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## **Vintage** *Cherish*

# **His Mother's Wedding**

**JUDY DUARTE**

Mills & Boon Vintage Cherish

Judy Duarte

**His Mother's Wedding**

«HarperCollins»

**Duarte J.**

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HERE COMES THE BRIDE...MATCHMAKING DOWN THE AISLE!When private investigator Rico Garcia arrived to visit his recently engaged mother, becoming involved with her wedding planner was the last thing on his mind. But his matchmaker of a mom had other ideas—and an assignment to find the starry-eyed Molly Townsend's long-lost sister.Molly had dreamed of her Prince Charming for years—and the cynical, down-with-love Rico was the stuff of her nightmares! But as she and Rico worked together to plan a wedding, and a reunion with her sister, Molly's chance at true love seemed within reach. It was just up to Rico to close the book on a perfect fairy-tale ending....

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## **“I don’t want you lying to my mom.”**

“What are you talking about?”

Rico brushed his lips across hers, once, twice.

Molly sucked in her breath but didn’t move. Didn’t speak, didn’t stop him. Instead, she placed a tentative hand on his chest, then slowly gripped the lapel of his jacket—to steady herself, no doubt. Or maybe to draw him closer?

Her lips parted before she came to her senses and pulled away. “What in the world was that all about?”

“Tell my mother that I’m rude or a cynical jerk. Tell her I’m a die-hard bachelor, that I’m stubborn and cocky and too set in my ways. But don’t tell her there’s no chemistry between us,” he added, flashing her a rebel grin. “Because that, sweet Molly, would be a bold-faced lie.”

Dear Reader,

So—it’s the new year. Time for new beginnings. And we at Special Edition take that very seriously, so this month we offer the first of six books in our new FAMILY BUSINESS continuity. In it, a family shattered by tragedy finds a way to rebuild. USA TODAY bestselling author Susan Mallery opens the series with *Prodigal Son*, in which the son who thought he’d rid himself of the family business is called back to save it—with the help of his old (figuratively speaking) and beautiful business school nemesis. Don’t miss it!

It’s time for new beginnings for reader favorite Patricia Kay also, who this month opens *CALLIE’S CORNER CAFÉ*, a three-book miniseries centered around a small-town restaurant that serves as home base for a group of female friends. January’s kickoff book in the series is *A Perfect Life*, which features a woman who thought she had the whole life-plan thing down pat—until fate told her otherwise. Talk about reinventing yourself! Next up, Judy Duarte tells the story of a marriage-phobic man, his much-married mother...and the wedding planner who gets involved with them both, in *His Mother’s Wedding*. Jessica Bird continues *THE MOOREHOUSE LEGACY* with *His Comfort and Joy*. For years, sweet, small-town Joy Moorehouse has fantasized about arrogant, big-city Grayson Bennett... Are those fantasies about to become reality? In *The Three-Way Miracle* by Karen Sandler, three people—a woman, a man and a child—greatly in need of healing, find all they need in each other. And in Kate Welsh’s *The Doctor’s Secret Child*, what starts out as a custody battle for a little boy turns into a love story. You won’t be able to put it down....

Enjoy them all—and don’t forget next month! It’s February, and you know what that means....

Here’s to new beginnings....

Gail Chasan

Senior Editor

## **His Mother's Wedding**

### **Judy Duarte**



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To Virginia Collis, the very first reader to take pen in hand and tell me she liked my books.

Virginia, this story is for you.

I hope you give it a thumbs-up, too!

## **JUDY DUARTE**

An avid reader who enjoys a happy ending, Judy Duarte loves to create stories of her own. When she's not cooped up in her writing cave, she's spending time with her somewhat enormous, but delightfully close family.

Judy makes her home in California with her personal hero, their youngest son and a cat named Mom. "Sharing a name with the family pet gets a bit confusing," she admits. "Especially when the cat decides to curl up in a secluded cubbyhole and hide. I'm not sure what the neighbors think when my son walks up and down the street calling for Mom."

You can write to Judy c/o Silhouette Books, 233 Broadway, Suite 1001, New York, NY 10237. Or you can contact her through her Web site at: [www.judyduarte.com](http://www.judyduarte.com).

