?”

She swiveled her head. “What?”

“I didn’t tell your father what I was wearing for our wedding. Bad luck, you know. The groom should not see the bride in the wedding dress.”

“I know that, but...” Her voice trailed off. But what? She was doing Lily a favor by wearing that absolutely darling creation. She didn’t have to pay for the dress, only have a picture of it put into the newspaper. And since her mother would expect an announcement of the wedding to be in the paper no matter what she wore or where she was married, she really had no problems.

“Okay, I won’t say a word about the dress.” A beautiful dress didn’t mean a big wedding. She settled more comfortably into her seat.

Nick’s used blue Ford was parked off to the side of her father’s Buick. He sat alone in the living room, a textbook on his lap. He gave them both the lopsided grin that always made her stomach muscles quiver.

“What’s the damage?” Evelyn asked.

He shifted until he could face her squarely. “Based on his mutterings on the way home, he shot his worst game ever. Mine wasn’t much better, but I still beat him by at least three strokes.”

“We’ll pack and go back to school tonight,” Caroline declared.

Nick laughed. “Come on, it’s not that serious.”

Both women stared at him and he shifted in his seat. “Is it?” he asked.

Caroline nodded, her hands on her hips. “Dad prides himself on his golf game. He wouldn’t make it on the pro circuit but he almost always wins the local charity tournament. You didn’t mention how few times you’ve golfed, did you?”

“It might have come up in conversation.”

Caroline groaned. “Now. We have to leave now.”

Her mother stepped forward and rested a hand on Nick’s shoulder. “You’re not going anywhere. Your father is a grown man and this was a friendly game. No reason to send his future, and only, son-in-law away before we’ve even had dinner.”

Her footsteps faded away down the hall. Nick grabbed Caroline’s hand and pulled her into his lap.

“Listen, I really did think I’d lose.” His hand lightly stroked up and down her arm and she had to control herself not to start purring like a well-pleasured kitten. “You know how often I’ve played.

I figured there was no way I'd come close to his score. Then I saw how quiet he was getting with each of my strokes. Your father was off, Caroline. If he does win the local tournament, he has to play a lot better than he did today.”

She snuggled against his chest, her mind finding it hard to focus on a game that had been over for several hours. He traced lazy circles around her neck and under her ear. “He’s good, Nick,” she said, trying to stay with the conversation. “He really is. And I didn’t even think to warn you because, well—”

He tipped her chin up with his finger and grinned. “You didn’t figure I’d win.”

She nodded and giggled when he tweaked her ear.

“Well, let me show you something I’m good at,” he growled.

His lips met hers in a kiss that drove thoughts of golf games and wedding dresses right out of her mind. He nibbled and tasted her lips, her cheek, her jaw, blazing a trail down her neck and toward her low-cut top.

Her fingers clenched his arms, her head pressed against his shoulders. A soft moan worked its way past her lips and she felt his answering chuckle against her skin. His tongue and lips caressed and teased her, making it hard to breathe or think.

Footsteps sounded behind her and she jerked away, suddenly remembering they were making out in her family’s living room. “Nick, stop!” she whispered. She jumped out of his lap, pulling her top back into place. She barely landed on the couch opposite his chair before her mother walked into the room.

If her mother noticed anything amiss, she didn’t say a word. Caroline resisted the urge to smooth her hair back into place and sat up straight, her hands folded primly in her lap. Evelyn sat down next to her and gave them both a wide smile.

“Everything is fine. We’re going out to dinner tonight, so why don’t you both go freshen up.” She cocked her head toward Caroline. “Maybe put on something a little less revealing, so your father doesn’t have a reason to get any more upset at your young man.”

At Nick’s snort, she glanced down. A tiny love mark was visible just above the elastic of her top. She stood up slowly, keeping her dignity intact in front of the room. “Where are we going?” she asked at the doorway, her back to her mother. She would not look Nick in the eye. His humor was palpable from fifty paces away.

“The local diner. Can you be ready in thirty minutes?”

Nick followed her out of the room and caught her in a tight hug as soon as they were out of sight. “Stop it, you’ve caused me enough trouble.” She pushed at his shoulders but he didn’t release her.

“I like having my mark on you.” He lowered his head and tickled her skin with his tongue.

She swallowed her quick giggle and renewed her efforts to get away. “If Dad sees us, he’ll throw you out on your ear.”

Nick lifted his head, his devilish grin sparkling in his eyes. “Your father isn’t much different than me, Miss Caroline. How do you think you arrived in this world?”

She gave an enormous push and succeeded in backing away from him. “That, Nick, is just gross.” She shuddered. “I do not want to think about my parents having sex.”

Her shock at the easy way her mother had used the term “shacking up” still lingered.

“And they don’t want to think about you having sex,” he retorted. “Go on, get changed. I’ll meet you in the living room. And I’ll be the perfect gentleman all evening.”

He was true to his word. He held the door open for her mother, waited for Caroline and her mom to be seated before sliding into the chair opposite Caroline, and leaned forward with rapt attention during all conversation. At one point, Caroline kicked him under the table, sure that his attentiveness would be seen as sarcasm by her usually aware father.

But her dad was intent on sharing information about their community with Nick, detailing recent developments, the progress the city council was making in marketing their community, and the many businesses advertising for employees.

“Your father wants us to live here after the wedding.” They were several paces behind her parents as they walked back to the car.

