

 *Silhouette*

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CHRISTINE RIMMER

**THE RELUCTANT
CINDERELLA**

SPECIAL EDITION™

*Talk OF THE
Neighborhood*



Mills & Boon Silhouette

Christine Rimmer

The Reluctant Cinderella

«HarperCollins»

Rimmer C.

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Plain Jane Megan Schumacher was the most dependable person on Danbury Way, the sleek suburban cul-de-sac where she lived over her sister's garage. Certainly not the kind of girl who would rock anyone's boat—until she fell for the (barely) ex-husband of her best friend and neighbor! Greg Banning planned to hire Megan to redo his marketing plan, but he counted the minutes until each of their meetings. As their romance heated up, Greg realized she was everything he wanted in a woman, and his thoughts began straying to marriage. But would their new love spell happiness for both of them—or would the scandal tear them apart?

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“I can’t stop thinking about you.”

The damning words just sort of popped out, and Megan couldn’t regret saying them.

Greg asked, “And is that such a bad thing?”

“No.” She traced the handle of her mug with a finger. “Yes. Oh, I don’t know.”

He chuckled. “Well, at least that’s one thing you’re sure about.”

“You think this is funny?” she chided. “Because it’s not—not in the least.”

“I know.” His voice was soft and low. Intimate. Tender. “I’ve been thinking....”

She had to swallow before she could speak. “About?”

“You.”

Dear Reader,

Don’t you just love it when the nice girl finishes first? I do.

Take Megan Schumacher, She’s about the nicest woman on Danbury Way. All the women of the neighborhood like Megan. Everyone trusts her. They tell her their secrets. They cry on her shoulder when things go wrong.

But the real truth is, Megan, like most of the women of Danbury Way, has a few secrets of her own. Like that crush she had on sweet Carly Alderson’s ex, Greg Banning. Now, there’s a secret that will never be revealed. Because Greg’s a total hunk and would never in a million years be interested in nondescript Megan.

Or would he? Mwahaha.

Welcome to Danbury Way, where everybody knows everybody’s business—and talks about it.

A lot.

Best always,

Christine Rimmer

The Reluctant Cinderella

Christine Rimmer



www.millsandboon.co.uk

CHRISTINE RIMMER

came to her profession the long way around. Before settling down to write about the magic of romance, she'd been everything from an actress to a salesclerk to a waitress. Now that she's finally found work that suits her perfectly, she insists she never had a problem keeping a job—she was merely gaining “life experience” for her future as a novelist. Christine is grateful not only for the joy she finds in writing, but for what waits when the day's work is through: a man she loves, who loves her right back, and the privilege of watching their children grow and change day to day. She lives with her family in Oklahoma. Visit Christine at her new home on the Web at www.christinerimmer.com.

For my fellow authors on this project.

As always, it was a joy working with you.

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Chapter One

“Aunt Megan, I really, really need to go,” Olivia whispered anxiously.

Bent over to child level as she dumped the dishwasher detergent in the tray, Megan Schumacher snapped the tray shut, straightened to push the start button and shoved the door into lock position. Inside, the whooshing started. She edged the box of detergent onto the crowded kitchen counter and turned to look fondly down at her niece.

“Powder room.” Megan pointed the way. “Quick.”

Blond curls bounced as the little sweetie shook her head. “Someone’s in there.” She wrinkled her button nose in childish disgust. “Being sick. And there’s someone upstairs in our bathroom, too.” She meant the bathroom she shared with her brothers, Anthony and Michael. “Crying.”

Great. “What about your mom’s bathr—”

Olivia cut her off with a snort of wounded frustration. “Anthony’s in there. He yelled at me to go away.”

Anthony, the oldest of Megan’s sister’s kids, was nine. He’d developed a bit of an attitude lately. If he wasn’t silent and sulky, he was ordering everyone to leave him alone.

Olivia rolled her blue eyes. “Aunt Megan. Come on. I need to use your bathroom.”

“Well, sure. Why didn’t you just say so?”

Olivia let out a pained sigh. “Is it open?”

“You bet. Need help?”

The little girl drew herself up and spoke with great dignity. “Thank you. No. After all, I am seven.” Then she whirled and took off for the kitchen door that led to the breezeway and the backyard entrance to Megan’s apartment over the garage.

“She’s a cutie, that one.” Marti Vincente, who lived next door, pulled a tray of stuffed miniature portobello mushrooms from the oven. The neighbors took turns hosting the annual Danbury Way early summer block party, but Marti and her husband always provided most of the food. The stuffed mushrooms looked as delicious as everything else Marti and Ed had brought over to Angela’s bright kitchen that day.

Slim, stylish and attractive, Marti worked full-time at the restaurant she and Ed owned. She was up close and personal with all that wonderful food on a daily basis—and she couldn’t weigh more than one-ten. How fair was that?

Megan looked down at her own baggy orange T-shirt and frayed jeans. Beneath the comfortable old clothes, she was no Marti Vincente. And she probably never would be.

“Mushroom?” Marti offered. “I’ve got some that are slightly cooled right here....”

Megan needed no more urging. She popped one of the delicious morsels into her mouth and groaned in delight. “Incredible.” Through the window over the sink, she could see the neighbors gathered in groups under the shade of the patio cover, chatting and laughing, sipping iced drinks and chowing down on the Vincentes’ delicious finger food.

Angela was out there, too, weaving in and out among her guests, carrying a trayful of Vincente delicacies. Since her sister was busy, that left Megan to check on Olivia’s story of sickness and sobbing in the bathrooms. Resigned, Megan swallowed the last of that to-die-for mushroom, thanked Marti and headed off down the back hall.

She found Rebecca Peters hovering by the door to the powder room.

Rebecca was subletting the house on the other side of the Vincentes. She wore a skinny, strappy sundress in her trademark black, with the usual four-inch designer heels to match. Rebecca was so not the suburban type. No one in the neighborhood could understand why she’d moved to Rosewood, which was an hour-and-a-half train ride north of New York City and about as suburban as any town could get.

Her worried frown had Megan asking, “What’s up?”

Rebecca’s frown deepened. “I think Molly’s in there....”

Molly owned the house at 7 Danbury Way. Happily single, she put most of her energy into her mega-successful consulting firm.

“Is she sick?” Megan asked softly.

Rebecca nodded and pitched her voice to a confidential level. “She was fine. We were chatting out on the patio. And then she got this strange, green look and...” Rebecca shook her sleek brown head. “I don’t know. I just don’t know...”

Megan took charge, moving in close, tapping lightly on the door, asking gently, “Molly? Molly, are you all right?”

Several seconds passed before she answered, “Fine.” Her voice was bright and cheerful—too much so. “Be right out.” She practically sang the words. A moment later, the door swung inward and Molly emerged on a suspicious cloud of minty-fresh scent: breath spray. No doubt about it. “Hey.” Molly fluffed her long, curly hair and smiled a wide, forced smile. “Great party, huh? Megan, I don’t know how that sister of yours does it. Single with three kids and a full-time job. But the house looks fabulous and the party is...perfect.” She patted Megan’s arm. “I’m sure it helps to have you here to pitch in.”

Before Megan could reply, Rebecca tried again. “Molly, are you certain you’re—”

Molly didn’t even let her finish. “Whew. I need some of that lemonade Angela’s been passing around. How ’bout you?”

