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Groom in Training  
Gail Gaymer Martin



Mills & Boon Love Inspired

Gail Gaymer Martin

**Groom In Training**

«HarperCollins»

## **Martin G.**

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A widow with a sad past, Steph Wright finds comfort in her faith and her adorable Border Collie, Fred. When scampering Fred becomes friendly with the neighbor's pedigreed Bouvier, Steph meets the very handsome Nick Davis. With a broken engagement and a busy job, Nick isn't open to love and romance. Especially when Steph needs an escort to a wedding, and Nick agrees to be her not-really-date. But through dog walks, long talks and a shared love of the Lord, Steph realizes there's some unexpected groom-in-training going on, too!

# Содержание

Nick had so many things to learn about Steph.	6
GAIL GAYMER MARTIN	7
Groom in Training	8
MILLS & BOON	9
Contents	10
Chapter One	11
Chapter Two	20
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28



## **Nick had so many things to learn about Steph.**

And one day he wanted to tell her about his broken engagement, but it opened too many doors right now. Later maybe, when he knew how things were going with them. Now they were friends. Friends almost too fast, and that scared him.

Her faith. The concern knotted in his mind. He liked her too much. They had things in common—the love of dogs, laughter, pride in their work—but that wasn't enough. His love for God was primary in his life, and he needed that in his marriage.

Marriage? Where did that come from? His heart had rushed past his good sense. Marriage wasn't an option until he got his act together and until he felt God's leading to a life partner. But that's what bothered him. Nick did feel something different. He sensed Steph had come into his life for a reason and for a deeper purpose. They had a comfortable relationship together already. When he dropped by, the pleasure sparked in her eyes. But he'd also seen the look of question there, too, and he longed to know what it meant.

## **GAIL GAYMER MARTIN**

A former counselor, Gail Gaymer Martin is an award-winning author of women's fiction, romance and romantic suspense. *Groom in Training* is her forty-second published work of long fiction with three million books in print, and many of her novels have received numerous national awards. Gail is the author of twenty-five worship resource books and is the author of *Writing the Christian Romance* from Writers Digest Books. She is a cofounder of American Christian Fiction Writers.

When not behind her computer, Gail enjoys a busy life—traveling, presenting workshops at conferences, speaking at churches and libraries, and singing as a soloist, praise leader and choir member at her church, where she also plays handbells and hand chimes. She also sings with one of the finest Christian chorales in Michigan, the Detroit Lutheran Singers. Gail lives in Michigan with her husband, Bob. To learn more about her, visit her Web site at [www.gailmartin.com](http://www.gailmartin.com). Write to Gail at P.O. Box 760063, Lathrup Village, MI 48076, or at [authorgailmartin@aol.com](mailto:authorgailmartin@aol.com). She enjoys hearing from readers.

**Groom in Training**  
**Gail Gaymer Martin**



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Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.

—Luke 15:6

In memory of our daughter, Brenda Martin Bailey, and to our son, Dave Martin, who is the real songwriter and lead singer of Clay Adams Band.

And to Jinx, our terrier, who experienced the real two-week trek until he found his veterinarian, and we rejoiced when we brought him home. He's now in doggy heaven, but he was a character we'll never forget.

## Contents

Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen  
Chapter Fourteen  
Chapter Fifteen  
Questions for Discussion

## Chapter One

Hearing a ruckus in the backyard, Steph leaped from the kitchen chair and darted to the patio door. She slid it open with a thud and stepped outside. “Fred. Stop.”

The yips and barks split the air while Fred wagged his tail and leaped along the fence with a shaggy gray mop of a dog on the other side.

Steph’s gaze shifted to a man leaning against the fence, her new neighbor she presumed. An amiable grin curved his full lips, and he gazed at her with twinkling saddle-brown eyes.

“Fred. Come.” She clapped her hands to get her border collie’s attention. He twisted his neck, and she could see his struggle to respond to her call or to stay with his nose against the chain-link fence while his shaggy friend mesmerized him. Finally Fred bounded toward her.

Steph approached the stranger, who lifted his hand in welcome and then ran his fingers through his dark brown, wavy hair. It looked tousled and made him seem playful. As she studied his classic good looks, Fred tangled around her feet, and she nearly tripped. So did her pulse.

The stranger gestured toward Fred. “It’s nice to see another dog in the neighborhood and right next door.”

Steph chuckled. “Not everyone feels like that.” She’d forced the levity, startled by the sensation she’d felt when she looked in his eyes. She lowered her gaze to his ring finger. Bare.

What was she thinking? Steph released a puff of air and managed to meet his gaze again.

He grinned. “I’m getting a kick out of the dogs.”

“I noticed.” His warm smile heated her face.

He grasped the fence rail and tilted back on his heels. She watched as he lowered his body to the fence again, as if thinking of what to say next. She forced her focus away from his arms.

He straightened. “I hope I didn’t disturb you.”

“You didn’t disturb me at all.” Not true. His beautiful eyes disturbed her. “But Fred and his furry friend did.” Furry friend? She cringed listening to herself. She sounded like an idiot.

“My furry friend is Suzette.”

Happy to have another place to focus, she looked at the slate-gray dog, its eyes nearly covered by long silky bangs. “Nice to meet you, Suzette.” Managing to get her wits under control, Steph lifted her head. “And nice to meet you, too.” She extended her hand. “Stephanie Wright. Steph to my friends.”

“A pleasure.” He gave her fingers an easy squeeze. “Nick Davis.” He smiled and tilted his head toward the dogs. “They seem to like each other. It’s too bad people can’t make friends that easily.”

She eyed the dogs, grinning at their wagging tails and their snouts sniffing against the chain links. “You mean, as easily as rubbing our noses together?”

His grin broadened. “Sure, if we were Eskimos.” He winked.

Why had she said “our” noses? Noses would have been bad enough. Feeling the heat reach her cheeks, she averted her eyes. While she grappled with her discomfort, she watched the dogs’ antics. Fred appeared smitten.

When her cheeks cooled, Steph decided the dogs were safer conversation. “Your dog looks like a big rag mop. What breed is she?”

Nick’s dark eyes twinkled. “A Bouvier.”

“Bouvier. So that’s what they look like.”

He glanced over his shoulder, appearing to look for an intruder, then leaned closer as if sharing a secret. His breath whispered against her cheek. “If you ask my brother her breed, he’d tell you Suzette is a Bouvier des Flandres. She’s actually Martin’s dog.” He drew back, giving her a crooked grin. “Martin thinks it sounds classier.”

“Well, la-di-da.” La-di-da? Get a grip. She had to stop herself from rolling her eyes. “Fred’s just a border collie from Michigan.” Steph hoped she sounded sane.

“But a very nice one, I’m sure.”