“He’s proud of Mustang.” She wouldn’t be surprised if her father had finally found the right place to settle down. Her parents had lived there since her freshman year in high school. Longer than anywhere else they’d lived.

Nick shook his head. “You’re his little girl, Caroline. He wants you to live close by.”

Caroline stared at her father’s solid back. He was holding hands with her mother and she felt an enormous wave of love flow through her.

Followed by a dull ache in her chest right below her heart. She’d be leaving them when she married. She’d always be their daughter, but once the vows were spoken, she’d be Nick’s wife first.

Her vision blurred and she stumbled over the pavement. Nick caught her arm. “You all right?”

She nodded, ducking her head so he couldn’t see the tears. How could she explain the feelings coursing through her? She loved him, she knew she did. Marrying him was the right decision and she could hardly wait to start their life together.

But she had never really considered what she was giving up by making a new family.

He bent down and kissed her cheek. “It’s okay, sweetheart. We’ll see them whenever we can.” “What?”

“Getting married is a big deal.” His voice was as serious as the day he had proposed. “We’ll have to work out all kinds of holiday visits between our two families. But you and me, we’re going to be great together.”

She cupped his cheek with one hand, all doubts washing away. “You’re right. We are.”

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU ended up getting married in the biggest church in town.” Lily adjusted the filmy cape around Caroline’s shoulders.

“I know.” Butterflies danced in her stomach and she could hardly stand still. Twice, Lily had threatened to send her up the aisle with her panty hose showing to the world if she didn’t stop moving.

Caroline held her head still while Lily tucked the hood of the cape around the braided bun at the base of her neck. “Mom kept saying it was our choice. But we all knew it wasn’t.”

Her mother had been clever, never outright asking them to use the church. Instead, she had casually mentioned that any elderly relatives they invited might find it difficult to stand for very long and getting chairs into the wooded glade could be a challenge. The lack of bathrooms and limited parking could also be a problem. Not a major one, of course, since the wedding would be short. And as long as it didn’t rain and no one had to rush up the wood-chip path to their cars...

Nick had finally conceded defeat and told her mother to reserve the church. Caroline had said they didn’t have to change their plans just because her mother was being manipulative. He had given a rueful laugh and hugged her close. “Caroline, you’re her only daughter. It’s one day. As long as we’re married at the end of it, I don’t care what happens.”

Now Lily stepped back, her eyes narrowed. “Well?” Caroline asked. The mirror was across the room and she couldn’t see anything.

The door opened behind Caroline and footsteps rushed into the room. “Caroline, your aunt...” Her mother’s voice trailed away.

Caroline turned her head. Evelyn stood frozen in the middle of the room, her hand pressed against her mouth. “What?” Was something the matter with the dress, with the way it fit? Her aunt?

Her mother advanced into the room, stopping next to Lily. Both women stared at Caroline for several long seconds and then her mom wrapped her arms around Lily in a tight hug.

“I assume that means everything looks good,” Caroline said in a dry tone.

Her mom nodded, dabbing at her eyes with the handkerchief she had been carrying all day. By now, she could probably fuel Niagara Falls. “You look perfect, darling. Absolutely perfect.”

“Can I see?”

Lily nodded. Lifting the hem, Caroline picked her way to the large mirror at the side of the room.

“Oh, Lily!” she breathed, staring at her reflection. She was a princess in a fairy tale.

“Oh, Caroline.” Lily bent down and straightened the skirt. When she stood up, she had flickers of tears on her lashes. “Let’s get you married.”

Her father’s reaction matched that of her mother. “You look lovely,” he whispered.

She tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. “Thank you, Daddy. And thank you for being so nice to Nick.”

“He’s a good man.” They started the march down the aisle. “As long as he remembers to take care of you.”

The wedding passed in a blur. She saw Nick’s eyes light up when she came into view and her lips curved into a wide smile that didn’t disappear the entire evening. She danced with uncles and cousins she hadn’t seen in ages. Her father whisked her into the father-daughter dance with old-world charm and then made her giggle when he swung her in a wide dip. Her brothers each claimed a portion of a dance, teasing her until their wives dragged them away.

The last dance was with Nick. His hands rested on her waist, their feet barely moving across the floor. She couldn’t take her eyes off his face or the love she saw mirrored in his eyes.

“Happy?” he said.

She nodded. “Deliciously so.” She had found words welling up in her mind all night, fulsome words she would never use any other time. In her Cinderella dress, with her handsome prince in his dark suit, the music playing around them, their family and friends surrounding them, she couldn’t help thinking that no bride had ever been so lucky.

He deftly swung her out of the way of two little cousins dancing a jitterbug of sorts to the slow music. “How much longer before we can get out of here?”

The urgency and desire in his voice made her quiver. She had thrown the bouquet, he had tossed the garter. The cake was almost gone. “Now?” she murmured.

He stopped dancing and the cousins bumped into her hip. They scowled and jiggled around them. Nick grabbed her hand and dragged her toward the door.

She dug her heels into the flooring. “We can’t just rush out. We have to tell our parents goodbye.”

He growled but detoured toward the front tables and halted in front of her parents, his hand tight on hers. The wedding band she had slipped onto his finger felt smooth against her palm. “Thank you for a lovely wedding. We’re leaving now.”