Mr. Rico Garcia  
requests the honor of your presence  
at the marriage of his mother  
Colette Marie Garcia  
to  
Dr. Daniel Osterhout  
Saturday, the third of June  
at two o'clock in the afternoon  
Westlake Community Church  
Westlake, New York  
Reception to follow

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## Chapter One

“Hi, baby. It’s me. Where’ve you been lately? Are we still on for this weekend?”

As he listened to his voice mail, Rico Garcia leaned back in his tufted leather desk chair and blew out a sigh.

Damn. He and Suzette had a date on Saturday, and he’d completely forgotten. Talk about a subconscious desire to cut bait and run.

Not that he’d been stringing her along.

On the day they’d met, he’d made it clear he didn’t commit, and she’d eagerly agreed to his terms. Now, two months later, she was having second thoughts.

And so was he.

Not about committing, though. About their relationship.

He opened the file drawer on the lower right side of his desk where he kept it full of candy and reached into an open bag of Reese’s Pieces. He had a stash of goodies in the glove box of his car, too.

As a kid, he spent the bulk of his allowance on sweets. But after his step-dad was shot, and the proceeds of the life insurance policy dwindled, any money Rico could scavenge went toward rent and utility bills.

He grabbed a handful of the autumn-colored candies, popped them into his mouth and savored the peanut butter taste. The first time he’d eaten them was back in the early eighties, after watching E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial at the Sunday matinee. And they’d been one of his favorites ever since.

After listening to the rest of his messages and making the appropriate return calls, he pulled the Rolodex across his mahogany desk.

He needed to break things off with Suzette. But he wouldn’t do it on a night she was expecting dinner and a sleepover. He’d just have to cancel their date. Then, at the beginning of the week, he’d stop by her house and tell her she ought to look for someone who wanted the same things out of life that she did.

As he flipped through the tabs, he found V and looked for Vio...Vya...

What the hell was the name of the company Suzette worked for?

As a private investigator, details like that never slipped his mind. But sometimes, when it came to relationships with women, his brain didn’t work the same way. The selective-memory thing bothered him a bit, though. Probably because he prided himself on the ability to recall trivial details about a case.

There was a real rush when an investigation struck pay dirt, as most of his did.

Most—but not all of them.

He glanced at the only photograph that sat on his desk, a dark-metal-framed picture of Frank Stafford standing beside his 1963 Corvette Stingray—tuxedo-black, with a split back window and a three-twenty-seven-cubic-inch fuel-injection engine.

The photo had been taken right after Frank bought the vintage vehicle. That was a year before his stepfather had died in a hunting “accident,” a case Rico hadn’t been able to solve. One that wouldn’t grow cold until his memory of Frank died.

He glanced out the window, catching a view of the Empire State Building. It was cloudy and overcast today. Rain, most likely. He hoped to get out of there before the storm hit, but that wasn’t going to happen. He still had work to do.

Rico owned and operated a highly successful private investigative firm. Garcia and Associates was and always would be his baby, his life. He’d built the elite and discreet agency to the level where he had a top-notch office staff and the most skilled and professional private investigators in the business. He could probably take some time off—if he wanted to. But he thrived on having the focus his work provided.

The intercom light flashed, then buzzed.

Beep. “Mr. Garcia?”

“Yes, Margie.”

“Your mother is on line three.”

“Thanks.” Rico let the Rolodex cards slip through his fingers. He hadn’t talked to his mom in weeks and hoped everything was all right. He worried about her sometimes.

No, make that a lot.

He pressed the lit button on line three and took his mother’s call. “Hey, stranger. What’s up?”

“Oh, Rico. You’ll never believe what happened.” His mom’s voice, while innately cheerful, held an even more upbeat tone than usual. “I have wonderful news.”

“What’d you do? Hit the lottery?”

“No. It’s much better than that.”

Better than money?

He didn’t like the sound of that already. He’d spent the first twenty years of his life living with and looking after his sweet, softhearted but gullible mother. And her “good news” always put his skeptical nature on alert.

She’d better not be talking about another pyramid scheme she’d been roped into. The last time, he’d had to put some pressure on the guy who’d preyed on divorcées and widows, making him give the money back. Then he’d turned the sorry son of a bitch in to the local police.

His mother had gotten her investment back—that time.

“Listen, I’ve only got a couple of minutes before my next appointment, Mom. Why don’t you just tell me your good news?”

“Well, all right. I’ve met the most wonderful man in the world. And I’ve fallen in love.”