He’d ignored her lunacy or else didn’t notice. That made her feel better.

“Martin’s pitiful with his pretentiousness at times. I don’t know where he gets it.”

Steph appreciated the distraction. “I’d like to strangle my brother once in a while.” More often than she wanted to remember. He’d upset her much too often. “My parents were thrilled to finally have a son to carry on the family name, and Hal knew it. He seemed to think he’d been born with a crown, and he expected us to bow to his every need.”

She peered at Fred, his tail slapping against the grass.

“Fred usually doesn’t carry on like that. He’s used to being around other dogs.”

“Suzette’s a flirt.” Nick flashed Steph a grin, then crouched down and put his finger through the chain link. “Is she playing with your heart, old man?”

Fred gave his finger a sniff and then swiped it with his tongue.

Suzette had no intention of being outdone. She wiggled between Fred and Nick, then nuzzled her nose against the links. Nick petted her, then looked up at Steph. “If you’re not familiar with a Bouvier, feel her coat.”

Steph leaned over the fence and drew her hand across the dog’s fur. “She’s not a rag mop at all. She feels like chenille.”

He ran his fingers through her coat, too, their hands brushing against each other’s, and when he rose, they stood eye to eye.

Something happened. Her stomach flipped, and she felt out of control. Steph motioned toward the patio door. “It’s been nice, but I need to get inside. This is housework day for me.”

His lips curved to a teasing frown. “That doesn’t sound like fun.” He shoved his hand into his pocket. “It’s been nice talking with you, Steph.” His brow arched. “I hope it’s okay to call you that.”

“Consider yourself a friend.”

“I’d like that.” He took a step backward. “Maybe we could walk the dogs one day. They seem to get along well.”

Her stomach shot to her chest, and her response followed at the same speed. “We have a park nearby.” She swung her hand in that direction. “That would be fun.”

He stepped back. “Great. I’ll talk with you again.” He backed away, then pivoted and headed toward the house with Suzette bouncing beside him.

Fred let out a whimper and so did Steph.

She made her way to the patio and through the door, then caved into the same kitchen chair she’d been sitting on before the distraction. She’d flirted with the man. Flirting wasn’t her style, and on top of it, she’d talked about rubbing noses. Where did that come from?

Steph rolled her eyes as she got up and opened the refrigerator. She pulled out a soft drink, snapped the tab and took a swallow before leaning against the kitchen counter. She’d been a widow four years, and as time passed, she’d decided relationships were too difficult. Before he’d died, Doug had drifted from her like bubbles on the wind. She reached out to grasp him, and he vanished. Her life became dark, but these past years, she’d finally found the light. Artificial light sometimes, but she’d learned to keep her eyes wide-open. Today she’d squinted and look what happened.

Steph pulled her spine from the counter and grasped the dust cloth and lemony spray. Back to work and forget the few moments of backyard fantasy. Reality made more sense.

Nick stood inside the house and gazed through the window at Steph as she strode toward her patio door. Her straight blond hair whisked against her shoulders. The woman put a grin on his face. She loved that dog. Fred. The name gave him a chuckle. The border collie seemed well behaved and friendly. So did Steph. His mouth pulled to a grin again.

He rested his hand on the windowsill as he watched Fred trot beside her. Steph’s large blue eyes, canopied by long lashes, reminded him of a summer sky. He’d been drawn to her blunt comments,

especially the witty ones that made him smile. And she'd flirted, but in a nice way. She'd even flushed. His pulse heightened, picturing her playfulness.

The garage door rumbled and dragged him from his thoughts. Nick heard a car door slam. Then the garage door closed and he listened for his brother's footsteps.

Martin came through the doorway with a puzzled look. "What are you doing here?"

"Want me to leave?" Nick didn't wait for an answer. He opened the refrigerator and gazed inside.

"You can't afford your own food with that business of yours?"

Nick's back stiffened. When it came to his business, Martin's humor grated on his nerves. He forced himself to let it go, then faced his brother. "You asked me to drop by to walk your dog and feed her because you're too busy. Now you begrudge me a drink?" He pulled out a cola and popped the tab. "I stopped by to offer my service."

"Service?" Distrust grew on Martin's face.

Nick motioned toward the boxes. "Thought I'd help you unpack."

His chin raised as he eyed Nick. "Unpack? Why?"

"Why not? If you tell me where you want things, I'll unpack some of the cartons or they'll be there forever."

A questioning look filled Martin's face. "You're not looking for a handout?"

"No handouts." The reference stabbed Nick in the gut. He'd never asked Martin for anything, and he never would.

"You really want to unpack boxes? Are you sure?"

"Positive."

The response relaxed Martin's expression. He tilted his head toward the largest stack of cartons. "I guess you can start over there."

Nick had stretched the truth a bit. Not that he hadn't planned to help, but his offer was the way to a means. He needed to work it into the conversation without making a big deal out of it although it was to him. He could ask point-blank, but he preferred to ease it in. Martin enjoyed pointing out his guilt.

He hoisted a heavy box onto the table and flipped open the lid. "By the way, I met your neighbor."

Martin grunted.

"She's very nice."

"She?" Martin arched an eyebrow.

Nick nodded. "Good sense of humor. Attractive."

"What does that mean?" Martin's voice left no question that he was aggravated.

Nick swiveled. "It means she's a pretty woman." Pretty wasn't the half of it. She was great looking. "And she likes dogs."

A dark frown filled Martin's face. "I hope you're not matchmaking."

"You're kidding? I wouldn't put a lovely woman through that." Nick had tried to sound lighthearted.

"Glad to hear it."

Nick avoided looking in Martin's direction. His brother would see the truth in his eyes. He'd been drawn to Steph from the moment he watched her march across the grass, and the more he thought about it, an unsettled feeling rocked in his stomach. Nick dug deeper into the box.

The rustle of packing material quieted, and their conversation ended until Martin blurted into the silence. "What makes you think this woman likes dogs?"

"She owns a border collie."

"Seems like everyone owns some kind of mutt." Irritation weighted Martin's voice.

“Attitude. Attitude, bro. Suzette’s not the only dog in the world.” Steph’s spoiled brother had nothing on the Bouvier. Suzette also wore a crown in Martin’s eyes. Nick pulled out more packing material from the box. “He might not be as classy, but he’s a well-trained dog. That’s more than I can say about Suzette.”

Martin spun around to face him, but Nick refused to back off. “The border collie’s friendly. Give him a chance. I know how you are.”

“I don’t want him getting friendly with Suzette. She’s purebred.”

Despite his provocation, Nick tried to cover his grin, thinking of Steph’s “la-di-da” comment.

Rather than start a quarrel, Nick didn’t respond. “Where do you want the china dinnerware?”