Caroline’s cheeks heated up. Without waiting for her parents’ reply, he tugged her along to his parents. “Mom, Dad, we’re leaving. Have a safe drive.”

She caught his wrist with her free hand. “Nick.”

He glanced over his shoulder at her. “Caroline, I’m not stopping again until we’re at our motel. Do you have a problem with that?”

Desire shimmered in the air between them. A fine sheen glistened on his forehead and his lips were pressed together in a tight line.

They’d waited long enough. She leaned toward him. “How fast do you think you can get us there?”

A grin lit up his face. “Watch.”

CHAPTER TWO

Career changes

Twenty-six years earlier

THE GARAGE DOOR slid closed behind him, but Nick made no move to get out of the car. Caroline's car occupied her space, sparkling from a recent washing. She must have stopped on her way home from school.

He inhaled slowly and then let the breath out just as carefully. He needed to go in, not sit noticing the lack of dust on her vehicle. He'd eat dinner, chat as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened and then offer to do the dishes. Once the kitchen was clean and they were relaxing in the living room, he'd bring up his news.

The door between the kitchen and the garage opened and Caroline hurried through, a cloth bag over her shoulder, her head down as she watched her step. She paused to push the garage-door opener. Halfway down the second step, she saw him, grinned and hurried over to his car.

"Hey!" She leaned over, tapping on his window.

Rather than roll it down, he opened the door, careful not to bump her skirt, and climbed out. "You going somewhere?"

She nodded. "The school-board meeting, remember? I'm giving my presentation. I told you last night."

He had a vague recollection of listening to something about her third-grade class and the books they were reading, but sometimes Caroline rambled on about her school day in such detail he found it easy to ignore most of it. If he made a few "uh-huhs" or "reallys?" during the monologue, that sufficed.

"When will you be home?"

"I don't know. Most of the time, we can slip out after we finish our part. I'll see if I can do that without making a scene."

She took a step closer and leaned in, kissing him on the cheek and nuzzling his chin. "I won't stay a minute longer than I have to."

His body tightened at the promise in her voice. Four years of marriage and that whisper of longing in her tone still made him want to push her up against the wall.

His hand stole around her neck and he tugged her closer for a solid kiss. Her bag bumped against one hip and the door scraped his other one. He edged around the door, keeping their mouths melded together. With his free hand, he pushed the car door shut and wrapped his arm around her waist, catching his balance against the car.

A whimper slid over her lips and he swallowed the soft sound, using his teeth, his tongue, his lips to explore her mouth. She tasted of minty toothpaste and he wanted to devour her.

Her hands pressed against his chest and she backed up. He lifted his head. "I have to go," she whispered.

Her lashes were lowered, her cheeks flushed. "You sure?" he asked, a sense of satisfaction filling him. He had the same power over her that she wielded over him.

"Yes." She smoothed several locks of hair behind her right ear, then ran her hands down her skirt. "How do I look?"

He leaned back and gave her a once-over, moving slowly past the soft curves at her hips, her waist, her breasts, and back to her face.

"Not that way!" She gave him a push that knocked him against the car.

He grinned. The momentary pain had been worth the view.

"Do I look okay for my meeting? I don't have time to go back in and repair your damage." She brushed at the front of her blouse.

“You look fine.” He patted her on the rear, chuckling at her squeak of annoyance. Nothing irritated her more than that patronizing action. She was back to her normal, public self. That half-out-of-bed look he wanted to keep for himself.

Whistling, he closed the garage door after her car turned into the street and wandered in to the house. The kitchen light over the sink was on, sending a soft glow into the room. Their rented town house was twice the size of the apartment they had lived in for the first three years of their marriage.

The silence of the extra rooms echoed around him. He opened the refrigerator and peered inside. Grabbing a package of ham, he fixed a sandwich. He carried it into the living room, flicked on the television and plopped down on the couch.

The local sports announcer was giving a quick rundown of the coming baseball games, promising highlights during the special Friday night segment that ran during the season. The announcer added that the starting pitcher for the high-school team was considering several area colleges and that scouts from a prestigious university had been seen at the last game.

Nick frowned, the information bringing back the afternoon’s conversation with his boss, the pitcher’s dad. The opportunity to move up in the company had been handed to him, with a substantial pay increase. The only problem was that the promotion included a move out of state.

He slumped against the back of the couch, staring at the swirls on the ceiling. The extra money was secondary to the chance to head his own department. After months of following orders, he would be the one giving them.

The design in the ceiling formed itself into Caroline’s face. Even before she saw him, he had seen excitement in her walk, in the way she swung down the steps. He couldn’t have told anyone about the program she was going to discuss for the school board that evening, but he did know it was something that had involved most of her waking free moments for the past school year.

Good teachers are needed everywhere, he thought. Her principal would be sad to lose her, but he’d give Caroline a glowing recommendation. The man had been full of praise for her abilities when they met at the school’s Spring Fling. Nick had been proud she was his wife.

“Nick?” Caroline’s voice sounded from the kitchen.

“In the living room.”

“What are you doing sitting in the dark?” She clicked on a lamp and dropped onto the couch next to him.

“Did you wow them?” He muted the television, now in the middle of a weekly variety show, and draped an arm around her waist.

She leaned her head on his shoulder. “Yeah.” Her lips briefly touched his neck. “The kids were so good. The board members asked several questions and not one of the kids faltered in their answers.”

“Did you think they would?”