Rebecca got the message: whatever had been going on behind the powder room door, Molly had no intention of discussing it. “Uh. Well, alrighty. Sounds great. Megan?”

Megan still had to make sure the crier upstairs in the kids’ bathroom was all right. And check on Anthony. “You guys go ahead.”

So the two women turned and left her just as Zooey Finnegan, the gorgeous model-slim, auburn-haired nanny who looked after widower Jack Lever’s kids, came through the arch from the family room. “Terrific party,” she said with a warm smile as she slipped into the empty powder room and softly shut the door.

Megan made for the stairs. Halfway up, she ran into Anthony, who came barreling down paying zero attention to where he was going.

“Whoa, there, cowboy.” Megan laughed, catching him by the arms and righting him before he fell against the stair rail.

“Sorry, Aunt Megan,” he muttered, looking down.

“No prob.” She waited until he slanted her a glance before softly chiding, “Olivia says you yelled at her.”

He let out a snort. “Well. I was in the bathroom. She kept knocking. What’d she expect?”

“She didn’t expect yelling,” Megan said quietly. “Yelling is not a good thing.”

“Okay, okay.” He stuck out his lower lip, but he did mutter, “I’m sorry.”

“Tell that to your sister.”

He was staring at his shoes again. “Awright, I will. Can I go now? Please?”

She released him. “Remember. No running on the—”

He’d already zipped around her and was headed down—fast, but no longer at a run. He called over his shoulder, “Okay, okay. I won’t. I promise.”

Megan stared after him for a second or two, smiling a doting auntie’s smile. Anthony was a good kid. He’d get past this sulky phase—soon, she hoped.

And there was still the crier in the kids’ bath to see about.

In the upstairs hall, the door to the bathroom was shut. Megan stood in front of it and wondered what she should do next. She couldn’t hear any crying coming from in there. Maybe she should just—

Wait. There: a sob. A stifled one, but still. A definite sob.

So, okay. Maybe a little further investigation was required. She waited—and yep. There it was again: another sob, followed by a distinct sniffle and a tiny, choked-off wail. Olivia had got it right. Someone was in there crying.

When you cried in the bathroom at a block party, well, you should get sympathy. Someone should come and lend a shoulder to cry on.

That would be Megan. On Danbury Way, where she'd lived for three years now, Megan was considered a person everybody could trust: nonthreatening, patient and understanding. All the women liked her. They could tell her anything and she'd never betray their secrets.

Sometimes the role of confidante got a little old, especially lately, when so much had changed in her life outside the neighborhood. But then again, somebody had to “be there” for everyone else. And Megan was used to it. She'd been fitting in, getting along and listening to everybody else's problems, since she was seven and a half years old.

Discreetly, she tapped on the bathroom door.

Silence.

After a thirty-second interval, she tapped again.

More silence.

Finally, she spoke. “It's Megan. Are you...all right in there?”

Another silence. Then a sniffle. And finally, hopefully, a woman murmured, “Megan?” More sniffing. “Is it really...” A sob. A tiny hiccup, then, “...you?” Even with all the sniffing, Megan recognized that soft Texas drawl. It was Carly Alderson.

Megan probably should have known. She made her voice even gentler. “Come on, Carly. Let me in...”

A second later, the door opened. Carly, strikingly pretty even with puffy eyes and a red nose, sniffled, sobbed and ushered Megan inside. Once Megan stood on the fluffy green bathroom rug with her, Carly shut the door and punched the lock.

Then, with a mournful little groan, she sank to the edge of the tub. Megan got the box of tissues from the sink counter and sat down beside her.

“Oh, Megan...” Carly paused to sniffle some more. She wiped her nose with a torn-up, wrinkled bit of tissue. “I just...I can't...”

“Here.” Megan extended the box.

Carly whipped out a fresh one. Then she buried her red nose in it and sobbed. “I just...I can't stand it, you know?”

Megan patted her slim back and stroked her soft blond hair and made soothing noises of support and understanding.

Finally, Carly pulled herself together enough to announce, “It's final today. Our divorce. Greg and I are...no longer husband and wife. It's over. Officially. Completely. Kaput.”

“Carly. I'm so sorry...”

Greg Banning, Carly's ex, had moved out months ago—well, actually, Carly had kicked him out. As a gesture of fury and defiance. Because he'd asked her for a separation. She'd kicked him out and started calling herself by her maiden name.

But it had all been pure bravado. Carly wanted him back. Desperately. Getting her handsome husband to return to her was all Carly wanted, all she talked about.

No one in the neighborhood knew why Greg had asked for the split. There had been no big scenes, no angry confrontations—not that anyone knew about. Carly claimed they never fought.

But then, out of nowhere, he'd asked for a separation. She'd tossed him and his personal belongings out on the lawn of the great big house they owned that took up two lots in the heart of the cul de sac that was Danbury Way. Greg had left and never come back.

The neighbors assumed there must be another woman. But no one had seen such a woman, or had a clue who she might be.

Carly dabbed at her wet cheeks. “I know I shouldn’t have locked myself in here. But I couldn’t stand it downstairs. Everybody’s being so sweet to me, feeling so sorry for me. And then there’s Rhonda and Irene. Those two just won’t leave me alone. You know how they are. Like vultures, hanging around, picking at the bones of everybody’s troubles...”

Rhonda Johnson and Irene Dare were the neighborhood’s most notorious gossips. They lived around the corner, next door to each other, on Maplewood Lane.

“Those two,” said Megan, with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Ignore them.”

“Oh, I’m trying. I truly am. But every time I turn around, one of them is standing there, looking so sympathetic, whispering how I should tell her everything, every little detail, and she won’t breathe a word to another soul... I mean, they shouldn’t even be here. It’s our block party, not theirs.” Carly sniffed. “Okay.” She blew out a hard breath. “That was petty of me. That was just downright small.”

“It’s all right...”

“No. Danbury Way parties are always the best ones. Everybody in Rosewood knows that. I can’t blame Rhonda and Irene for coming. I just wish they’d leave me alone.”

“I totally understand.”

Carly’s soft lip quivered and her china-blue eyes filled again. “Oh, Megan. If only he would call me. If he would just talk to me, you know?”

Megan dared to suggest, “Maybe it’s too late for that. Maybe what you need to do is to start finding a way to get over—”

“I just don’t understand.” Carly cut in, shaking her head, oblivious to what Megan had been trying to tell her. “I’ll never understand. I’ve been the perfect wife to him. He’s the center of my world. I know I could make everything right between us, if he’d only...” A sob escaped her. “...only...” Her eyes brimmed. “...give me a chance...” And she dissolved into tears again, crumpling toward Megan in her abject misery.

Megan dropped the box of tissues and gathered her close. Carly sobbed all the harder. Megan stroked her soft blond hair and whispered that everything was going to be all right. Eventually, Carly wound down to a sniffle and a sob or two.

Just when Megan was about to take her by the shoulders and tell her it was time to dry her eyes and rejoin the party, someone knocked on the door. Carly gasped and snapped up straight. Megan called, “Try the master bath,” and whoever it was went away.

But Carly did get the message. She heaved another big, sad sigh and pressed her palms to her flushed, damp cheeks. “Oh, I’m such a mess. I have simply got to pull myself together. We can’t stay in here forever. It’s just plain rude. And I was not brought up to be rude.”