Oh, for cripes sake. Again?

It’s not as though Rico didn’t want to see his mom happy, but he’d been through enough heartbreak with her as it was. He just wished she’d stop believing that some Romeo was going to ride into her life and carry her away to a castle in the sky.

She, more than anyone, ought to know that.

“Rico?” she asked. “Did you hear me?”

“Yeah, Mom. I heard you.”

“You’re not excited?”

Hell no, he wasn’t excited. At fifty-two, his mother had been married four times already. When was she going to put away those fairy-tale dreams and call it quits?

But damn, he couldn’t snap at her like that. She’d probably start crying. And Lord knew he couldn’t handle her tears.

He leaned back in his chair, leather creaking. “You know I want to see you happy, Mom. But who is this guy?”

“His name is Daniel Osterhout. He’s a dentist. And he’s my soul mate.”

A soul mate, huh? Well, that’s a term she’d never used before. Couldn’t she just sleep with the guy? Why did she have to marry every man she was attracted to?

“How long have you known him?”

“Nearly a month.”

“That’s not very long.”

“It seems as though I’ve known him forever.”

Rico sighed.

“Oh, come on, honey,” she said softly. “I understand your skepticism, but Daniel is different. You’ll see. And someday you’re going to meet someone special, too.”

Rico rolled his eyes heavenward in a God-help-me way. He loved his mom, he really did. But he wished she wasn't so trusting. Her heart had been tromped on many times in the past. And she certainly didn't deserve the pain and disappointment she continually set herself up for.

Couldn't she be just a little more realistic about love?

"Daniel and I have decided to get married in June," she added, a singsong enthusiasm resonating in her voice. "What do you think?"

Truthfully?

Rico thought it was a joke to have a big hoopla, especially under the circumstances. Hell, this guy would be her fifth husband. "When you say wedding, you're talking about a little ceremony down at the courthouse with a justice of the peace and a couple of witnesses, right?"

"Well, actually, Daniel and I would like a church wedding, an organist, a few close friends and family. That sort of thing."

As far as Rico was concerned, that sort of thing sounded way too involved. But what the hell. "I guess there's nothing wrong with June, as long as you're sure about this."

"I've never been more sure about anything." She undoubtedly thought that would make him feel better.

It didn't.

"Of course, I may need to borrow a little money," she added. "The bride is supposed to put on the wedding, and I might come up a bit short."

They both knew she wouldn't be "borrowing" any money, but Rico would step up to the plate. He always did. Heck, he'd never been able to deny his mom anything.

Ever since his father died, it had been just the two of them—well, other than a progression of stepfathers who for some reason or another swung in and out of their lives as if they were traveling through a revolving door. Each one had offered a lonely mother and child the promise and hope of a family and then provided them everything but.

He glanced at Frank's picture, picked it up. Okay, so that one hadn't hurt them on purpose, but his unexpected death had left them alone and hurting just the same.

"All right," he told his mom. "I'll spring for the wedding if you'll try and keep it small."

They both knew Rico wasn't a cheapskate. He could well afford a fancy wingding. But he wasn't into dog-and-pony shows.

"Oh, honey," she said, her voice getting all soft and mushy. "You're so good to me."

"Yeah? Well, you've been pretty good to me, too."

They'd been through a lot together—more than their share of pain and struggles. There was a time when they'd both had to work to keep a roof over their heads, and Rico hadn't even hit his teen years.

"I love you."

"Me, too," he told her. But the words weren't necessary. She knew he loved her unconditionally even if she frustrated the hell out of him at times.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked again.

"Absolutely."

Dead silence.

Then he blew out a sigh and reeled in his ever-present cynicism the best he could. "Okay. Then I'm happy for you." Well, not exactly happy. Resigned, he supposed.

But that didn't mean he wouldn't do a little background check on Prince Charming, D.D.S.

He picked up a pen. "What did you say this guy's name was?"

"Daniel Osterhout."

"Spell it."

"You're not writing that down, are you?"

"Humor me."

“You’re not going to have one of your investigators dig into his background, are you?”

“Of course not.” Rico wasn’t about to pass this job on to anyone else.

She spelled out the name.

“Is that German?”

“On his father’s side.”

“So where did you meet him?”

“I found a coupon in the Dollarsaver offering a free dental exam and X-rays to new patients at his office in Westlake, so I called and made an appointment. I know you don’t believe in this sort of thing, but it was love at first sight.”