She shook her head, her hair rustling against his shirt. The silky movement brought a clench to his groin, reminding him of the unfinished business between them.

He looped his arm around her and tugged her into his lap. She giggled, her skirt flipping up and baring her legs to the tops of her shapely thighs. “What are you doing?”

“Celebrating your wonderful performance.” She wasn’t wearing stockings. His free hand caressed the soft skin under her knee and her giggles shifted to a lower pitch.

“Tell me what happened at the meeting,” he murmured, his index finger tracing lazy circles over and behind her knee.

She swallowed and licked her lips. “After a couple short announcements,” she managed to say in a higher-than-normal voice, “the vice superintendent introduced me.”

He added another finger to his tracing and navigated a few inches higher on her thigh. “And?” he asked.

She shifted, her hand tightening on his waist. He followed her leg, alternating his tracing with gentle squeezes on the soft thigh muscles.

“I, um, I told them about the books that we use, how much we read each day, some of the activities—”

He watched the skin of her throat ripple as she swallowed. Using the pad of his thumb, he trailed down the faint ridges, slowing at the hollow at the base of her throat.

“I bet they were impressed.” He leaned in and kissed the pale skin at the curve of her neck. “You’ve been working on this all year.”

“Yes, well, I—Ms. Russell—” She swallowed and the skin danced across his lips. “She mentioned that they’re considering—Oh! Nick!”

He grinned, his mouth hovering over the nipple he had just kissed through her shirt. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No, I—” Her hand caressed the hair at the nape of his neck and gently, slowly, she eased his head and mouth back to her breast. “I’ll tell you the rest later,” she murmured.

CAROLINE LOUNGED AGAINST his shoulder, nestled between his body and the back of the couch. Their clothes were scattered on the floor, her panties resting precariously on the edge of the lamp shade. She shivered and he tucked her closer.

Her hand twirled the hair on his chest, her fingernails lightly dancing over his skin. “Did you eat something?”

“Yeah.” His fingers tangled in the curls above her ear and he leaned in for a long kiss. “A sandwich,” he managed to say when he could breathe again.

She was wedged between the cushion and his arm. With every breath she took, her body rubbed against his skin. He clamped his teeth against the surge of desire that raced through him. No matter how many times he was with her, she could start the reaction all over again with a simple smile, a touch of her hand, her skin against his.

Instead of giving in to the desire, he knew he had to tell her his news. The temptation to wait until the next day was balanced by the thought that their current bout of lovemaking had left her in a mellow mood.

“I had my formal review,” he began.

She jerked upright and he had to press his foot to the floor to keep from sliding off the couch. “You got your promotion, right?”

He nodded and she yipped, her face lighting up as she threw herself on top of him. “Oh, Nick! That’s wonderful. Now we can look for a house, finish paying off your school loans. You’ll have your own office, right? With a window? We can decorate it, add some personal touches. That cubicle you have now—”

“Wait.” He interrupted her with a hand on her lips and at her waist to keep her still. Her bouncing was causing parts of him to respond and he had to keep his wits about him.

She frowned. “You didn’t get a raise?” she mumbled against his fingers. “No new office?”

“No, I’ll get a raise.” He glanced at the ceiling, at the flickering lights of the television, toward the glass door leading to their small patio. Anywhere but at her shining face.

“Nick.” Her hands framed his cheeks and turned his attention back to her. “What is it?”

He’d never been a coward. She’d understand. She loved him. She wanted what was best for both of them and this was a grand opportunity for his career. She was a wonderful teacher, she’d find another job...

“The new office is in Missouri.”

Her stunned silence bounced off the walls. From the corner of his eye, he could see the comedian speaking to his cohort in the sitcom that had replaced the variety show, their mouths moving wordlessly. A branch scraped across the glass door of the patio.

“Caro?”

She pushed against his shoulders, climbing to her feet. She scooped up her clothes and hugged them against her body, crossing the space to the stairs.

“Don’t walk away. We have to talk about this.”

She glanced at him over her shoulder, dignified in her posture. For a moment, he was distracted by the lean length of her, the tight buttocks, the slender legs.

But her words snapped him back to the conversation. “You’re asking me to move, right? Did you hear a word I said earlier? No, of course you didn’t. I didn’t finish because you distracted me.”

She leaned forward. “Well, let me tell you the rest. Ms. Russell wants to develop my program for the entire district. The vice superintendent of curriculum, Nick!”

She flung her hands out, her stance a belligerent, naked goddess. “She wants me to work with the other teachers next year and go into their classrooms. The administration talked about it at their work session today and are willing to give me a stipend for the extra hours. Are you asking me to give that up?”

“No.” He stopped. How could she develop her program here in Iowa if they moved to Missouri for his new position?

Her eyes narrowed. “I’m not going.” She took another step toward the stairs and rested a hand on the railing. “This is what my mom did, Nick. She followed my dad everywhere he wanted to go. Not once did she get a chance to be her own person, someone other than George Armstrong’s wife.”

“Caro.” He sat up, his arms crossed over his thighs. She had looked fierce and commanding standing in the middle of the living room, her eyes intense. He felt vulnerable, arguing his case naked. “Good teachers are needed everywhere. You’ll get a great recommendation. You can start your reading program in Missouri.”

“You don’t start changing things as soon as you move into a new district.” She stomped toward the stairs, her body disappearing around the bend.