Megan smiled. She really did like Carly, who was always the soul of courtesy and Southern gentility—even today, when her perfect marriage to the perfect man was over in the most final kind of way. “Come on. Splash a little cold water on your face, smooth that gorgeous hair and let’s get out there where you can show Irene and Rhonda that they don’t get to you in the least.”

Carly took another tissue and dabbed her eyes. “Megan. Thank you.”

“Hey. Anytime.” She started to rise.

Carly caught her arm. “Wait.”

As she sank back to the edge of the tub, Megan sent a little prayer winging heavenward that Carly wouldn’t turn on the waterworks all over again. “What?”

Carly straightened her delicate shoulders and hitched up her chin. “I’m calling Greg.”

Megan blinked. “Well, if you really think you—”

“No, silly.” Carly actually smiled. “Not for me. For you.”

Megan wasn’t following. “I don’t...why?”

“Your company. What’s it called? Design...?”

“Design Solutions.”

“Yeah. That’s right. You’re a...?”

"I'm a graphic designer." And Design Solutions was all hers. Megan had a staff of six—okay, five and an intern. Her office was a short train ride away, in Poughkeepsie, close to home with low overhead.

Carly was nodding. "You do, um, brochures, business cards, flyers, things like that, right?"

"Right." Megan did a lot more than flyers and brochures. But whenever she tried to explain about the real scope of effective design, about branding and positioning and how a top designer could boost a corporation's bottom line, her neighbors tended to get glassy-eyed. As a result, except for Angela, no one in the area really understood what Megan's work was all about.

It was kind of funny, really. The neighborhood wives were always trying to help her out. They had her designing invitations to their kids' parties, making flyers for their charity yard sales, creating letterhead stationery for their own personal use, that type of thing. Then they'd slip her a fifty in payment and tell her how "talented" she was.

Megan knew they meant well, that they were only trying to be supportive. But they saw her in a certain way; she was the nice "full-figured" girl who rented the apartment over her sister's garage.

They didn't understand that she had owned a house three years ago, a house she'd sold so she could put all her money into starting up her business—and help her single-mom sister out with the kids.

Megan's business venture had taken off. In a big way. She hardly had time anymore for a good night's sleep, let alone for small jobs at nominal fees.

Carly muttered darkly, "Yeah. It's the least Greg can do..."

Megan realized she hadn't been paying attention. "Excuse me?"

"He can give you an interview. He can maybe hire you to do...the things you do."

"Hire me?"

"For Banning's. You know. You can be their, um, graphic designer."

Megan was all-ears by then. "You're serious."

"Oh, yes I am." Carly sniffed and forced a brave smile.

"Wow..." Banning's was a small but nationally known family-run chain of upscale department stores. This was a real opportunity. Landing the Banning's account would be a coup. And Megan would love a chance to freshen up their slightly stuffy image.

Carly reached out and patted her hand. "I'm grateful. I truly am. For those times, like now, when you've been there, to listen to me and comfort me when things have been so rough for me. You are a very sweet person, Megan, and I want to do something to pay you back for your kindness to me."

Megan returned Carly's smile. "What can I say, except 'wow' all over again?"

"I'm glad to help you out..." Carly's long lashes fluttered down and her forced smile softened. Megan knew she was thinking that asking Greg for this favor would be a good excuse to get in touch with him.

Megan also knew that Carly—and Greg Banning—would see this as strictly a mercy interview. Banning's would, of course, already have a major design firm overseeing all their graphics and company-image print work. Greg would agree, for his ex-wife's sake, to hear Megan's pitch, all the while knowing he would end up politely turning her down.

What Greg Banning didn't know was that Megan was Good—capital G intended. She was taking Carly's offer and she was going to knock Greg Banning's socks off.

In a purely professional sense, of course.

Megan realized that she, like Carly, was looking down. Because there was, after all, the little matter of...

The crush.

The embarrassing truth was that, back when Megan used to see Greg now and then around the neighborhood, before he moved out on Carly and into an apartment in the city, Megan had had a slight—very slight and totally secret—crush on him.

A crush that was completely over and didn't matter in the least. Puh-leese. In his own rich-guy-next-door way, Greg Banning was a complete hunk. He was so far out of Megan's league there was no need to even think about that silly crush. It wasn't as if he'd ever paid the least bit of attention to Angela Schumacher's dumpy sister. Even ordinary guys never did....

Now, wait just a minute! The voice of the new, successful Megan Schumacher piped up in her mind.

True, before Design Solutions, Megan had often wished that she wasn't so shy, that she was prettier and thinner, that some nice guy might notice her.

Now, though?

Not so much. Lately, she was feeling much more confident on the man front. When Megan was in entrepreneur mode, dressed in the bright colored, snug power suits that she favored, men often looked twice. Some flirted, some even put moves on her.

Not that it made a whole lot of difference in her day-to-day life.

Between her booming, yet still fledgling, business and her commitment to help her sister with the kids, Megan was on the go 24-7. Even if she met someone who interested her more than her career, where would she find the time to be with the guy?

Uh-uh. Right now, romance was just not on her agenda.

And the slight—and so over—crush on Greg Banning would be no problem. This was business. Period. And it would be a major feather in Megan's professional cap to bring in her team and create a whole new image for Banning's, Inc.

"So, then," said Carly. Megan turned her head to find the other woman watching her. "You do want me to do it—to give him a call for you?"

"Yes. Thank you so much. I'd love a shot at a contract with Banning's."

"Great. I'll call him. You can consider it done."

Chapter Two

On Monday, July 3, with Independence Day looming, most of the businesses in Manhattan's financial district had gone ahead and called it a four-day weekend. At the offices of Banning's, Inc., a lone receptionist held down the fort at the desk by the elevators. And Greg Banning, president and CEO, sat alone in his bright corner office, tying up a few loose ends without the usual workday bustle and noise to distract him.

He could have been elsewhere. He'd had invitations. Since becoming a bachelor all over again, Greg had discovered that there were a lot of good-looking, smart women who were more than willing to go out with him. Hey. He was a Banning. That meant money and influence and that made him a catch.

But Greg wanted something not just any sophisticated, beautiful woman could give him. He wanted...

Okay. He wasn't sure exactly what he wanted. But he knew what he didn't want: a woman who was after him for his name and his bank account.

So instead of a lawn party upstate or a four-day weekend in the Hamptons, Greg had opted for the temporary quiet of the city and the pile of work always waiting on his desk. He'd given his personal assistant the day off, had a clear calendar and didn't expect to be disturbed.

But then, at eleven, his phone buzzed. Surprised, he checked the display: the security desk down in the lobby. Was the building on fire?

Frowning, he punched the talk button. "Greg Banning."

"Mr. Banning, Megan Schumacher is here to see you."

Megan Schumacher? Who the hell was...?

Then he remembered. Damn. Carly had called him two weeks ago and asked him to interview Angela Schumacher's sister. He'd agreed, and had gently gotten rid of Carly. And then promptly forgotten all about it. Which was why the appointment—for today, at eleven—had never made it to his calendar.

Greg scoured his brain. Megan Schumacher...

The woman lived over the Angela's garage, didn't she? And she was in...?

Graphic design. Yeah. According to Carly, she owned a small company, the name of which escaped him. Carly had asked him to consider using Megan's little company for Banning's design work.