Martin didn’t speak but motioned to a cabinet.

Nick opened the door, then lifted an octagonal plate with a bamboo shaped edge and slid it onto a shelf. Expensive he could tell. He grabbed another and flipped it over. Royal Signet China. Nick never heard of it, but he knew Martin’s taste.

His own taste raised in question. What had happened to him? He’d never cared about fancy china or expensive crystal. Women often fussed about that, he remembered. What kind of tableware did Steph own? What difference did it make? He’d never see it.

He emptied the box, then slapped the lid closed. He’d already experienced one fiancée who tossed her ring in his face just before the wedding. Why would he allow himself to even daydream about another?

The memory triggered a new question. He paused until he got Martin’s attention. “Have you ever thought about dating again?”

Martin’s head drew back. “Me?”

“You’re the only other person in the room.” Nick stood with his hand on the box lid. Martin’s social life ended after his failed marriage. He’d never been one to hang out with friends, and Nick didn’t recall Martin dating anyone other than the woman he’d married.

“Why would I date?”

“You have a good life. You have a new home that’s too big for even one person.”

“One person and a dog.”

“Okay, and a dog.” A stream of air burst from his nose. “I just wondered. You’re still young enough. You’ve been divorced for—”

“Don’t bring that up.”

Nick drew in a breath. “You have lots of things going for you, but for some reason, you aren’t happy.”

“I’m happy.” Martin spun around, pointing his index finger at him. “And what about you? I don’t see you with a social life to brag about.”

His brother had nailed him. But Nick had an excuse. The business took a lot of time and money. Nick faltered. That was an excuse. He’d avoided commitment since his failed engagement. Maybe dating would work without marriage as an option. He wondered about Steph’s situation. She was single, he assumed. He’d noticed she didn’t wear a ring, and she’d even flirted a little. But that didn’t mean much in today’s society.

Nick opened another carton and removed layers of Bubble Wrap. When he looked inside, he caught his breath. He grasped a crystal plate as memories flooded back. He drew out a faceted crystal bowl, and beside it, he recognized other pieces from his youth. “These were Mother’s.” Sadness washed over him, picturing his mom since the stroke.

Martin glanced up and nodded. “You took some of her dishes, didn’t you?”

“A few things.”

Tension grew on his brother’s face.

“I’m not challenging the pieces you have, Martin. You use them more than I would.”

His brother gave a shrug and lifted another box from the floor.

The door had been opened to his true purpose for dropping by. Feeling the weight of his question, Nick managed to form the words. “Have you talked with her?”

“By her, you mean Mom?”

The question was moot. Nick didn’t answer.

“I’ve talked to her. She can’t utter a thing that makes sense.” He turned from the carton and leaned against the counter, his eyes piercing Nick’s. “You’re avoiding her.”

The words lashed Nick like a whip. “I’m not avoiding her. It kills me to see her so helpless.”

“You don’t think it kills me? Ignoring her doesn’t help. Do you think I don’t have to force myself to visit her in that condition and fill the time with one-sided conversation? You can’t shun her. She’s still your mother.”

“I know. I know.” Nick blocked his ears from Martin’s accusations. “I visit.”

“When was the last time?”

Like a punch in the stomach, Martin’s question knocked the wind out of Nick. “I’ll go. I just wondered if there’s any improvement.”

“Not much. She tries to talk, but it’s nearly impossible to understand her. The nurses do a better job than I do.”

Knots twisted in Nick’s chest. His mother was a good woman, and the horrible stroke had taken away her identity. She couldn’t do much for herself. She lay there being fed and diapered like a baby. The image tore at him.

“I’ll go this week. I promise.”

Martin focused sad eyes on him. “It’s not easy, Nick. At least make an effort.”

Nick nodded but couldn’t control a rebuttal. “And will you make an effort to be genial to Steph and Fred?”

Martin frowned. “Fred? Is that her husband?” He flashed an accusing look. “I thought you had your eye on the woman.”

Heat boiled in Nick’s chest. “Fred’s the dog, and since when do I get involved with married women?”

“That doesn’t stop some people. It didn’t slow down Denise.”

Nick’s anger softened. “I’m sorry, Martin. Denise did something terribly wrong, and I don’t condone it, either.”

Martin shook his head and reached for another dish. “I’m sorry for snapping.”

Surprised at his brother’s apology, Nick let it drop. But he couldn’t forget Martin’s comment about his interest in Steph. Sure, she’d gotten his attention, and he’d had fun doing a little flirting himself, but that’s all it was. They’d just met. Those things happened in movies not real life.

Still his defense rose. Martin often came off badly to strangers. “Is there something wrong with being neighborly?”

Martin lowered another carton onto the counter. “I don’t care what you do, but I don’t have time to be hanging over the fence, making small talk. I have a business to run.”

Nick took a lengthy breath and closed his mouth. The Bible said turn the other cheek, and that’s what he’d learned to do with Martin. If he knew what made his brother so one-sided, he might be able to help him.

As he delved into the next box, Nick kept silent. He’d always tried to get along with people. He’d go out of his way to be kind. Making friends only took a smile and a few kind words. Why couldn’t Martin do that?

Nick closed his eyes picturing the dogs bounding back and forth along the fence and brushing their noses together, bonding a new friendship, but the dogs faded. In their place, Steph’s image filled his mind, and he tried to block it. Why think about a hopeless situation? Relationships took time. That’s why Martin’s business was over the top while his was creeping on all fours.

Nick drew in a deep breath. He didn’t have time for a woman in his life now. Maybe never.

His heart skipped a beat. Who was he trying to convince?

“Heel.” Steph tightened the leash. Teaching Fred to stay at her side seemed her biggest challenge. And Fred’s. In the yard he followed her well, but when he had free rein outside the fence, the dog’s spirit grew, and he wanted to run. Once he calmed down, he’d be a winner and her friend Molly would be proud.

Steph couldn’t believe Molly’s wedding was so soon. Her bridesmaid dress fitting was scheduled the following week, and three weeks later, Molly would enjoy her big day.

The big day. Her own wedding sank into her thoughts. People married with great hopes and plans. She and Doug had. But something went wrong. He’d always been a little moody. She’d learned to stay out of his way at those times, but after the wedding, she had no home to run to. They shared a life, which meant she shared his emotional nosedives.

She’d urged him to see a doctor, to get help, but he was too proud, too positive that everyone else had the problem and not him. He’d almost convinced her. Maybe he had.

When she’d talked with Molly about this a couple years later, Molly told her to lean on the Lord. She didn’t know the Lord, and if she had, Steph wasn’t sure that even God could have helped. And if a God existed—Molly insisted He did—then why hadn’t He helped her when she needed Him the most?