In a dental chair? How romantic.

Open your mouth and say “aah.”

Aah...ooh, baby.

“Nope, I’m a skeptic when it comes to stuff like that, Mom. But I’m glad you’re happy.” He just hoped she’d stay that way.

As an adolescent, he’d pinned his hopes on each man she’d brought into their lives. And after weathering each disappointment, he’d become tough and callused when it came to buying into the fairy tale of love. But he’d managed to survive, to become strong.

His mom, on the other hand, had been a slow learner. And he was afraid that one more failed marriage, either through death, divorce or abandonment, would do her in rather than toughen her up.

“Daniel and I would like to take you out to dinner this weekend,” she said.

Garcia and Associates, with offices in New York, Chicago and L.A., hadn’t become a booming company without its owner working long, hard hours and pouring his blood, sweat and tears into the place. Rico couldn’t just take off on a personal jaunt for the hell of it.

Okay, due to the agency’s success, that wasn’t entirely true anymore.

“I don’t know if I can get away,” he lied, hoping that if he dragged his feet, her budding romance would blow over before he had to meet the guy.

“Oh, come on, honey. You put in too many hours as it is. Besides, you’ve hired some new investigators, like that man you call Cowboy. So surely you can drive up here for a day.”

He glanced at his calendar. Once he gave Suzette a call, he’d have some free time this weekend. “All right. I’ll come down on Saturday afternoon. We can have dinner, I’ll meet your dental soul mate, then I’ll head back to the city.”

“You can also stay the night in my spare room. I’ll make homemade biscuits and sausage gravy in the morning.”

“Nothing like twisting my arm. The last woman I was seeing tried to get me on a health kick—tofu, wheat germ and a bunch of other crap—so I’m ready to bolt.”

“You’re between ladies right now?”

Warning bells went off. There was no way he wanted his mother fixing him up with anyone. No way. She thought the perfect woman for him was someone a lot like herself, someone with her head in the clouds and her eye on true love forever.

And for some dumb reason, she couldn’t get it in her mind that he’d quit believing in pipe dreams like marriage a long time ago. And not just because of his mother’s marital history.

He had a friend, Mac McGuire, whose wife had tried to force him to give up being a cop, who’d tried to make him move to the suburbs and trade in his police cruiser for a minivan. They’d even had a kid together, which had only made things worse.

And then fate, as it was prone to do, threw Mac a nasty curve. He and his wife divorced, his son was later killed in a traffic accident and the resulting grief led to some heavy drinking, a misconduct charge at work....

Nope, he wouldn’t set himself up for something like that.

“Listen,” he told his mom. “I’m not looking for a date, if that’s what you’ve got on your mind. But I’ll come up and have dinner with you on Saturday. And if the biscuits-and-gravy deal is still on, I’ll spend the night.”

“I’m so glad. And by the way...”

Uh-oh. Rico instinctively braced himself.

“I have a good friend who needs a private investigator. And I thought...”

“You thought that I’d do it as a favor to you.”

“You’ll help her, won’t you?”

Oh, he’d grumble a bit. But he’d do it, as he always did. His mother seemed to gravitate toward people who needed his services. And those “good friends” always expected him to investigate something or other as a courtesy. Shoot, the last one just wanted some genealogical information for a cross-stitch of her family tree, something she could have easily found online.

But what the hell.

Rico loved his mom—big old heart, rose-colored glasses and all. “What’s the trouble this time?”

“My friend is trying to locate a younger sister she hasn’t seen since they were children. It would mean so much to her. And to me.”

“All right. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Good. I’ll have her at my house on Saturday afternoon. Maybe she can join us for dinner.”

Well, at least his mom wasn’t trying to set him up with anyone.

When they said their goodbyes, Rico hung up the telephone, then resumed his search for Suzette’s number.

If there was anything that made him even more determined to avoid commitments, it was a chat with his mother—God bless her sweet, ever-trusting heart.

Molly Townsend had never met a woman more like herself. Even the fact that Colette Garcia was old enough to be her mother hadn’t stopped them from becoming good friends in a matter of weeks.

As Molly sat on the sofa in the small but cozy living room of the older woman’s home, Colette poured them each a cup of tea from a delicate hand-painted china pot.