Greg just hadn't been able to tell her no. He felt bad for Carly. He honestly did. He felt bad and he felt guilty—which was why he'd made sure she got a nice, fat divorce settlement and why he couldn't refuse her when she asked him to interview her friend from the neighborhood.

Greg straightened his tie and shook his head. What a damn waste of time—both his and the poor Schumacher girl's. Banning's already had the services of a top-notch graphic design firm at their disposal. It was a firm Banning's had been using for over twenty years, a firm that invariably delivered a quality product on time and within budget.

So there was zero chance he would hire Megan Schumacher. And that meant all he could do right now was smile and make nice and let the poor thing down gently.

"Thanks. Send her up." He punched the line to the receptionist's desk. "Jennifer, Megan Schumacher is coming up to see me. Show her the way to my office."

"Of course, Mr. Banning."

Greg hung up and went back to the flow chart he'd been studying. A few minutes later, Jennifer spoke from beyond his wide-open door.

"Mr. Banning, Ms. Schumacher is here...."

Greg clicked the program shut and glanced up. The sexiest woman he'd ever seen was standing in the doorway. Greg blinked. "Uh. Thanks, Jennifer. That's all." The receptionist left them.

And the incredible woman in the doorway greeted him with a glowing, dimpled smile. "Greg. How've you been?"

Simple question. But somehow, he'd temporarily forgotten how to speak.

Superlatives scrolled through his stunned brain: amazing. Outstanding. Exceptional...

Not pretty, really. Better than pretty.

She was full-figured in a hot-pink jacket and skirt, an outfit that hugged her generous curves. She wore one of those camisole things under the jacket; he spotted a tempting hint of black lace that matched her sleek black high-heeled shoes. Her blond hair fell in soft waves to her shoulders.

Could this possibly be Angela Schumacher's nondescript little sister?

Evidently.

He couldn't believe it. He remembered Megan Schumacher—or rather, he didn't remember her. To be brutally honest about it, all he could recall of her was a general, fuzzy impression of someone shy and plain and slightly overweight.

But this woman...

She literally sparkled with energy and life and...well, there was that word again: sex.

He really needed to stop thinking about sex.

Greg was a conservative man. He kept his flirtations away from the office, never mixed business with pleasure, had never gotten near another woman while he was married to Carly.

But right then, in the first five seconds after this new, astonishing Megan Schumacher entered his office, all of his fine principles flew right out the window. He wanted her. Damned if he didn't. He wanted her bad.

And he'd been sitting there gaping at her like a teenage kid with his first big-time crush. He jumped to his feet. "Megan. It's great to see you."

She dimpled at him again. "Admit it. You barely remembered me. And I can see it in your eyes. You promised Carly you'd give me this meeting—and then you instantly forgot all about it."

Ouch. She'd nailed him.

No point in denying it. "Okay, you got me," he confessed as he stepped out from behind his big glass desk and crossed to meet her. She carried a large, soft briefcase and a hefty portfolio. He took the portfolio from her with his left hand and extended his right. "But now you're here and so am I. And I can't wait to hear all about what Design Solutions can do for Banning's."

She sent him a conspiratorial glance, one that hinted she thought he was laying it on a little thick. But all she said was, "Good. Because Design Solutions has a lot to offer you." Her perfume tempted him—flowers, plus something slightly tart. And more than the flowers and the tartness, she smelled of...

Peaches. Damned if she didn't smell like a sweet, ripe peach. Her hand was soft and smooth and cool. He liked the feel of it cradled in his. Liked it a lot.

He had to remind himself to let go. "Your company is relatively new, isn't it?"

She nodded firmly. "Design Solutions is three years old and growing by leaps and bounds. I have two graphic artists on staff, a Web expert, an office manager, a clerk-receptionist and an intern who helps out wherever we need him. I'm looking at bringing in another artist and possibly even a second designer at the first of the year." She gestured with one of those soft hands. "Just put the portfolio down anywhere." With the tips of her fingers, she brushed the back of one of the two chairs that faced his desk. He wished those fingers were brushing him. "Sit here, beside me. I'll boot up my laptop and we can get started..."

Sitting beside her.

Excellent idea. He took the chair she'd indicated and propped her portfolio up on the floor between them, then he sat back and watched as she took a laptop the size of Cleveland from her fat briefcase and opened the thing on the outer edge of his desk.

"I'll show you some of the work we've done." She sent him another of those captivating smiles as the big screen glowed to life. "Then I want to give you a basic idea of the many ways Design Solutions can bolster and expand on the Banning's brand. Finally, we'll take a look at a few things in the portfolio. It's always good, I think, to get a sense of textures and colors, to see firsthand how the print work is going to translate. We can do so much online and with computer programs now, but sometimes digital images simply aren't the same as holding the finished product in your hands...."

"Excellent," he said as she started bringing up examples of work her company had done. Each one was different from the last, and each was terrific—clear and well-organized, with colors that popped and graphics that jumped right off the screen.

As she began explaining how she would work her own particular magic on Banning's image, Greg realized he was interested—and not only in the lush, peach-scented Ms. Schumacher herself.

Her ideas for Banning's were fresh and exciting. And Greg had been thinking lately that the company needed an upgrade on the image front. Their trademark black-and-red graphics had once seemed sophisticated and dramatic.

Now, though, gazing at the images Megan had prepared for him, the plain black-and-red seemed a little bit tired, didn't it? A little bit old.

"We don't want to go with different colors," Megan suggested. "We don't want to lose your brand recognition. We just want to...update your look a little. Instead of midnight black, we'll make it just a tiny bit silvery. So the black has a certain...luster. No?"

He was nodding. She continued, "And we'll go from that slightly blue red to an even brighter, more aggressive true red...."

"I like it."

She glanced at him. That dimpled smile bloomed and her green eyes danced. "I kind of figured you would."

She spoke of launching a print campaign to make sure all of Banning's customers were aware of the fresh styles they carried now. They needed, she said, to showcase the new clothing lines they'd recently introduced, the ones that targeted a younger, trendier consumer. She took apart Bannings.com, said the pages were too slow to load, and navigation could be simpler. Her Web guy, she promised, was a genius. He could get with Banning's Web people and help them streamline the site while they worked on the various image-brand issues.

Greg listened and nodded, asked a few questions and liked the answers he got, all the while planning how he was going to get to know her better.

It might not be easy. She was direct and cheerful and friendly. But she wasn't coming on to him. Not in the least.

Still, she had to feel it, didn't she? The heat of attraction? She was only behaving appropriately, hiding her personal interest in him, keeping it strictly business, right?

Or was interest on her part no more than wishful thinking on his?

He just plain couldn't believe that he'd once lived on the same street with her and never even noticed her. She was not the kind of woman a normal, red-blooded man easily forgot.

She wrapped up her presentation, and by then he was totally sold. He would have Design Solutions revamp the image of Banning's department stores.

But there were more steps to take before he could tell her she had it locked up. Greg's father, Gregory, Sr., chairman of the board of Banning's, Inc., would have to be convinced, as would a couple of the vice presidents. Greg had no doubt that Megan and her team would cinch it with the rest of them, but he wasn't telling her that. No way. If he told her, she might just smile that stunning, dimpled smile, say "Thank you very much," and leave.

“I want to hear more,” he said, as she zipped up her portfolio. “It’s almost one. Are you hungry?”