That’s one thing she admired in Molly. She stuck to her faith, and she had an answer for everything. She’d asked Molly why God let bad things happen. Molly’s answer? She told Steph two things. First God gave His children free will, and Eve used it. She ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge that brought sin and evil into the world. Steph had to agree. People often caused their own problems—their own doubts and sinful ways. Steph still couldn’t decide about Molly’s explanation. Why didn’t the Lord stop Eve from eating the fruit if He knew everything?

Molly’s explanation: God didn’t want to be a puppeteer. Steph chuckled. Molly said He wanted His children to behave and love Him like a Father for who He was and not because they had no choice. After Steph thought about it, that made sense. If she ever had children, she would want them to choose to love her and not love her because they were forced.

Molly’s second explanation: through difficulties people learn. They grow and strengthen. They lean on God for help, and that binds them together. That made sense, too.

Steph rubbed her head. Sometimes she’d almost wanted to read the Bible and see if Molly knew what she was talking about. Steph questioned a lot of things. Even now she questioned what she could have done to make her marriage better. She wondered if she were at fault as Doug had accused her. Maybe she should have gone for help. A counselor might have taught her how to handle Doug’s moods, his anger, his—

“Fred, heel.” She gave the leash a quick tug and brought him to her side, grateful he’d pulled her away from her wallowing.

Steph looked up at the summer sky, hoping Molly’s wedding day would be as warm and cheerful. Weddings and funerals in the rain were terrible.

Funerals? Why did she let that slip into her mind?

Fred tugged again and jerked her forward. When Steph looked ahead, she understood Fred’s motivation. Suzette. She gained momentum, pleased to see Nick at the opposite end of the leash.

Nick waved, a smile growing on his face.

Fred’s enthusiasm quickened her steps even more. She waved back, and along with the leash, Steph felt her chest tighten.

“I stopped by your house to see if you wanted to walk Fred, but you weren’t there.”

She chuckled, watching Suzette wrap around his legs while he tried to untangle her. “That’s because I was here.”

He looked as good today as he did when she’d met him a few days earlier. Today he wore earth-toned colors, the collar of his sport shirt peaking above a rust-colored pullover.

“So once again, you’re the dog walker.”

“Always.” He stood in front of her while Suzette and Fred pressed their noses together, then tugged at their restraints.

Her spirit lifted looking into his smiling eyes, but the usual caution followed. She wished her heart listened to the warning.

Nick jerked with Suzette’s enthusiastic tug. He tipped his head toward the park. “Want to let the dogs run?”

The talk she’d given herself about not getting involved fluttered away. “Sure.”

His face brightened as he took a step toward the grass. “Let’s go.”

Steph followed him, her heart and head fighting. Yes, she found him appealing, attractive even, but all the foolish emotion was fruitless. Allowing a near stranger to fill her with possibilities could only lead to heartache. At thirty-nine, she’d settled into complacent singleness. She had her home and her good job now that Molly had opened the shelter and shared the building with her. She had a companion in Fred, and she’d learned that dogs were everything a soul mate should be—faithful, devoted and filled with unconditional love.

Could a man offer her those attributes? She didn’t think so.

Nick reached a bench and grasped the connection on Suzette’s leash. “Do you think I’m taking a chance?”

“Does she come when you call?”

His face twisted to a crooked smile as his eyebrows lifted. “I doubt it, but Fred does. I figure she’ll follow him.” Then he smiled, and her heart swayed like her grandma’s rocking chair.

She grinned back, but her levity lost momentum. She wanted nothing unpleasant to happen to Suzette. She would never forgive herself, but her trust in Fred’s ability to come when she called won out. With confidence, she bent and detached his leash.

Distracted by Suzette, Fred didn’t move. A first for him.

“Here goes.” Nick released the restraint, and Suzette tossed her head, then jogged off with Fred leaping around her as she went.

Nick gave a soft chuckle. “Men make such fools of themselves.” His voice was low, almost as if he were speaking to himself.

Steph backed up and sat on the bench, keeping her eyes focused on the animals.

“So far so good,” Nick said, pulling his gaze from the frolicking dogs. He sat beside her. “Have you met my brother yet?”

“No.” She studied him. “Why?”

He shrugged, a shadow growing on his face. “He’s not very neighborly.”

“That’s fine with me. I’m busy and don’t have time to hang over the fence, either.” She swallowed her words. “That is unless someone is leaning on it when I walk outside.” She pictured his friendly smile the day they met.

His eyes brightened. “And the bright side is I’m not a cranky neighbor.”

She understood the reference. “I’ve never had problems with a neighbor except a few complaints about my doggie day care when it was there.”

“Doggie day care? You mean, there in your home?”

His questioning look made Steph wish she hadn’t mentioned it. “That’s what I do for a living.”

His eyebrows lifted. “I’d never thought a pet day care could be so lucrative. Good for you.” His gaze drifted to her house.

She cringed. “My house is paid for. When my husband died, the insurance paid it in full.” The admission surprised her, and she tensed.

Nick lowered his eyes. “Sorry. I didn’t realize—”

“You didn’t know.”

His demeanor had changed, and Steph was sorry she mentioned it at all. She'd dampened their lively conversation, and the silence became uncomfortable. "My business moved to my friend's dog shelter facility, Time for Paws, spelled P-A-W-S. It's nice there. More room."

"Cute name." Nick slipped his arm behind her along the bench.

Feeling his closeness, Steph's mind raced, trying to keep the conversation flowing. "What do you do for a living?"

"I own a small company that produces parts for industrial tools."

Owns a company. So out of her league. "Parts for tools? Now, that sounds lucrative."

He chuckled. "A new company takes time to grow. I worked for Martin for a while. He owns a large electronics firm, but I decided to take the big step and open my own business. It didn't sit well with my brother."

"No? I'd think he'd be pleased."

"You'd think so." He gave her a crooked smile.

In the bright sunlight, chestnut highlights glinted beneath the waves of his dark hair, cut in layers and so thick she could drown in it. She curled her fingers around the bench seat to keep herself from touching it while he watched the dogs play.

"That's a neat thing about dogs." Steph uncoiled her fingers. "We can read them because they're honest. If they like you, they wag their tails and lick your hand. If they don't, they growl and bare their teeth. You know where you stand."

"Wouldn't that be nice?"

Nick didn't look at her, but she spotted tension in his jaw.

"Once a dog is socialized, you can trust them. In life, people aren't that open. We hide a lot of things." The truth struck her hard. She'd spent much of her life hiding things about her marriage and Doug's death. She'd felt to blame no matter how she tried to convince herself otherwise.

Nick didn't speak. He continued to stare at the grass as if he were miles away. Finally he lifted his head. "You're right. It's not only Martin who reacts without making sense. We're all affected by our mistakes and experiences."