At five foot six and in her early fifties, Colette was a stylish and attractive woman, with dyed red hair, expressive blue eyes and an optimistic heart of gold.

“You know,” Colette said, “I’m sure that Rico will love Daniel once he gets to know him. But having them meet for the first time has me a little nervous and on edge. Rico is so protective of me. Too much so, actually.”

“I’m sure everything will go beautifully.” Molly took the ivory-colored cup and saucer, noting the delicate lilac and green-leaf trim.

“You’re probably right, but I’m glad you’ll be going to dinner with us. I don’t think Rico is too excited about me having a wedding, even though he agreed to pay for it. And I’m hoping you can explain to him how much this means to me. I’ve been married four times, but I’ve never been in love—not this deeply. Daniel and I are both making a lifetime commitment to each other and we want to do it right.”

“I’ll do whatever I can.”

As a wedding consultant at Betty’s Bridal Boutique, Molly had run into more than one perplexed father of the bride who didn’t understand the emotional and symbolic importance of a wedding. Of course, she’d never had to deal with the son of a bride before.

“You know, Rico should be here anytime.” The older woman glanced at her gold wristwatch, then grinned. “I’m so glad you’re going to get a chance to meet him.”

So was Molly. When Colette had first mentioned her son was the owner of a successful private investigative agency, she couldn’t believe her luck. For years she’d wanted to find her younger sister but hadn’t known where to start.

Colette insisted that Rico would be happy to do the legwork at no charge. But Molly wouldn't be comfortable with that. She would insist upon paying for his services. A reunion with her little sister would be worth any price.

"You know," Colette said, "Rico doesn't know where I'm coming from with Daniel. He'd be so much happier if he did. He really needs to find a nice girl and settle down."

Molly wondered if this was a setup. If so, it made her a tad uneasy, even though she was eager to find that special someone God created just for her, a prince among men. In fact, she usually looked forward to meeting potential mates, especially if they'd been recommended by a friend.

But Molly had a high set of standards not many men could fill. And from what she'd heard, she suspected Colette's son would fall short of her expectations.

"You know," Colette said, "I have a good feeling about you and Rico."

So this was a setup.

Molly took a sip of tea, her senses on alert. Her primary motive for meeting Rico was to talk to him about locating her sister. She would, of course, give him a chance—if she'd misjudged him and found him to be like his warmhearted, optimistic, family-oriented mother.

Time would tell, though.

Molly placed her cup and saucer on the coffee table, then reached for her notepad. "Do you want to discuss the wedding details over dinner or should we bring them up this afternoon?"

"Maybe we ought to wait until Daniel gets here. I'd really like him to be a part of this."

Molly nodded.

"You know," Colette said again, "you're going to love Rico."

"I hope so," Molly responded. "But there's something you need to understand. I'm open to meeting eligible bachelors, but I'm pretty fussy."

"And you should be."

Molly had to agree. She'd had a lousy example of home and family during the first twelve years of her life and she wasn't about to let history repeat itself. But she'd seen the best and worst of families.

Some people might not understand how a young woman with a lousy early childhood like Molly's could grow up and not become jaded and bitter.

Well, that was easy. Molly had Don and Barbara Townsend to thank for that.

Her foster parents had taught her that things always worked out for the best. That heroes like the Townsends existed. That love prevailed. And that—somewhere—her soul mate waited.

Colette patted Molly's knee with a light touch of the hand. "Well, picky or not, you're going to like my son." Then she led softly. "I know what you're probably thinking—every old crow thinks her baby's white as snow. But Rico is about the most handsome man who ever walked the face of the earth."

As far as Molly was concerned, a man's physical appearance wasn't anywhere near as important as his character. And she'd put plenty of thought into that conclusion.

In her heart she knew that she was looking for a guy who was a lot like Don Townsend, a man in touch with his feelings and understanding of hers. In many ways the sweet, slightly stooped, balding man had become a template for her dream mate.

Of course, when she allowed her fantasies to take flight, her future husband had a keen resemblance to Brad Pitt.

As the roar of a high-performance engine grew near, Colette placed her teacup and saucer on the glass-topped coffee table and stood. "Oh, good. He's here."

She'd recognized her son's vehicle?

Not that it mattered, but it sounded like some kind of race car.

All right, so Molly had failed to consider the style of vehicle Mr. Right ought to drive. But she couldn't imagine Don Townsend racing through town in a Porsche or a Ferrari.