“We’re not done talking about this,” he called after her.

All he heard in response was the sound of her feet treading up the steps.

THE BEDROOM DOOR WAS shut when he made it upstairs. He had locked the doors, checked the windows, turned off all the lights. Stalling, to let her have time to get ready for bed, to calm down and realize that the promotion was good for both of them.

The lights were out in the room when he pushed the door open. “Caro?” he whispered.

The streetlight shone through a crack in the curtain and illuminated the bed, showing her curled on the farthest edge away from the door. He could hear her light breathing, but he couldn’t tell if she was asleep or faking it so she didn’t have to talk to him.

He crossed the room and entered the small bathroom, brushing his teeth quickly. He clicked off the light and made his way through the dark room, climbing onto his side of the bed.

She tensed up and he sighed. “Caro, we have to talk about this.”

Silence.

He touched her shoulder. “Caro.”

She rolled away and he waited for her to tumble from the bed. She paused and he knew she was clinging to the edge of the mattress.

“Fine.” He stretched out on his side of the bed, his back to her. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Breakfast was a quiet affair. He had awakened in the night, expecting her to be spooned around his back. Instead, he had felt only the wide chasm of the empty mattress between them. Hurt and angry, he had settled back into his pillow, determined to wait her out.

“I have a meeting tonight, so I’ll be home about six.” Her voice was neutral.

“Do you want me to start something for supper? I should be home at five-thirty.”

“There’s hamburger for tacos in the refrigerator.”

He nodded. Anyone observing them would see two people going about their before-work activities. No raised voices, no angry glares.

No kiss goodbye.

HE WAS CHOPPING TOMATOES into fine pieces when she came home. “Hi.” He kept his voice low. “How was your day?”

“Fine. We had a meeting with one of my parents. I think we sorted out the problem.”

“That’s good.” He slid the chopped tomatoes into one side of the divided bowl. His back to her, he unscrewed the lid on a jar of black olives and drained them before adding them to the other side of the bowl.

Caroline reached over his shoulder and snagged an olive, popping it into her mouth. Her other hand rested on his shoulder.

“Sorry about last night,” she said softly, her breath a whisper against his ear.

He relaxed and turned around, placing his hands on her waist. “It’s okay. I didn’t mean to spring it on you like that.”

She tilted back, her eyes narrowed. “You weren’t hoping that making love would keep me from yelling at you?”

“I didn’t plan it that way, but afterward, I did think it might help.” He kissed the tip of her nose and then edged away, giving the hamburger sizzling on the stove a stir. “I didn’t accept the promotion yet, Caro. I wanted to talk to you first.”

“I figured that out after I calmed down this morning.” She carried the condiments to the table and spread out the dishes he had stacked in the center. “I made a list.”

His bark of laughter echoed around the room. She faced him, her hands on her hips. “I know you think my lists are crazy, but they let us see all the options. I’ll show you after supper.”

He nodded and dished up the meat. Caroline was always easier to talk to when she was well fed.

After dinner, with the dishwasher humming quietly in the background, Caroline lit a candle on the kitchen counter. The soft scent of apple cinnamon cut through the spicy aroma of the tacos they had just eaten. Outside, a neighbor mowed the common area in front of the town houses, taking advantage of the light now that daylight saving time had started. Two children raced past the window on big-wheeled tricycles, their voices high and shrill over the loud whirring of their tires.

“I listed the pros and cons of two options,” Caroline said.

He turned away from the scene outside. “Two options?”

She pulled a tablet out of her bag and opened it to the first page. “Not what you think.”

He frowned. The only two options that came to his mind were taking the job or not taking the job.

She laid her hand on top of his. “You need to take the job, Nick. That’s a given. You’ve worked hard for the promotion. I know we didn’t consider a move, but that doesn’t have to be a bad thing. We just have to look at what’s good for both of us.”

He glanced at the paper she had turned toward him. The heading at the top caught his eye. “You stay in Iowa?”

“Yes. Wait—” she said quickly, lifting her hand. “Just listen before you say anything.”

She pointed to the first two items on her list. “Pros. You get the experience and job you deserve. I can develop my program with the teachers.”

He tapped the right side of the paper. “We won’t be together.”

“During the week.” She ran a finger over the words she had written on the first line of the con entry. “Four days.”

“Four days? We both work Monday through Friday.” How could she calmly suggest that they be apart four days each week? They hadn’t slept away from each other since their wedding night. Even angry last night, they’d been in the same bed.

“You’ll come home every Friday night. And I checked the mileage. If you left early Monday morning once in a while, you’d still get to your office on time. So, you’d really only be gone Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.” She raised a finger with each day.

He bent over and kissed the raised fingers. “Three days, four days. It doesn’t matter, Caro. That’s a lot of days to be apart.”

She tapped the paper. “But, Nick, it’s only during the school year. We’ll have the summer and holidays together. I can visit you on my breaks.”

He sat back in his chair, his arms folded over his chest. He didn’t like her reasoning, but he was willing to hear her out. “Okay, go on with the list.”

“With the raise you’ll receive and my stipend, we can save toward our house.” She lifted her hand again when he opened his mouth. “I know, I know, it doesn’t sound like we’ll save money, with two places to live. But if we can find you an apartment close to your office, we’ll save on gas money.”

The pros took up the full side of the paper. Only one item was on the con side. “You don’t mind living apart for the year?” he asked.