For the first time since she’d strolled so confidently through his office door, she looked doubtful. A slight frown formed between her smooth brows. She cleared her throat. “Well, I...” The words trailed off.

He jumped right in before she could find a way to say no. “Let me take you to lunch. You like Italian? I know a great little Italian place up on Lexington at 33rd. The food is terrific and the service is, too.”

For a moment—barely a split second—he thought she looked... what? Shocked? Wary? Slightly frantic?

But before he could decide what the look might mean, it vanished. She flashed him another of those incredible smiles of hers. “Why not?” she said. “Lunch it is.”

Megan was having the time of her life.

She had so aced her presentation. Soon, there would be more meetings with more executives. She and her team would need to get right on a formal Flash presentation—one that would blow them all away.

Oh, yeah. She would get the Banning’s account, she just knew it. And now here she was, sitting next to Greg on gorgeous, glove-soft black leather in a company limo.

Greg had insisted on the limo, so she could stash her big portfolio and heavy briefcase in the trunk and forget about them while they were in the restaurant. Megan enjoyed a limo ride as much as the next girl. What was not to like?

She leaned on the padded armrest and gazed out the smoked-glass window at semideserted Manhattan streets. “I love New York on days like this.”

“You mean when everyone else is gone for the holiday?”

“Exactly.” She turned to Greg, met those velvety brown eyes of his and told herself that the thrill that shimmered through her every time she looked at him didn’t mean a thing. “It’s so... peaceful. For a change.”

“Your offices are in Poughkeepsie, you said?”

She nodded. “Close to home and economical. You live here in the city now, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I’ve got a loft apartment right on Broadway, two and a half blocks up from the office.”

“Convenient.”

“That’s what I tell myself....” He had a great voice. Deep. Smooth as melted chocolate. But did he sound kind of... wistful?

She thought of Carly, wondered as she’d wondered more than once in the past months just what had gone wrong there—two beautiful people with everything going for them. Two nice people. Really, their breakup made no sense.

Megan dared to suggest, “You sound... I don’t know. As if you’re not happy living in the city.”

His warm gaze cooled just a little. “I’m happy. Perfectly. And here we are....” The limo rolled to a stop in front of the restaurant and the driver got out and opened the door for them.

“Thank you, Jerry.” Greg pressed some bills into the driver’s palm. “We’ll be awhile. I’ll call for you when we’re ready to go.”

“Good enough, Mr. Banning.” Jerry tipped his chauffeur’s cap and got back behind the wheel.

After the heat of the summer day, the restaurant was cool and dim and inviting. The hostess called Greg by name and took them to a corner table. Even with half of Manhattan out of town, the place was almost full. “Must be popular,” Megan said to Greg once the hostess had left them.

“It is. Deservedly so.” The wine steward appeared. He and Greg conferred briefly. The steward nodded and left, reappearing a moment later with bottle of chenin blanc. There was pouring and tasting. Finally, the wine guy left. Greg held up his glass. “To Design Solutions. Much success.”

Oh, well. One glass wouldn't hurt. And she was pretty much finished working for the day, anyway. She touched her glass to his. "To success." She sipped. The wine was excellent. "Umm. Wonderful. Too wonderful...."

"Is that bad?"

She couldn't help laughing. "Not in the least."

He leaned a little closer across the snowy white tablecloth. "You are amazing. You know that?"

A curl of alarm tightened inside her. She ordered it gone. He wasn't putting a move on her. No way. It was just a compliment. No big deal. "People from the neighborhood are always surprised when I happen to run into them during working hours."

"On Danbury Way you always seemed so..."

She laughed again. "I believe the word you're looking for is shy? Or maybe bland? Or just plain dumpy..."

He pretended to look injured. "Did I say that?"

"You didn't have to—and I confess, okay? In the neighborhood I do like to, er, play it low-key."

He sipped from his wine. "Why?"

"Habit, I guess. And, oh, I don't know. Everyone at home sees me a certain way. And I don't disillusion them."

"But if it's not the real you..."

It seemed so natural to lean toward him, to brush the back of his hand with light fingers, to enjoy the lazy, pleased feel of that brief touch. "But it is the real me."

He frowned, though his eyes had a teasing light in them. "Then who is it I'm sitting across from right now?"

She shrugged. "This is me, too."

"Ah," he said, but he still looked doubtful.

She explained further. "They're both me. I guess this is more the new me—and at home, I'm pretty much the old me. If that makes any sense."

"I'll take the new you."

Before she could come up with a suitably lighthearted reply, the waiter appeared.

After they ordered, Greg asked how she'd come to live over her sister's garage. She explained about wanting to put everything she had into starting up her company. "That was three years ago," she said. "And Angela and her ex, Jerome, were calling it quits. My moving into the apartment at her house worked out for everyone. Angela and the kids can use the extra money I pay in rent, and I get a nice, reasonably priced place to live. I can zip back from Poughkeepsie at four most days and stay with the kids after school until Ange gets home from work. Then, if I have anything that won't wait, I hop the train and head back to the office to put in a few hours in the evening."

And why was she telling him all this? As if it mattered in the least to Greg Banning how she and Angela juggled child care and the necessity of bringing home a paycheck.

He remarked in a tone that said he really was interested, "Sounds like a tight schedule."

"It is. For both Angela and me. But we manage...."

"You're smiling. I think you love your sister a lot."

"Yeah. I do. She's my best friend."

"Any other sisters? Brothers?"

"Nope. Just the two of us—in fact, I was adopted into the Schumacher family when I was eleven and Angela was thirteen..." It had been a very tough time, those first years after her parents died. Megan had been bounced from one foster home to the next.

"Your birth parents?"

Was this getting just a little too personal? Probably. But then again, none of it was any deep, dark secret. "I was seven when they died. We went on a family vacation in the Bahamas—my parents, my brother and me. Mom and Dad rented a boat and took us out on the ocean. A sudden storm blew

in. The boat capsized. I survived by catching a piece of driftwood and holding on until help finally came. My parents and my little brother...not so lucky. They said it was a miracle that I lived through it, that they even found me....”

Funny. After all these years, it still got to her, to remember the ones she’d lost so long ago. If she closed her eyes, she could almost hear her mother’s warm laughter, see her father’s loving smile. She’d adored her bratty brother, Ethan, even though he could be so annoying.

Not much remained to her of the day she had lost them. She recalled that the sun had been shining when they set out. The sky had darkened. And after that, she had only a series of vague, awful impressions of clinging to that bit of driftwood in an endless, choppy sea, calling for her mother, her father and Ethan until her throat was too raw to make a sound....

Greg’s big, warm hand settled over hers on the white tablecloth. She looked down at it—tanned, dusted with golden hair, strong and capable looking. It felt really good, to have him touching her.

Much, much too good...

She eased her hand away, picked up her wineglass and knocked back a giant-size gulp.

Greg’s dark eyes held sympathy and understanding. “What a horrible thing to happen—to anyone. But especially to a little girl.”

She beamed him a determined smile. “Well. I got through it. And eventually, the Schumachers adopted me. Angela and I hit it off from the first. And then, three years later, our parents divorced. It was pretty bad, especially for Angela, who’d had just about the perfect childhood up till then.”

And come on. Megan had said way more than enough about herself and her childhood. “What about you?” She was reasonably sure he had no siblings, but she asked anyway. “Brothers? Sisters?”