"Will you excuse me for a minute?" Colette asked as she approached the front door.

“Sure.” Molly brushed her palms across the black knit fabric of her simple but classic A-line dress.

Hope might spring eternal, but something told her Rico wouldn't be her type, no matter what his mother had said. His job as a private investigator in itself sent up a red flag.

She wanted someone with a nine-to-five job, a man who would spend time with his family in the evenings and on weekends. And she doubted Colette's son would ever be home.

His car sent up another flag.

What kind was it? The revved-up sound of the engine suggested speed and flash. A risk taker. An attention seeker.

A real turnoff, if you asked her.

But Molly was open-minded. Well, skeptical but unbiased. So she'd have to meet the man first.

As Colette went outside to greet her son, Molly couldn't quell a growing curiosity. So she made her way to the big bay window that looked out into the suburban tree-lined street and stood to the side, hidden behind the pale, cream-colored panel curtains.

Outside, a vintage Corvette, completely restored and as black as night, sat curbside behind her faded blue Toyota.

She continued to stare as a tall, dark-haired man climbed from the classic sports car, wearing a pair of sunglasses and a devilish smile.

He walked around his vehicle and stepped onto the sidewalk, dressed casually in a pair of black slacks and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Everything about him shouted out Flirt. Player.

Yet a flurry of butterflies swept through Molly's tummy, and her heart slipped into a zippity-do-dah beat.

How crazy was that?

Especially when she'd never been attracted to the tall, dark and aren't-I-gorgeous type.

She could tell right now that she'd never want to become romantically involved with Rico Garcia.

But for some dumb reason, her hormones didn't seem to be listening.

## Chapter Two

At just after five o'clock Rico arrived at his mom's house—a small, two-bedroom tract home on a quiet street in Westlake Falls.

Three years ago, when the first phase of the development had been released, he'd surprised her by purchasing her a new house. She'd gotten over her shock and quickly set about hanging pictures and making it her own.

She'd not only decorated the inside but had done a great job with the landscape, too. The wood-and-wrought-iron bench on the lawn had been added since the last time he'd come to visit, and so had the concrete garden figurine—an angel, no doubt. Or maybe it was a cupid.

For as long as Rico could remember, his mom had had a talent for making a run-down shack feel like home.

Each time she moved into a place, she left her mark by setting a glass bowl of potpourri on the coffee table, framed photographs on the mantel, a vanilla-scented candle on the counter and other things like that. And if she knew Rico was stopping by, there would always be something cooking on the stove or baking in the oven.

He admired that about her, the ability to provide him a place where he could temporarily slip off his cloak of cynicism and hang it by the door.

Of course, this time he wouldn't be removing his "outerwear." He was going to need it to check out the new man in her life, to make sure his mom would be treated well—that she'd be appreciated, respected.

To him, that was a hell of a lot more important than being in love with her soul mate.

As Rico slowed in front of the house, he saw that his mom had parked her Ford Taurus at a diagonal, taking up the entire driveway. So he pulled his Corvette along the curb, behind a blue Toyota Corolla that had seen better years.

He sure hoped the Toyota didn't belong to Dr. Osterhout. If his mom was going to get married again, he wanted her husband to be able to support her in the manner she deserved. And he'd feel better if the dentist drove a late-model Mercedes or Lincoln.

His preliminary investigation showed the guy to be on the up-and-up. But Rico still wasn't convinced. When it came to choosing men, at least the last couple of times, his mom's track record had been lousy.

Rico got out of his car and took another look at the Toyota. An artificial red rose was attached to the antenna with a ribbon, suggesting the driver couldn't always remember where he or she parked. The rear bumper had a few dings, not to mention a dented New York license plate. Dang. Maybe his car would be safer if he parked across the street.

"Hello, honey." His mom, dressed in black slacks and a lightweight gray sweater, stepped onto the front porch and met him in the driveway with a warm hug.

He inhaled the familiar scent of gardenias, a fragrance that belonged only to her.

"How was your drive?" she asked as she led him into the small white house.

"It wasn't bad." He nodded over his shoulder, toward the Toyota. "Whose car?"

"It's Molly's. I'll introduce you."

Oh, yeah. The lady who wanted to find her sister.

As they stepped into the living room that had been painted a pale green, Rico scanned the small, cozy interior, looking for his mom's friend.