Though she didn't understand what had triggered the thought, a thread of understanding connected them.

When Steph turned her attention to Fred, her heart rose to her throat. She leaped from the bench, seeing the dogs had strayed too near the road. She clapped her hands. "Fred, come."

Fred's head snapped her way and his body followed. So did Suzette.

When he trotted to her side, she captured his collar. "That was a close one."

"I should have been watching, too." Nick clicked the leash on Suzette. "Sorry, I was distracted."

"We both were." She hooked her hand through the leash. "I should get back." This felt too good and made her uneasy. Her uplifted spirit began to droop. She headed toward the sidewalk while avoiding getting her feet tangled in the leash.

Nick fell into step beside her as his cell phone jingled. He slipped it from a pocket and flipped it open. Hello faded to an apology. "I'm sorry, Al. I had some business and didn't realize how late it was." He tilted his wrist and eyed his watch. "I can be there in twenty minutes."

Steph hated to listen, but Nick stayed in step with her while the voice on the other end sounded unhappy.

"Can we make it another day?"

Nick's head lowered, and he kicked a stone. "Oh, I didn't know. When will you be back?"

The voice was softer so Steph didn't feel like an eavesdropper.

"Another time, then, and have a nice trip." He flipped the lid and slid the cell phone into his pocket. "I was supposed to meet a friend for dinner."

"I'm sorry, Nick. I hope you didn't let me cause you to be late."

“Not at all. Martin asked me to walk Suzette again, and I thought I could do both.” He shook his head. “When I saw you, I forgot.”

She suspected his friend hadn’t been thrilled. “You can’t do that to friends.”

He released a ragged sigh. “I know. I’ve been told that before.”

She’d wondered about him. Nick spent too much time doing his brother favors, and it seemed to affect his own life. Why did he do that? The question clogged her mind, but she kept it there and didn’t ask.

“You’re quiet.” He plopped his hand on her shoulder.

“Busy thinking.” He should do the same. “I have to do some housework today that I normally do Saturday.”

“What’s happening Saturday?” His voice faded, and he patted her shoulder. “Sorry. That’s a personal question I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s not personal.” His expression confused her—curious, yet wary. “Saturday I’m spending the afternoon having a dress fitting for a wedding.”

His eyes widened, and his hand slipped from her shoulder.

“Not my wedding, naturally. A friend’s. She’s getting married June 6. I’m a bridesmaid.”

He looked embarrassed and grinned. “Sounds like fun.”

Not really. She hated going dateless to a wedding. “I hope so.”

His hand rose to her shoulder again and gave it a squeeze. “Oh, come on. You’ll look beautiful in that gown, and you’ll have a good time.”

She gave a shrug and managed to grin. If she knew Nick better, he would make a good escort. Going alone was the pits. But she would survive without him. She’d been doing it for years.

They were silent, and Nick’s hand slipped from her shoulder. And why hadn’t he suggested taking her to the wedding?

The warmth faded, and Steph felt horribly alone.

## Chapter Two

Nick sat beside his mother's bed, studying the butter colored walls with the large clock and a card with the day and date. Everything in the facility was geared for helping the elderly men and women hang on to what mental capacity they still had.

His gaze slipped to a vase of dying flowers on his mother's bed table. The signature on the card was Martin's. Nick winced, then lowered his eyes and spotted the menu sheet below it. He grasped the paper, reading the choices she would have for her next meals—meals she couldn't eat without help. He looked everywhere but at his mother. The sight broke his heart. If he had Martin's disposition, he could deal with this horrendous situation. Whenever Nick came to visit her, a lump grew in his throat so huge he thought he would choke on it.

A guttural sound caught his attention, and he shifted toward his mother. Her glazed eyes stared at him.

“Do you want something?” Nick knew he'd never understand what she needed.

He listened to her sounds, forcing an attentive look on his face rather than the frustration he felt. She tried so hard to form words.

His pulse skipped. “Water? Do you want water?”

The expression in her eyes validated his question. He grasped the water carafe, poured a fresh glass and bent the straw. She drew in droplets of water, some running down her chin, and when she finished, he took a tissue and wiped it away while searching for conversation.

“Martin's new house is nice.”

An attentive look swept over her. “I helped him put away some dishes in the kitchen.” Should he or shouldn't he? He decided to go with his instinct. “I found some of your crystal. A serving bowl and some dessert plates. A sugar bowl and creamer. They took me back to when we were kids. You always used those fancy dishes for holidays, remember?” The nostalgia twisted through him. No wonder he avoided these visits.

Her foot shifted, the only one that she could move, and she nodded.

Nick caught her flicker of gratitude. “We had a good childhood, Mom.” His mind flew back to his fights with Martin over toys and chicken breasts. Nick hated thighs, and he often confused one for a breast since they often looked alike to him. “Remember, Mom, when you gave up cooking whole chickens and only bought white meat?”

A grotesque sound burst from her throat until he realized she was trying to talk while laughing. He'd made her laugh.

His stomach tightened. He had to visit more. As much as Martin irked him, his brother had been a faithful visitor, and he'd tried to motivate Nick to do the same. His glance shifted toward the vase of fading flowers. He could at least bring along a bouquet on his next visit.

Steph liked flowers. New blooms poked up from the ground in her garden. He'd noticed them though he had no idea what kind of flowers they were. Women seemed to like pretty things—flowers, sunsets, romantic movies and candlelight dinners. He'd tried to make Cara happy, but he'd failed. Time had been her complaint. He didn't give her enough time. Maybe flowers and romantic movies weren't that important. Maybe it was time? A faint shrug moved his shoulder. He had no idea what women wanted.

He wanted people to be real and truthful. Like dogs. Steph had said it the other day. Dogs wagged their tails, and he had no doubt they were content and happy. Humans weren't that easy to read.

Nick looked at his mother again. How would Steph handle the situation with his mother? Would it even be an issue for her? His mother's eyes flickered, and he realized he'd been silent too long.

He rested his hand on hers. “Martin's neighbor is very nice.”

Her eyes brightened.

“She has a border collie, so Martin’s worried about Suzette and the collie getting together.” Meaningless sounds came from his mother, and her bright eyes faded to frustration.

Nick patted her hand. “I know, Mom.” He detested his feeling of helplessness.

“Her dog’s named Fred. The two dogs rubbed noses and became fast friends.” A grin sprouted on his face. He and Steph had bonded, too, minus the nose rubbing.

His mother’s mouth twisted into a grimace though he suspected it was a smile. Then her head shifted a little, her gaze probing his. He guessed her question. “Yes, I like her.

We’ve only talked a couple of times, and if I—” If I what? If ever he needed to talk to his mom, today would be it.

Her brow knitted, and Nick relaxed. “You want to know how I really feel about her.”