He was shaking his head. “I’m an only. I grew up in a brownstone on the Upper East Side. Big rooms in that brownstone. And high ceilings. Kind of empty, really. And very, very quiet.”

She sipped more wine. “Your parents still live there?”

“Yes, they do.”

“You wanted brothers, didn’t you? You wouldn’t even have minded a sister or two.”

“Yeah. I wanted a houseful of brothers and sisters. Didn’t happen, though. Truthfully, for my mother, one child was more than enough.”

Vanessa. That was his mother’s name. Megan knew this because Carly had told her. Carly said Vanessa was tall and slim and very sophisticated. And difficult to please. “Greg’s mother never did like me much,” Carly claimed. “Not that she’s happy about Greg wanting a divorce. Vanessa doesn’t believe in divorce, so she’s on my side for once. But it’s not for my sake or anything. It’s just the principle of the thing, you know? She’s always made it painfully clear that she would have preferred if Greg had married some rich Yankee woman from Vassar or Bryn Mawr, instead of me....”

The waiter appeared with a pair of calamari salads. He set the plates before them, poured them each more wine and then was gone.

Megan picked up her salad fork and popped a bite into her mouth. She wasn’t a big squid fan as a rule, but the salad was wonderful. She chewed and swallowed, thinking about Carly, feeling just a little bit guilty about the way things were going here. This was a business lunch, and nothing more. But somehow, it was a business lunch that felt way too much like a date.

They both concentrated on the fabulous food for a moment or two, in a shared silence that was surprisingly companionable. Megan sipped from her water glass and decided a change of subject—away from the personal and more toward the professional—was in order.

She suggested, “We haven’t set a date and time for our next meeting.”

He sent her a look, one that heated her midsection and curled her toes in her best pair of shoes. “We aren’t finished with this one yet.”

She toasted him with her wineglass. “I like to plan ahead.” And she took another sip, though she knew she shouldn’t. She was on her second glass and the world was looking a little bit soft around

the edges. Plus she was smiling way too much. That always happened when she drank more than one glass of anything with alcohol in it. She became a smiling fool.

Greg took a sip, too. "Okay. Tell me what you've got in mind."

Firmly, she set down her glass. "A formal presentation. With my entire team there—and anyone from Banning's who you think should be in on the final decision."

"That sounds like the next step to me."

"I'd love it if you and your people would come up to Poughkeepsie for the presentation."

"You want it on your turf."

"I do." She was grinning again. Much too widely. But somehow, she couldn't—or wouldn't—make herself stop. "Would that work for you?"

"When?"

"A week from today. Say, 10:00 a.m.?"

"That's quick."

"We're not only good, we're efficient."

"I like efficiency." His eyes said there were other things he liked, things that had nothing to do with updating Banning's brand.

She remembered her objective. "So...?"

He nodded. "Next Monday at ten in your offices. That should work. I'll need to check with the others, confirm that they can make it."

"I'll have my assistant call your assistant, just to firm things up."

Those dark eyes gleamed. "You mean to make certain the date and time get on my calendar."

She shrugged. Eloquently. "Well. There's that, too."

"I won't forget. Not this time. How could I? After all, it's an appointment with you."

An appointment with you....

His tone was personal. And so was that gleam in his eyes. Megan knew she should say something, should make it clear right then and there that, for Carly's sake, she could never allow anything personal to go on between them. At the very least, she should sit up straight, stop leaning toward him across the table, stop smiling into those beautiful eyes of his.

But she said nothing. And she went on smiling, went on leaning eagerly toward him, went on wishing with every fiber of her being that he wasn't Carly Alderson's ex.

Chapter Three

Greg wanted to stay in that restaurant forever, to sit across from Megan and stare into those clear green eyes, to listen to that slightly husky voice of hers and try to make her laugh. She had the best damn laugh, free and full-throated.

But after she refused dessert and finished her coffee, well, he could see that she thought it was time to go. He called Jerry and paid the bill and they went out into the glaring brightness of the afternoon.

“Take the limo,” Greg said.

She looked adorably bewildered, those round, soft cheeks slightly flushed, and confusion in her eyes. “But there’s no point. I can catch the train right here at—”

“You’re not taking the train. Jerry will take you home to Rosewood—or on up to Poughkeepsie, if that’s where you’re headed from here.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. . . .”

He caught her hand. Heat sizzled up his arm. “Yes, you could.”

She swallowed, pressed those sweet lips together—and then broke into a smile. “Well, okay then. I’ll take the limo gladly. And thank you.” Since he still held her hand firmly in his, she shook it, pumping her arm up and down with great enthusiasm.

He finally got the message and reluctantly let her go. “You’re welcome.” He opened the limo door for her. She ducked inside. He shut the door. She rolled down the window and smiled up at him.

He passed her his card, the one with all his numbers on it—office, cell and home. “Next Monday.”

She took the card. “Ten o’clock.” Those lips of hers seemed to beg for a kiss.

“Gotcha.” He tore his gaze from her mouth to keep himself from doing something completely unacceptable. “Till then. . . .”

She nodded and rolled up the window. He tapped on the passenger window. Jerry rolled it down. Greg passed the chauffeur another big tip. “Take Megan upstate. She’ll tell you where.”

“Will do, Mr. Banning.”

Greg stepped back from the car. The limo rolled away from the curb. He stood staring after it until it turned the corner.

As the hot afternoon faded into a muggy evening, Greg began to wonder what the hell had gotten into him. Damned if he hadn’t gone completely gaga over Angela Schumacher’s sister. He’d come that close to dragging Megan out of that limousine and into his arms. That close to kissing her—a hard, long, wet kiss—right there on the street.

Maybe it was the wine. . . .

But he knew it wasn’t. He’d been long-gone over the woman from the moment he’d glanced up from his computer and found her standing in the doorway to his office. There’d been no wine then. He’d been stone-cold sober.

Unbelievable. Unacceptable. And impossible.

He was never going to go out with Megan Schumacher. She was from the neighborhood, for pity’s sake. She lived three houses up from Carly. . . .

No way. Couldn’t happen. If he and Megan started seeing each other, there would be talk. And Carly would be hurt even more than he’d already hurt her.

Greg would never go back to Carly. It was over between them and had been for a long time. He did, however, feel a certain. . . tenderness toward her. A certain responsibility. She was a good woman, just not the woman for him. Somehow, sweet Carly Alderson had turned out to be the perfect wife. Greg didn’t want perfect. He’d never wanted perfect. He’d grown up with perfect and it was a cold, sterile way to live.

He knew that Carly had yet to accept that it was over. But in time, she would. Until then, though, he owed it to her to stay away, to keep himself the hell out of her life—which meant not dating someone she considered her friend. Whatever had happened to him at the sight of sexy Megan Schumacher, it couldn't be allowed to happen again.

Greg stood in the darkness of his apartment and stared out at the Manhattan night and considered calling Megan to tell her he'd changed his mind about using Design Solutions.

But no. That would not only be a bad business decision for Banning's, it wouldn't be right. Her work was top-notch. Her ideas were brilliant. She'd never been anything but strictly professional during the meeting and the lunch that followed. He was the one who'd come within an inch of stepping over the line.

Megan deserved this opportunity. And he had zero doubt that once his father and the others saw what she could do, she would get the contract. They'd be lucky to have her.