Expecting a middle-aged woman, he was blindsided by a petite twenty-something blonde in the center of the room.

She stood about five-three and wore her shoulder-length hair in a classic style. A simple black knit dress stretched whisper-soft along each feminine curve.

Her smile sucked the air out of the room.

Had they been at a club in the city, he would have easily picked her out of the crowd and sidled up to her, asked if he could buy her a drink. Maybe taken her out on the dance floor. And if she'd been agreeable, they might have ended the night in bed.

But what was a woman like her doing at his mom's house?

"Rico," his mother said, "this is my friend Molly, the one I told you about."

Unbelievable. This was his mom's friend?

For a guy who prided himself on being prepared for the unexpected, Rico was damn near gawking at her. But damn, he'd always been partial to blondes.

He tried to rein in his surprise and extended an arm in greeting. "How do you do?"

"I'm fine, thank you." Molly took his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Her skin was soft, cool. Her fingers delicate. Her nails unpolished, plain yet filed neatly. Silver heart charms dangled from a chain on her wrist.

His gaze locked on hers, and he studied her eyes, the brilliant shade of green, the tiny gold flecks. The thick, spiky lashes that didn't need mascara.

Shake it off, he reprimanded himself. This lady was a friend of his mom's, for God's sake. Looking for a husband and kids, no doubt.

In the past, his mom had tried to play matchmaker by introducing him to women like Molly. But Rico hadn't taken the bait. Hopefully she'd learned her lesson, since it had been a while since she'd tried to set him up.

Molly flashed him another pretty smile that damn near knocked the wind out of him, then slowly pulled her fingers from his grasp.

Had he held her hand a few seconds too long? He hadn't meant to. But he wasn't going to stress about it. It had to happen to her all the time.

"Molly and I met when I was shopping at Betty's Bridal Boutique," his mom said.

Oh, yeah. The wedding. It had completely slipped his mind the moment he strode into the room and laid eyes on Molly.

They'd met at Betty's Bridal Boutique, huh? Had the pretty blonde been looking for a wedding dress, too?

That wouldn't surprise him. He imagined a lot of guys would want to stake a permanent claim on an attractive woman like her.

"And with Molly's help," his mom said, "I found the perfect dress. It's off-white, with a pearl-encrusted bodice. And it was on sale. It'll need alterations, but it's gorgeous."

"You bought the dress already?" he asked, unable to keep the surprise from his voice. "What if you change your mind?" Or to be more accurate, what if he managed to convince her she was jumping into things too quickly?

"Don't be silly son. I'm not going to change my mind. But I only put the dress on hold. I wanted you to see it first."

Rico glanced at Molly. A starry-eyed smile bore evidence of her support of the wedding. No wonder she and his mom were fast friends.

"You really ought to see the dress on her," Molly interjected. "It's perfect. And with the calla lilies she chose for her bouquet..."

Rico's turned to his mom. "I thought you said it was just going to be a small church ceremony."

"There are a lot of formalities to consider when planning a wedding, no matter what size. And Betty's offers a consultant to help with it all."

"You're talking to a wedding planner?" The surprised tone in his voice escalated in spite of his natural inclination to remain cool, in control of his emotions. Unaffected.

But for Pete's sake, she was getting carried away.

He never could understand how women could get so damn caught up in all that bridal fuss. It was like the senior prom, only more ostentatious and a complete waste of time, money and emotion.

No one would ever rope Rico into a formal ceremony, assuming he ever found a reason to get married in the first place. But women seemed to go nuts over all the pomp and circumstance. And the wedding vendors—or rather, bridal vultures—saw them coming a mile away. Hell, all anyone had to do was mention the word wedding and the price of flowers, bands, banquet halls and the rest of that crap tripled.

He knew. His buddy Mac had complained to him at length about it.

“Daniel and I plan to keep the guest list under a hundred,” his mom said.

Hell, even that sounded like a circus to Rico. “I thought you were going to keep things simple. Small.”

“We are, but there’s a lot of etiquette involved, and Daniel and I want things to be done right.” His mom lobbed a smile at her pretty, young friend. “Molly has been a godsend, especially since I’ve never had a real wedding before.”

Rico tore his gaze from his mother, then looked at Molly, realizing she was much more than a pretty face. He didn’t mean that as a compliment either. “Don’t tell me you’re the wedding consultant?”