Her face relaxed, giving him the answer. “I like her...a lot. I don’t know why. We’ve only met, but she gives me confidence.” That was it. Confidence. Though his mother lay so near, he allowed his stream of consciousness to be spoken aloud. “When Cara broke our engagement, I felt like a failure. I hadn’t understood what I’d done. I suppose I knew a little from her spiteful comments. I didn’t give her enough time.”

His mother’s eyes searched his.

“Now my time and energy is tied up with the business, so getting involved in a relationship is useless.” Or was it? “I need to understand myself before I involve anyone else in my life.” Would he ever understand himself? Doubt flooded his mind.

When he looked up, moisture had collected in the corner of his mother’s eye. Maybe he’d upset her with his rambling. Nick pulled another tissue from the box on her tray, wiping away the tears. This is what he couldn’t handle. He patted her arm and eyed his watch. “I’d better go and let you rest.”

He sensed a guilty expression spreading over his face. He couldn’t hide it. “If...when I come again, can I bring you anything?” He racked his mind for something to entertain her. She had always loved to read, but she needed two hands to hold a book. “Would you like a novel on tape? I could bring you something like that?”

She gave a little shrug, and he wasn’t sure if it was a yes or no, but what he did know is he had to come back again and soon. He rose and bent to kiss her cheek. “Thanks for listening. I love you, Mom.”

Sounds slipped from her lips, and he knew she’d said she loved him, too.

Nick hurried from the building, eager to breathe fresh air and wash away the scent of medicine and antiseptic. His chest weighed with emotions he didn’t want to feel. Life wasn’t fair. His mother had been a good woman, a faithful wife and a thoughtful mother. Why did God give her a devastating stroke?

He slid into his car, letting the thoughts settle into reason. God didn’t promise a life without pain or sorrow. A Scripture slipped into his mind, something about how in our weaknesses we become more powerful, because we turn to the Lord for strength. His mother’s power was her faith. One day she would be whole again in heaven.

His throat knotted. Nick grasped his own faith and sent up a prayer for the Lord to touch his weakness with greater strength. He needed to be a faithful son just as his mother had been faithful to her family—her boys—and to the Lord.

Nick flipped open his cell phone and hit his brother’s stored number. He’d nearly hung up before Martin finally answered.

“I’m leaving the nursing home now. Mom’s good. I talked about a few things—when we were kids. She even laughed. At least, I think that’s what it was.”

“I know it’s difficult, but you did the right thing. I’m glad you went.” Martin’s voice sounded different—less critical and more accepting.

“I am, too.” Martin’s reaction punctuated Nick’s decision to be a better son.

He said goodbye and flipped the lid on his cell phone. Why couldn't he and Martin talk like that about everything? He needed to pray for Martin and for their relationship. One of these days, his brother would be the only family he had left.

A lump formed in his throat, and he tossed the cell on the passenger seat. Emotions. He hated them.

Fred's bark zapped Steph to action. She dashed to the patio door, hoping she'd find Nick at the fence, but when her foot hit the flagstone, her stomach spiraled. Martin. Though he appeared to be an older version of Nick, his expression showed no relationship. Nick had warned her.

She drew up her shoulders and marched to the fence. "What's the problem?"

"Keep your mongrel away from my dog."

Steph winced and drew back from his index finger aiming at her nose. "The dog has every right to be in his own yard."

"You think so?" His accusing finger swung toward the fence.

She eyed the pile of dirt where Fred had begun to dig. Her nerves tingled, and she feared she couldn't get out the words. "I guarantee it won't happen ag—"

"Why not? You think that mutt's going to forget how to dig?"

This wasn't the way she wanted to meet Martin. And it wasn't like Fred. She shifted her gaze from Martin's mottled face to Suzette bounding around the yard as if showing off for poor Fred. He was smitten.

She sent Martin a piercing look, hoping to convince him she wasn't going to put up with his insults. "Calm down, please. Fred didn't get into your yard. He only dug a little hole."

"Because I stopped him. Next time, I might not be that—"

"Next time? I told you it won't happen again." Today she understood Nick's concern.

As her words charged across the fence, she spotted Nick racing toward them with the expression of a fireman heading for a five alarm fire.

Martin raised his fist. "He better not or—"

"Whoa, bro." Nick skidded to his side and grabbed Martin's knotted fingers. "What's going on?" He shifted his gaze from his brother to Steph and gave her one of those I-told-you-so looks.

Martin snatched away his hand.

"What happened?" Nick asked, shaking his head.

She gave a halfhearted shrug. "Fred dug a minute hole beside the fence and—"

"No need to explain." Nick eyed Suzette, prancing at his side, and brushed his hand over her fur. "Suzette, are you getting in trouble?"

Martin's look pierced Nick. "What do you mean Suzette? She didn't dig the hole."

"Martin, the dogs are getting along fine. You're the one with the problem. Learn something from your dog."

Martin's nostrils flared. "This isn't your business." He spun on his heel and marched away from the fence with Suzette pattering alongside him.

Steph remained quiet. She had to live next door to the man.

Nick rested his elbow on the fence post. "Sorry about that. Like I told you, my brother has a short fuse sometimes. He needs to learn a little diplomacy."

"That's not all he needs to learn." Steph arched a brow. "He called Fred a mongrel." She gazed into the large yard, noticing Suzette had gone inside. Not by choice, she was sure.

He leaned over the fence and eyed the hole, grasped the fence post and flung himself over the top rail, then wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulder. "I can't believe my brother made a fuss over this."

Steph's chest hummed.

His arm slipped away, and she stood dumbfounded, admiring his muscular arms while he eyed the hole. Her body ached to be back in his embrace. When her pulse stopped racing, she could finally concentrate. “This isn’t like Fred at all.”

“Remember, men do crazy things around women.” He grinned at her before turning his attention to the fence.

Didn’t he think jumping over a fence was crazy? Her mouth curved to a grin.

“Do you think we should do something to stop him from digging?” He looked at her flower beds, the fresh blooms peeking up from the ground. “Some kind of safeguard.”

Safeguard? She needed to safeguard herself from her emotions. “Thanks, but it’s not your problem.” She plucked lint from her sweater. “How can two men from the same family be so different? Was your brother adopted?”

Nick tossed his head back, chuckling. “I’ve wondered that myself.”

A giddy feeling came over her, and she sensed the expression had bonded to her face.

“Every time I meet you I like you more and more.” His eyes glinted as he gave her another one-armed squeeze.

“Thanks.” The touch swept to her toes. She lowered her gaze, needing to turn the subject away from her. “I don’t know what got into Fred.”

“Males can be impetuous when it comes to the fairer sex.” He lowered his arm as if he had just noticed the hug. “I’d better get inside and deal with the ‘wrath of Martin.’ I’ll do what I can to talk sense into him, and let me know if I can help.”