Uh-uh. It wasn't Megan Schumacher's fault that Greg Banning had gone crazy over her. It was Greg's problem and he would handle it.

From now on, when it came to Megan, Greg was keeping his mind on business and business alone.

In Rosewood late that night, Megan lay in her bed and stared at the silvery half-moon out the window and thought the same things that Greg was thinking seventy-five miles away.

How could this have happened? She'd truly believed that the silly crush she'd once had on Carly's husband was over. And yet, since she'd left Greg on the street outside the restaurant, she couldn't stop thinking of him. His name played over and over in an endless loop inside her head: Greg, Greg, Greg...

Which was dumb, dumb, dumb. She didn't need a boyfriend. She didn't have time for a boyfriend. Her life was jam-packed and then some. She hardly had time to get her legs waxed. There wasn't a minute left over for romance—especially not for a romance with Carly Alderson's ex.

This was bad. Megan was way too attracted. Much more attracted than she'd been back when Greg and Carly were married. Then, it had only been a kind of now-and-then dreamy fantasy of what it might be like if...

And now? Well, to reiterate: Greg, Greg, Greg...

But it didn't matter. This crazy feeling she had for him was going nowhere. When she saw him next Monday, she'd make sure it was business and only business.

Period. End of story.

"Pancakes, pancakes. I love pancakes..." Michael sang the words and then poked a great big wad of pancake, dripping syrup, into his mouth.

"Eeww," remarked Olivia. "You've got syrup on your chin and it's rude to sing at the table."

"We're not at the table," Michael corrected with the pure and literal logic of a five-year-old, the words mushy with that mouthful of pancake. He swallowed. Hard. "We're at the breakfast counter." Angela's roomy kitchen had an L-shaped eating area along one section of the main counter.

"It's the same," insisted Olivia. "The breakfast counter is the same as the table when it comes to singing—so you just quit it."

"Pancakes, pancakes," Michael sang some more.

"Mo-om. He's sing-ing." Olivia turned on her stool to stick her chin out at her mother, who stood by the electric griddle down at the end of the counter, flipping another batch of blueberry pancakes.

"Eat your breakfast, honey," said her mother. "And Michael, stop singing and finish eating."

"Humph." Michael forked up another huge bite and shoved it in his mouth. Olivia flounced around to face front again and delicately picked up her own fork. Anthony ate in silence, staring at his plate.

The doorbell rang. Anthony's head jerked up. "It's Dad!" he crowed, brown eyes suddenly alight. "He's early." Jerome was due at ten to take the kids to the Catskills for the day.

"Dad!" echoed Michael around a half-chewed lump of pancake.

"Gross," muttered Olivia.

And then, in unison, all three kids announced, "I'll get it."

"Stay put." Megan slid her napkin beside her half-empty plate. "All of you."

Olivia groaned. Michael shrugged. Anthony let out a big, fat sigh. But they all remained on their stools.

In the foyer, Megan pulled open the door and found Carly on the front porch looking absolutely gorgeous. Her blond hair fell in soft, perfect waves around her beautiful face, which glowed with just a touch of blusher and a dab of lip gloss. She was dressed in the spirit of the day, in trim, royal-blue capris and a curve-hugging white shirt. On her perfectly manicured feet she wore a pair of strappy red sandals. She carried a layer cake on a crystal cake stand.

The cake was almost as stunning as Carly, a good eight inches high and slathered in ivory-colored swirls of buttercream frosting, with an accurate depiction of an American flag drawn in colored icing across the top.

"Wow." Megan was so impressed with the cake she almost forgot to feel guilty about going love-wacko over Greg. "That is beautiful."

Carly blushed and smiled her prettiest smile. "I baked it for you and Angela and the kids. It's a red velvet cake. And if I do say so myself, it is delish. Where I come from, we would always have red velvet cake on Independence Day."

Megan ushered her inside and shut the door. "Come on back to the kitchen. We're having blueberry pancakes. There's plenty. Join us."

"Oh. No. Really. I can't. All I have to do is look at a pancake and I put on five pounds."

Megan, who always did a lot more than look at her pancakes, only shrugged and offered, "Coffee, then?"

"I'd love a cup. Yes."

They went on to the kitchen, where Angela spotted the cake and said, "Oh, Carly, you shouldn't have..." Even the kids got all wide-eyed over it—well, except for Anthony, who only got wide-eyed lately when his mostly absent dad was at the door.

Carly took a stool, accepted a cup of black coffee and talked to each of the children in turn, asking them how they were doing and what their plans were for the day. Michael peppered her with a volley of questions. Olivia, whose rock collection was her pride and joy, solemnly explained that her grandpa had sent her a real quartz crystal, a big one, all the way from Arkansas. Even Anthony opened up to her a little. He said his dad was coming and they were going to the Catskills Game Park and maybe there would be fireworks after dark.

Carly was good with kids. Megan couldn't help wondering why she and Greg had never had any.

Not that she would ask. Oh, no. Not going there. No way...

The kids finished their breakfast, cleared their places and ran upstairs to get ready to go. Angela served herself the final stack of flapjacks and sat at the counter while Megan got the coffeepot and gave all three of them refills.

Carly, sitting between Angela and Megan, sipped and said how good the coffee was, and asked Angela how her job managing that dentist's office was going.

Angela said it was great. "And I get holidays. All the good ones. What more can I ask for?"

Regular support checks from Jerome would be nice, Megan thought. But of course, her sister would never say that.

Megan knew what was coming. After a moment, it did.

Carly turned to her and sweetly scolded, "You didn't call me yesterday to tell me how it went. Did Greg hire you?"

Keeping her expression totally noncommittal, Megan shrugged. “Not yet. That was just the preliminary meeting. There will be a more formal presentation at my office next week, with my whole team involved. There’ll also be Gregory, Sr., and a few vice presidents, I think.”

Carly let out a cry of delight. “Look at you. So calm and collected. I mean, you just said ‘Not yet.’ Why, he is going to hire you, isn’t he?”

“Surprised?” Megan couldn’t help teasing.

“Well, I...I just...”

Megan smiled. “Hey. It’s okay. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your setting up that interview.” Too bad I went and fell for the guy you’re still in love with....

“Oh, well.” Carly’s thick lashes swooped down. “I was happy to do it.”

“I’m very grateful. The chance to land the Banning’s account, that’s a big deal for me.”

Carly sipped more coffee. “So tell me. How is Greg?” Her cheeks were pinker than ever and those Delft-blue eyes glittered with a frantic kind of hope.

“Well, of course, it was a business meeting,” Megan hedged, and felt like a low-down, backstabbing creep. “But he seemed well. You know, healthy. All that...”

On Carly’s other side, Angela looked up sharply from her plate of pancakes. She’d always had a sixth sense about what was going on with Megan. Megan lifted an eyebrow and Angela lifted one right back.

Carly was oblivious to the sisterly signals. “Did he seem too thin? I worry, you know? That he’s not eating right...”

“Uh. No. He looked okay. Fine. Really.”

“What did he say about me?”

Good googly moogly. Megan honestly couldn’t recall his mentioning Carly’s name once. “Nothing. Really.” Carly’s face fell. And Megan heard herself adding, “He sends his regards, of course.” Liar, liar, pants on fire...

“His regards...” Carly mulled that over for a moment, her full lower lip quivering just a little.