She fixed him with her look that was just a fraction short of being disgusted. “Nick, it’s just for a few months. And we’ll see each other every weekend.”

She scooted her chair over until she could frame his face with her hands. “Honey, what if this job doesn’t work out? Or you don’t like the town? I’ll have given up this great opportunity for no reason. I want to try it for one year.”

She wasn’t pleading, but he could hear the tremor in her voice. “If I do move with you, I’ll have to get another certificate to teach in Missouri.” She sighed and he felt the motion all the way to his feet. “You know what happened when we moved to Lawrence. I had to work as an aide for a year before a job came open.”

He nodded. “You’re right.” He scooped her into his lap, holding her close. “But what am I going to do when I come home and you’re not there?”

“We’ll talk on the phone. And we’re both always so busy during the week, we hardly see each other in the evening anyway.”

He couldn’t put it into words, but he liked knowing that she was sitting at the dining-room table, her school papers spread around her, while he read through a report or checked on figures. She was always there when he prepared for bed, eager to tell him about her latest meeting or some funny story from her day.

Right now she was warm in his arms. How would he deal with the long nights without her?

“I MADE A COUPLE OF CASSEROLES and put them in the freezer.” Caroline stood next to her car, watching him add her last suitcase to the trunk. “And you have bread and sandwich fixings for the week.”

He caught her shoulders and kissed her mouth, silencing the rest of her words. “Caro, I can take care of myself.”

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.” Her brow was puckered in a frown, her gaze darting from the car to the door of the apartment building. “I mean, you lived at home, then we got married and I took care of you—”

His kiss was rougher and when he lifted his head, he was pleased to see the dazed look in her eyes. “I can take care of myself,” he repeated. “Now, you? What will happen if you need a clean blouse in the middle of the week?”

She grinned and tossed her head. Dressed in cutoff shorts and a Mickey Mouse tee shirt, her long blond hair pulled back in a simple ponytail, she looked more like a high-school student than a teacher heading back for a new school year. “I’ll buy a new one and wait until you come home to do the laundry.”

He laughed and spun her around, giving her a soft pat on the derriere when he put her down. “No shopping.” He marched her toward the car, leaning down to open her door. “We’re saving money here, remember? We want to buy a house we can live in together.”

“Okay, okay.” She stood on tiptoe and planted a long kiss on his mouth.

He held her close. The last two months had been a whirlwind of furnishing his small studio apartment and training at the new office. He liked the people and they had responded well to him. The local manager, the oldest son of the company’s owner, had invited them over for dinner. Caroline had discovered a mutual interest in authors with Mrs. Abbott. Their youngest child, an almost kindergartner, had crawled into Caroline’s lap and stayed there until sent to the family room to play with her older siblings.

Caroline had spent her days while he was at the office putting together school materials. Their nights had involved making memories that would last them through the days ahead. In a new place, a new town, she had lost any inhibitions and he sometimes wondered what his neighbors on either side of the apartment thought of the new tenant.

“I feel like your lover and not your wife,” she had whispered to him last night, arms and legs wrapped around each other in the dark, tiny space he would call home for the next ten months. “Grabbing every minute together, until we can sneak away again.”

He had held her close, savoring her scent, her soft skin, committing them to memory for the lonely nights ahead.

Now he tucked her into the car and reached across to fasten her seat belt. “Call me as soon as you get home.”

“I will.”

He shut the door and she rolled down the window. “I love you, Mr. Eddington.”

“Ditto, Mrs. Eddington.”

He watched the car head down the street, waiting until she disappeared from view before going back to his apartment. The place was functional, one large room with a kitchenette built into the wall under the window. They had pushed the double bed into the opposite corner and hidden it behind a wooden screen Caroline had found at a garage sale. She had positioned the flowered couch at an angle from the front door. An easy chair, coffee table and simple entertainment center with a TV and his stereo created the illusion of a living room separate from the other areas.

The apartment felt empty without Caroline. He wandered around, touching the leaves of the potted plant she had placed on the table, straightening a picture she had hung from their honeymoon in Colorado. He had snapped the shot from their cabin porch, the sun casting shadows on the canyon walls across the river. She had surprised him and had it enlarged and framed for their last anniversary.

“So you don’t forget me,” she had said, sitting cross-legged on the bed. They had been eating pizza, the only food available in the town by the time they finished celebrating between the sheets.

“I won’t have time to forget you.” He fed her the last bite of pepperoni. “I’m going to be so busy at work, I won’t have time to think of anything else. Once I’m home, I’ll drop off to sleep.”

He sank onto the sofa, his feet stretched in front of him. He wished he was tired enough to fall asleep right now. The long nights of boisterous lovemaking should have worn him out. Instead, all he could think about was his lonely bed and the long drive ahead for Caroline.

He changed into running shoes and shorts and jogged through the neighborhood, under the shade of the thick oak trees that lined the yards. The apartment building was nestled at the edge of a residential area, the five units catering to those few people in town who didn’t have a house of their own.

A dog barked at him from the back fence of a two-story frame house and he gave a jaunty wave. He hadn’t had time to meet any of his neighbors yet, too eager to savor the time he had with Caroline. He would spend the next few days getting to know them, to become part of this town.

His shower over, he turned on the evening news and slumped on the couch. When the phone rang, he dashed across the room and grabbed the receiver from the wall. “Hello?”