She doubted if that were possible now that she’d witnessed Martin in action.

He catapulted over the fence again, sent her a smile and headed toward the house.

Steph caught her breath. She loved his smile, but the whole situation gave her an unsettling feeling. She turned her attention back to the hole and kicked back the dirt. Frowning at Fred, she forced his nose to the fresh earth and gave him a stern look. “No. No digging.”

She waited a moment to let her reprimand sink in, then crouched beside him. “You have to be good. I can’t deal with a cranky neighbor.” Steph petted his black-and-white coat as she leaned toward his ear. “Just ignore Suzette. You’re too good for her anyway. She is a flirt.”

Fred tilted his head, his tongue dangling, and panted as if he’d run a race.

“Let’s go inside.” Steph rose and slapped her thigh. “Come.”

Realizing Suzette wasn’t the only one flirting lately, Steph shook her head and stepped toward the house with Fred following the way she’d trained him. Inside, she tossed him a treat, then grabbed a cookie for herself and sank into the nearest kitchen chair.

Today from watching their interaction, she couldn’t decide why these men lived together. They were so different. But it didn’t matter. She liked the idea that Nick was close by. He could be the buffer between her and his brother. Steph grinned thinking about the way he tried to handle the situation with humor. He’d wasted his effort. Steph leaned back, picturing Nick’s glinting eyes and playful smile. He said he liked her. She should have been honest and admitted she liked him, too. Too late now for should haves. She admired people who were straightforward. Being more direct with people was easier when she knew them well, like Molly, but Nick didn’t fit that category.

Probably for the best.

Now that Martin had become her neighbor, she was extra grateful for Time for Paws with its large indoor and outdoor areas for her dogs, which worked so much better than her house. The move gave her ample room to care for more pets on a daily basis. Along with space, the added income made a huge difference in keeping up her expenses.

Instead of dwelling on the day care, Steph turned to the problem at hand. Fred was her dog. He lived there, and he had every right to play in the backyard. Steph nibbled on the cookie as she reviewed her conversation with Martin. He insulted her and her dog with his name-calling. When she put Martin’s anger into perspective, it seemed like a fly speck in relationship to much of her life

when she'd had to rescue herself. Dodging her memories, Steph pulled herself back to resolve the immediate situation.

She could take a different tack. Next time she spoke with Martin she would say nice things about Suzette and agree that she was special. Not that Fred wasn't. But he had to stop digging. Being around other dogs was nothing new to Fred. He'd enjoyed playing with the ones she cared for each day. So why now? Maybe Nick had hit on it. Fred wanted to play. So did Suzette. Eventually the dogs would be so familiar with each other the excitement would fade. No more digging.

But could she convince Martin the ogre to give it a try? If she couldn't, she could count on Nick. His charm could win over anyone.

Steph stood back, her eyes brimming with tears. "Molly, you look gorgeous."

Her friend peered at her through the boutique mirror. "You think Brent will like it?"

Fighting back her own emotion, Steph drew up her shoulders. "No, he won't like it."

Molly spun around, her wedding gown twisted around her body. "No?"

"He'll love it, Molly. You look amazing."

Molly gazed at the dress, a satin gown with hints of delicate pink blossoms embroidered on the sheer overlay. A satin bow adorned the fitted waist and flowed to the ground.

Seeing Molly's wedding dress pierced Steph's memory. For her own winter wedding, she'd worn satin with lace detailing. She'd been filled with so much hope. "The dress is perfect for a spring wedding." Steph approached her, the chiffon of her gown swishing at her feet. The soft coral shade flashed in the mirror. "Look how your veil has the same lacy detail. It's perfect. You look beautiful."

"I don't feel like it. I'm getting nervous."

"All brides feel that way." Her mind flew back, reliving her rankled nerves as she approached her wedding day, but using herself as an example wouldn't soothe Molly's tension. "When you walk down the aisle and look into Brent's face, your anxiety will be gone."

"I know, but I want everything to be perfect."

"There you go, Moll. Still looking for perfection."

Molly shrugged, and they both laughed.

Steph had never known anyone besides Molly who wanted her life to be flawless. Life did have imperfections. She closed her mouth, unwilling to muffle Molly's happiness. "Being a bride is like falling in love. You feel giddy one minute and question yourself the next. Your pulse throbs, and your chest presses against your heart, and you—"

"Hold it." Molly lifted the hem of her gown and rushed to her side, letting the lacy hem fall to the carpet.

Steph tried to read her mind. "What?"

Molly narrowed her eyes. "Don't tell me. I can't believe it."

"Okay, I won't tell you." She had no idea what Molly was talking about.

"You're in love."

A gasp escaped her. "In love?" Steph nearly choked on the word. She couldn't be in love. In like, maybe, or infatuated. That was different than real love.

"It's that guy you told me about. Your new neighbor." She moved closer, her eyes wide. "You haven't told me a thing."

"Nothing to tell." Her heart sang as images of Nick swept through her mind, but saying it aloud made it too real. "You have romance on your mind. Let's get these dresses off and have lunch like we planned."

Molly rested her fingers against her cheeks. "Steph, I miss our talks."

So did Steph. Since Brent had come into Molly's life, her life had changed, too. Between the shelter and Brent, Steph had taken a backseat. Resentment didn't enter into it, only disappointment. And only for herself. Steph's chest weighed with selfish thoughts until she cast them away, wanting

only the best for Molly. “We see each other at work. We still talk.” But they both knew it wasn’t the same.

Color pooled on Molly’s face. “It’s hard to believe the date is almost here. I’d been certain for so long that I would never marry.”

“That’s something we used to have in common.” Steph tried to sound lighthearted, but she feared she failed.

“I know.” Molly’s excitement faded.

Steph wished she’d kept her mouth shut. “Don’t feel bad.

I’m happy for you, Molly, and I’ve never seen you happier.” She’d finally spoken the truth, and the tension lifted.

Molly eased to Steph’s side. “It just goes to prove that what we think and what God has in store don’t always go hand in hand.” She squeezed Steph’s arm. “You don’t know what He has planned for you.”

Molly and God. Steph wished she had the kind of confidence that Molly had.

A grin grew on Molly’s face. “Now, lest you think I’ve forgotten what we were talking about, I’m not moving until you tell me everything.”

“I have nothing to tell even if we can stay here all day.” Steph glanced toward the doorway, hoping the tailor would return to break into their conversation. “It’s a standoff. I’m hungry, and you promised me lunch, but I’m not going with you in that gown.” Gooseflesh rose on her arms. Talk to her. Don’t be stupid. But Steph couldn’t open her mouth. “You’re making a big deal out of nothing.” Her chest squeezed.