“Yes,” Megan said, so cheerfully it set her own teeth on edge.

Carly pasted on a smile. “Well. That’s something. I guess...” She popped off the stool as if she’d been ejected from it. “And you know what?” She tugged on the hem of her crisp white shirt. “I really do have to get going. I only meant to stay for just a moment. My, how the time does fly.” She was halfway across the kitchen already.

“Bye, Carly,” said Angela, with another sharp look at Megan. “Thanks again for the amazing cake. We will totally enjoy it.”

“My pleasure.” Carly’s voice was tight. She ducked out through the dining room.

Megan trailed her to the door, where Carly paused, swallowed back the tears that were shining in her eyes, and asked, “Your next meeting with Greg and his dad and the executives, when is that?”

“Monday.”

“Well, you’d better call me afterward this time. Promise?”

“I will.”

She reached up to smooth her perfect hair. “I want to hear all about it, now. I mean it.”

Since the meeting next Monday was going to be business and nothing but, Megan told herself, she had zero to worry about. “You bet.”

Carly’s forced smile widened. “Good luck.”

Megan thanked her again, and at last she left.

Back in the kitchen, big sister was waiting. “Okay.” Angela pushed her plate to the side and picked up her coffee cup. “What the heck is going on?”

Megan picked up her own cup and leaned against the counter. “Absolutely nothing.”

Angela gave a tiny snort. “Liar.”

Megan scowled at her sister. Leave it to Angela to cut right to the chase. “Really. It’s nothing.” Because I’m not letting it become something.

Angela wasn’t buying. “Something happened. With Greg Banning...” Megan winced—and her sister had one of those lightbulb moments. “Oh. My. Gosh.” She sent a glance over her shoulder, as if checking to see if Rhonda Johnson or Irene Dare or some other neighborhood busybody might be lurking there. And then she whispered, “You and Greg...?”

Megan plunked her cup down and crossed her arms over her midsection. “No. That’s not so. I’m telling you, nothing happened.”

Angela patted the stool that Carly had vacated. “Sit. Now.”

With a put-upon sigh, Megan took the stool. “What?”

“Exactly what happened while nothing was happening?”

“I gave the presentation. I was terrific.”

“Of course you were.”

“He said he wanted to hear more....”

“Yeah, and?”

“He asked me to lunch—and don’t get that look. Nothing was said, you know? He didn’t... make any moves or ask me out or anything.”

“Well, he asked you to lunch.”

“Angela. Come on. Sometimes Dr. Zefflinger takes you to lunch. Does that mean he’s putting a move on you?”

“Dr. Zefflinger is happily married, not to mention almost sixty.”

Megan blew out a breath. “Not my point.”

“Oh, really?”

“Ange. Business colleagues go to lunch all the time. It’s perfectly acceptable—in fact, a nice lunch is a good way to get to know the people you’re working with. It doesn’t have to be a man-woman thing.”

Angela looked at her long and hard. Then she nodded. “Right. It doesn’t have to be. But this is.”

Megan lowered her head and groaned. “Why is this happening?”

Angela waited until she raised her eyes again. “You really like him. I mean, you really, really like him.”

“Why are we talking about this?”

“Because you need to talk about it.”

“No. I don’t.”

“Yes, you do—and you said he didn’t ask you out?”

“He didn’t. I don’t believe he will. I believe he’s going to think it over, the way I’ve been thinking it over, and decide that it’s a terrible idea for him and me to ever...get together.”

Angela frowned. “Wait.”

“What?”

“Well, what did he do to let you know he was interested? I mean, if taking you to lunch doesn’t count. If he didn’t say anything or do anything, if he didn’t come on to you...”

“Oh, please. You know how it is, the little things a guy does, the...electricity in the air, when there’s attraction.”

Angela made a face. “I’m a single mom with almost no free time. I wouldn’t know a date if it fell on me. I work for a pediatric dentist who, as I just pointed out, is sixty and very married to his wife of forty years. Let’s just say I’ve forgotten, okay? Refresh my memory.”

“Arrgh.”

“Come on. Fill me in.”

“He...um, well, in the restaurant, he put his hand over mine when I told him about how my birth parents died—and then he didn’t take it away. I had to kind of slide my own hand out from

under it. And earlier...that first moment when I walked in his office. Oh, Ange.” Megan put her hand against her fast-beating heart. “You should have seen his face. Shocked. Amazed. Awestruck. Thrilled. Excited. All of the above. And I felt the same way. But I covered it. Pretty well, I think. I was the soul of professionalism.”

“Oh, I know you were.”

“...Until those last few moments outside the restaurant, before he sent me home in the limo.”

“He gave you his limo—to come all the way to Rosewood from Manhattan?”

“Farther. To Poughkeepsie. I went on up to the office. I tried to give the driver a big tip, but he only shook his head and said that Mr. Banning had already taken care of it.”

Angela’s eyes were saucer-wide. “Well, okay. I’m convinced. I mean, his limo...”

“Exactly.”

“So what happened? On the sidewalk, before the limo?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Megan’s cheeks were flaming. She pressed her hands to them to cool them a little. “It was just...I just knew he was going to kiss me. And oh, did I ever want him to do that. He grabbed my hand again. And, same as in the restaurant, he didn’t let go. I considered just, you know, kind of throwing myself against him. But I controlled myself. Thank God for that.”

“And you’ll see him again next Monday?”

“Yeah.”

“And if he asks you out then...?”

“He won’t.”

“Go with me here. What if he does?”

“Well, I’ll have to say no, of course.”

“Why?”

“Oh, come on. You know why. Because it wouldn’t be fair to Carly. Because it would be so cruel.”

“Megan. The fact is, Carly and Greg are divorced. Not separated. Not getting a divorce. They are no longer married and they aren’t together in any way. They’re through.”

“But Carly hopes—”

“It’s not your fault what Carly hopes. Greg hasn’t been on Danbury Way since she threw him out of Tara.” The rest of the houses on the street were colonials. But Carly’s huge house, with its tall pillars and wide front veranda, looked like something out of *Gone with the Wind*. The neighbors referred to it either as Tara or, more commonly, the McMansion. “He’s not coming back. Carly needs to accept that her marriage is finished, and get going on the rest of her life. She’s a beautiful woman, inside and outside. And it’s a shame that she’s throwing her life away waiting for a man who’s gone for good. You’re not doing her any favors by turning Greg down for her sake.”

“But...you know how people talk. She’d be mortified. And even worse than all the gossip, she’d think I went behind her back and went after him when she was so sweet and got me the interview in the first place.”

“So don’t go behind her back. If he asks you out and you decide to go for it, the classy way to handle the situation would be to speak frankly to Carly about it.”

Megan’s stomach felt as if a big, hard fist was squeezing it. “To tell her that I’m dating Greg...”

“That’s right,” said Angela.

Megan cringed and Angela saw it. She spoke more gently. “It wouldn’t be such a terrible thing for you, either, you know? If for once in your life you went after what you wanted instead of always going along with what everyone else wants.”

“I go after what I want.”

“In your work, yes. But on Danbury Way...?” Angela answered her own question with a shake of her golden head. “Look. Just think about it, okay?”

“I can’t, Ange. I won’t. I’m not getting anything going with Greg Banning, so there’s no reason for me to ever talk to Carly about it.”

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