“Hi. I’m home.”

He glanced at the cheery kitchen clock she had placed over the refrigerator. Everywhere he looked, touches of her. He didn’t know if they would provide him with solace or make him regret their decision. “Didn’t take you long,” he said.

“I didn’t stop. And I didn’t speed, thank you very much.”

He grinned and sank to the floor, his back against the wall, the cord of the phone wrapped around his wrist. “Did I say you did?”

“No. But you can’t let it go that I was stopped on our honeymoon. The only time I’ve ever been pulled over, I might add. And I didn’t even get a ticket!”

“The officer gave you a warning ticket.” The yellow slip was packed away with their wedding pictures and license, a reminder of that first trip to Colorado. She had been nervous when the Kansas highway patrolman had come to the window, stating that she had just been married and the name on her driver’s license hadn’t been changed yet. The young officer had given her a warning and said they would be watching her.

Her sniff of indignation sounded over the line. He could imagine her sitting with her legs crossed, her back against the headboard of the bed. “What time do you have to be at school tomorrow?” he asked.

“We’re working in our classrooms. We can go whenever we want. I’ll go in when I wake up.”

“The afternoon, then?”

Another sniff. “I’m not sleeping in that late.”

“Maybe I should call you and wake you up before I go to work.”

“Don’t you dare!”

The bantering went on for several more minutes. He was prone on the floor, the phone pressed against his ear as he said outrageous things to make her laugh. “I should hang up now,” she finally said.

“Yeah.” They were talking late on Sunday night, but the bill would still add up.

“Love you.”

“Ditto.”

“Nick! At least say it over the phone.”

“I did.”

A long sigh. “Sleep tight,” she said. “And have a good day tomorrow.”

He crawled into bed and lay on his back, watching the shadows from the streetlight flicker over the ceiling. Her scent lingered on the pillow next to him and he tugged it into his arms, feeling foolish but comforted at the same time. He was a grown man. He could survive a few days without his wife next to him in bed.

The days at work passed quickly. The owner of the heating and air-conditioning company had opened this second branch three years ago, putting the main responsibilities in the hands of his oldest son. Nick had been chosen to head the marketing department and improve their sales in the region. He pored over reports, looking for ways to help grow the company, papers covering the dinette table he and Caroline had found at a secondhand shop.

He talked to Caroline each evening, after he ran down the streets of his new neighborhood. His running had been relegated to the bottom of his priorities over the last few years. Work and marriage had taken up his time. Now he found the exercise necessary, the sweat and heat he generated helping him forget the empty apartment and the emptier bed.

After covering several miles, he would shower, dial the number of their town house and crawl under the covers. He had replaced the short phone cord with one that reached to all corners of his temporary home. Listening to her chatter about her day while he lay in bed brought her closer.

Not that he could ever tell her how he felt. Except for her “I love you” at the end of each conversation, Caroline never expressed any emotion and certainly never let him know that she missed him. He knew it was foolish, but his pride wouldn’t let him say that he missed her first.

“When are you coming home tomorrow?” she asked after a detailed description of her open house the night before.

He kicked off his running shoes. The phone had been ringing when he came in from his run and he had grabbed it before she hung up. “About tomorrow night—”

“No!” she interrupted. “Nick, you don’t have to work late, do you?”

He dropped his sweaty clothes on the floor and grabbed a towel off the rack, mopping up the sweat dripping from his forehead. “They’re having a picnic to introduce the new employees to the community. I’m expected to be there.”

“Why didn’t they have it earlier? Your boss knew I was going back to Iowa.”

“The picnic isn’t just for our company. The chamber puts it on every year to welcome any new employees that have been hired by the different businesses. They have it in the fall to include the new teachers. I have to be there, Caro. It’s a big deal around here.”

“Fine. Can you leave after it’s over?”

He wanted to. He’d planned to show up, eat a few hot dogs, chum around with the people he was starting to know by name and sight. Then leave and be home by midnight at the latest.

“I don’t think so. There’s a dance, some speeches, lots of mingling. Most people don’t leave until around eleven, I’m told.” Too late to drive three and a half hours. Even if he wanted to see his wife after four days without her.

“Can’t you explain you have to get home to your wife?”

It was the closest she had come to saying she missed him in all of their phone conversations.

“I wish I could, honey. I’ll leave first thing Saturday morning. I’ll be there before you wake up.” He would crawl into their bed, nuzzle the soft skin of her neck, wake her up just enough to rekindle those fires they had been burning all summer.

Her sigh sounded over the line. “We have a fund-raiser for school. A car wash. I took the first shift, from nine to eleven, figuring I’d be there and back before you woke up.”

He stretched out on the bed, the towel wrapped around his waist. “Then I’ll be waiting for you when you come home.”

THE WEEKEND WAS BUSY. Except for several hours in bed after she came home from the car wash, her hair wet and her skin slippery and soapy from the kids’ antics, their time together was spent on household chores. He caught up on the bills, ran a few loads of laundry, helped her stop a leak in the shower. She made what she expected to be a quick trip to the grocery and ended up stuck in the weekend crowd. They had considered a movie but decided Saturday date night wouldn’t give them any privacy.

“I’m coming to you,” she announced over the phone the next Wednesday. “When you come here, you work on the house. I want to have you all to myself, no chores.”