“Let me be the judge.” Molly folded her arms across her chest, resembling a bailiff in a wedding dress.

The picture made Steph laugh. “Okay, but let’s get our clothes on so we can leave. The dresses fit.”

“What’s his name? You never told me.”

“Nick. Nick Davis.”

Molly’s forehead wrinkled. “Nick Davis.” She pressed her index finger to her lips, then shook her head. “I’ve heard his name somewhere. Maybe Brent knows him.” She reached back for the zipper.

“Let me help you.” Steph turned her around, hoping the zipper would bring an end to the conversation.

But Molly twisted her neck and spoke over her shoulder. “Have you been on a date with him?”

A date? Steph was glad Molly couldn’t see her face. “If you call walking the dogs a date, yes.”

Molly slipped her arms from the gown. “Does he like you?”

“Yes, as a friend, but that’s fine. I’m not ready for anything serious.” Her mind flooded with dark thoughts. “First I have to learn to be more attentive to—”

“Stop blaming yourself, Steph.” The gown slipped from Molly’s body and pooled on the white cloth beneath her feet as she spun to face her. “Suicide is a selfish act. It leaves people asking themselves forever what they did wrong and what they might have done to make it better. Doug wanted to die for his own reason. You didn’t. You want to live, and it’s about time you did.”

Steph pressed the phone against her ear. Her fingers knotted around the receiver, and she forced her voice to sound normal, but tension had risen like a tsunami. “Why are you still living with Dad anyway, Hal? You two never got along.”

“That was before. We’ve been getting along until recently.”

She heard something in her brother’s voice that didn’t connect. Hal and her dad had a different set of ethics and values. They never were compatible. “What’s happened now?”

He didn’t respond.

“Are you working?” Steph pursed her lips, waiting to see how he’d wiggle out of that question.

“Why does everything revolve around that?”

A deep breath rattled through her lungs. “Answer me. Are you living off Dad again?”

“I don’t like your attitude, Steph. We haven’t talked in a long time. You’re my sister. I just called to see how you’re doing. I miss you.”

Since when? “I’m okay.”

“I thought maybe I’d come your way. You know, give Dad a few days’ break. Maybe then we’ll see eye to eye when I get back.”

She doubted that. Forget seeing eye to eye; her father probably preferred to see Hal’s hand with a paycheck. “Hal, I think before you visit anyone, you should spend time looking for work.”

“You don’t sound very—”

She lost the end of his sentence when the doorbell rang. Fred let out a yip as he scrambled to the door, flipping a scatter rug across the kitchen floor. “Hal, someone’s at the door. Hang on.”

Steph set the phone on the counter, wishing she’d said she was hanging up. As she approached the door, Fred tripped her, and she shot across the entry, one foot splaying on the hardwood and the other lifting in the air like a hornpiper’s jig. She whacked against the door, cringed and flung it open.

Nick’s mouth gaped. “Are you okay?”

She tried to grin, but she was sure it was a grimace. She beckoned him in. “My brother’s on the phone.” She headed back to the kitchen, keeping her eye out for Fred, with no need. She could hear him prancing around Nick’s legs near the door.

“Sorry, Hal. A neighbor dropped by.”

His deep sigh cut through the line. Steph listened to the silence, waiting.

“I’d better let you go. You have company.”

Her chest filled with air and she released it in one long stream. “All right, Hal, and good luck finding a job.” Her frustration had to be evident.

When she pulled the telephone from her ear, his last words struck her before she disconnected.

“I’ll see you soon.”

See her soon? She couldn’t believe it. He hadn’t heard a word she’d said. When she turned, Nick stood in the kitchen doorway.

“Bad news?”

She forced her mouth into a pleasant expression. Nick looked great. The May sun had deepened his skin tone to a bronze tan, making his chiseled features even more attractive. “My brother called. He wants to come for a visit, but I know he wants a handout. That’s the only reason he’d come here.”

“If you’re having company, I can leave anytime if you have things to do.”

“He’s not coming today.”

He eyed her, and she sensed he was waiting for an explanation.

“He doesn’t live in Michigan.” She grew silent, thinking about Hal and what he wanted.

Nick remained quiet for a moment and studied her. “You’re absorbed in something.”

“Thinking about my brother. I wish I knew what’s going on.”

“Has he wanted a handout before?”

Memories flooded Steph—times when she convinced Doug to bail him out of a problem and other times she slipped him money rather than ask Doug. That was when she had money to squander. Hal’s loans were really handouts.

“I didn’t mean to meddle.”

Nick’s voice cut through her thoughts. His face filled with concern.

The look squeezed against her heart. “You’re not meddling. It’s nice to have someone to talk with.” She’d talked with Molly so often about her problems, the kind of fun talking like they’d done earlier that day. She winced, realizing how lonely she’d become without having Molly to herself. Today at the boutique had made the change all too vivid.

Nick was still leaning against the doorjamb, and Steph found her manners. “Let’s sit.” She motioned toward the living room as she moved ahead of him. “By the way, thanks for the rescue Thursday.”

“You’re welcome.” He followed her through the archway.

She gestured toward the sofa. “I don’t expect you to bail me out every time I have a run-in with Martin.”

A grin brightened his face as he settled into an easy chair. “You looked as if you needed rescuing.”

She curled her legs up on the sofa. “Maybe I did. I might have dug myself into a deeper hole than Fred made. With all that anger, he could have a stroke.”

Nick’s face blanched, and Steph knew she’d struck a negative cord. Why did she seem to say the wrong thing everywhere she went today? She’d upset Molly, too. “I’m only kidding.”

“I know, but he could if he keeps it up.” He fell silent a moment, then thrust his back from the cushion. “When I walked up Thursday, I could see you’d put Martin in his place. That’s why he became angrier. But he needs people to talk back to him or he’ll never learn.” He looked uncomfortable for a moment. “I’m too close to the problem to do any good.”

“I have the same situation with Hal. I’m his sister, and it’s difficult being objective.”

Nick gave his head a shake. “Speaking of brothers, Martin’s at some kind of a shindig, and he asked me to walk Suzette. As usual, I didn’t say no.” He gave her a hangdog look. “So I dropped by to see if you’d like to take the dogs for a walk? We could pick up a sandwich or carryout somewhere and eat dinner in the park.”

Steph weighed the possibility. “That sounds nice, Nick. I don’t enjoy eating alone.”

“Me, neither.” His smile lit the room.

She pushed herself from the sofa. “While you go for Suzette, I’ll get ready.”

“It’s a date,” he said.

A date. Molly’s question flew into her mind. Steph didn’t move, watching him stride across the room to the foyer and walk out the door. Doug had been gone for over four years, and this was her first date. A sandwich in the park.

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