“About this weekend—”

“What this time?” Her voice was resigned.

“We have a retreat to determine the direction for the new year. Mr. Abbott is coming himself.” The boss had been in communication with him during the summer months, but this was the first time he had shown up at the office since Nick’s move.

“I’ll come home next weekend, no matter what,” he added.

Her long sigh echoed over the line. “All right. I can’t go two weeks without you, Nick.”

The longing in her voice warmed his heart. They might not say how much they missed each other, but he knew the need was there. He felt it every night when he crawled into his lonely bed.

THE RETREAT WAS DEEMED a success, Mr. Abbott calling him aside to praise the work he was doing. Nick was certain the business would continue to thrive if they took advantage of the growth spurt that was happening in the town. He was in daily contact with the home-builders' association, working with the contractors developing new neighborhoods. He had heard a rumor that a large company was considering the area for its latest factory and he was following up on that possibility. Abbott's Heating and Air could benefit from both the new factory construction and employee housing that would be needed.

He missed talking with Caroline about the progress that was being made. After the first month and the arrival of their phone bill, they had curtailed the long evening phone calls in favor of shorter calls each morning. He'd call and wake her up, they'd chat for a few minutes, and then both rush off to get ready for their day.

Little talk had gone on during the two weekends he made it home. He had tossed in a load of laundry and they had jumped into bed. Once, Caroline had started to tell him about her latest workshop, but he had been distracted by the movement of her lips and they had fallen back into bed, surfacing only when it was time for him to leave.

"Come down next weekend," he urged at the end of September. He had an important meeting on Friday with the factory manager that would no doubt last late into the night. If she drove to Wheeler, they could salvage the rest of the weekend. "I'll make sure nothing interrupts our time on Saturday. We'll hide away from the rest of the world," he whispered into the phone. "Have that affair you talked about."

"Isn't that what we've been doing when you come back here?"

He laughed and then glanced around the small space he was calling home. The current state of his apartment couldn't be further from a secret love nest. Clothes from his week were spread on the chairs and couch. His running shoes and shorts trailed a path to the bathroom. Papers from the current project were piled on the dinette table and chairs. Dirty dishes littered the small sink, and old newspapers were stacked against the overflowing trash can.

He had a week to clean up or she would leave him for being a slob.

"Just come," he begged. His adrenaline over winning the bid for the factory's heating and air-conditioning systems threatened to overtake him and he needed to release steam. With his wife.

He arrived home late Thursday after an intense meeting with the department heads. Hammering out their figures before the next day's meeting meant the team worked through dinner. He was confident the final negotiations would go well for both parties.

Now he needed to spend some quality time with his apartment. The days had blended into the nights and the mess had grown. He planned to crank up some rock and roll and get down to the dirty business of straightening the place before Caroline saw that their love nest had deteriorated into a sloppy bachelor pad.

Whistling, he walked up the two steps to his front door, his tie loosened and the top button of his shirt undone. The suits were the worst part of his day. Who had ever decided a man needed a cord tied around his neck to be successful? He stuck the key in the door and pushed it open.

"Surprise!" Caroline jumped from the couch and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He staggered and caught the edge of the door to keep his balance. "What are you doing here?"

She blinked and he shook his head, sorry his voice had sounded so rough. "I didn't mean it that way." He dropped his tie and hooked an arm around her neck, tugging her close. "I didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"I gathered that." Her voice was dry and he glanced around the room.

She had washed and dried the dishes, putting them away in the open cupboards that flanked the kitchen window. His clothes were gone from the various places he had flung them each night. The covers on the bed were smoothed down and he saw a wad of bedding in the hamper. She had even changed the sheets.

He sat down on the couch, keeping her close to him. The citrusy perfume she favored wafted over him and he inhaled deeply. “I expected you tomorrow night. Did you take the day off?”

She shook her head. “Fall break. I forgot to tell you and then decided to surprise you.”

Her scent was causing his insides to twist and he had a strong desire to check out the clean sheets.

Her fingers were busy on his shirt. He sprawled against the back of the couch, watching her work her way down his shirt and onto his belt through half-closed eyes. When she slid the zipper down on his pants, he stilled her hand. “I’ve had a long day.”

“Oh.” Disappointment shone in her green eyes.

He laced his fingers through hers, tugging her to her feet. “I think I’d do better in the bed. Just in case I fall asleep.”

Desire flickered again on her face. “I don’t think you’ll be falling asleep.”

“Really?” He backed her to the bed and gave her a light push, grinning when she bounced on top of the spread.

She raised her arms, holding them wide. “Not right away. After I’m through with you, though, you may wish you had tomorrow off.”

He dropped onto her, rolling them over and over the bed. The meeting with factory management flickered through his mind. No, he had to be there. But a few hours’ wrestling with his wife could only heighten his ability to negotiate the final terms. He buried his hands in her thick curls and prepared for the next day.

“MR. EDDINGTON? YOUR WIFE is here.”

Nick lifted his head from the budget report he’d been studying and frowned at Mildred, his secretary. “Caroline is here?”

He didn’t wait for her response, pushing his chair back and rushing across the room. Why was Caroline here in the middle of the week?

She rose from her seat on one of the soft chairs. “Hi, Nick.” Her cheeks were flushed and her voice sounded nervous.

“What are you doing here?” His hand cupped her elbow and he ran his gaze over her quickly.

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