“Yes,” Molly said, “I am.”

Damn. She probably worked on commission and had spotted his mom as an easy mark. He crossed his arms and shifted his weight to one foot. “Do you mind if we backpedal just a bit?”

“All right,” his mom said. “Maybe I should start at the beginning.”

“Good idea.” His mother’s explanations usually took a while, so he glanced at the only chair in the room. “Do you mind if I take a seat?”

“Of course not.” His mom plopped down in the green-and-lavender-plaid easy chair, leaving the coordinating floral sofa for Rico and Molly to share.

For a moment he got a strange sense that he was being set up, and not just with his mother’s wedding. But maybe he was wrong. Maybe it was just his response to the unwelcome attraction he was feeling to his mother’s wedding planner. In which case, designating pretty Molly as the enemy ought to take the edge off that.

“I already told you about meeting Daniel and falling in love with him,” his mom said, her eyes glistening.

When Rico stole a glance at Molly, he saw her smiling and getting all misty-eyed, too. What was with women? Or at least these two? He couldn’t find anything sentimental about a wedding, especially someone’s fifth.

Molly sat on the edge of the cushion and tugged at the hem of her dress, making sure it reached her knees.

They were lovely knees, he realized. Nice legs, too.

But they were the knees and legs of the adversary, his mom’s matrimonial cheerleader.

“Three weeks ago,” his mom began, “I stopped by Betty’s Bridal Boutique to look at dresses and to get some information about weddings. And that’s when I met Molly.” She blessed her young friend with a grin. “We hit it off immediately and had lunch together the next day. We have a lot in common in spite of our age difference.”

Stars in their eyes, for one thing.

“I told you about Molly,” his mom added. “Remember? On the telephone. And you agreed to help her find her sister.”

So what was this—an attack from all sides?

They had him squirming in his seat—first with the wedding his mom didn’t need, then with the free investigative work.

He hoped to hell he’d been mistaken about the cupid stuff.

Inadvertently he slid a peek at Molly's lap, where her hands rested primly. Her fingers were bare—not a diamond ring or a gold band in sight.

Great.

“Son, why don't I get you something to drink? I have iced tea, orange-mango juice, wine...”

“I'd like a scotch,” Rico told her, thinking he'd better relax and not allow his emotions to get the better of him. Damn, this was going to be a hell of a long evening.

“Molly?” his mom asked. “How about you?”

The attractive blonde glanced at her bracelet, which he realized was actually a wristwatch.

“A glass of wine would be nice,” she said.

When his mother disappeared, Rico leaned back in his seat, determined to take control of the conversation. “First of all, you can put down your pom-poms, Mollyanna.”

“Excuse me?” Her tone was sharp, spunky, her spine ramrod straight.

He'd offended her, he supposed. And for a moment he thought about apologizing, starting over. But the physical attraction that didn't seem to be abating put him at a disadvantage. So he took the offense rather than the defense.

“Let's get something straight. I agreed to pay for this wedding. And it's not a matter of cost—I'd give my mom the moon if I could. But she's been married four times already. And I think under the circumstances things should be quiet and discreet.”

Molly turned to face him, the hem of her dress sliding up her leg, revealing more skin than she probably realized and prompting him to swallow another urge to apologize and slip into a defensive stance.

“There's been a lot of heartbreak in your mother's past,” she said. “And she deserves to be happy. Dr. Osterhout and your mom are truly in love.”

Rico tried not to roll his eyes, but he couldn't hold back an exasperated sigh. “I hope you're right, but I'm a realist. I've seen the seedy side of life too often—firsthand as a kid, when I was a cop and sometimes when I'm investigating a case. And I've seen some of my mom's marriages. I don't believe in fairy tales and happy ever afters.”

Her gaze dropped to her hands, then back to him, as though she felt sorry for him for some stupid reason. But she didn't need to. He'd come out on top. And he was stronger and tougher because of it.

So he brushed her sympathy aside. “There were only two men who deserved my mother's love and faith—my dad and my stepfather, Frank Stafford. And they died, leaving her heartbroken.”

The other two husbands weren't worth mentioning.

“Your mom loved your father and Frank with a passion, and their deaths were hard on her.”

“I know they were. So you'll have to excuse me for not getting all excited about her loving someone with a passion again.” Rico hadn't ever known his dad, since he'd died in a five-car pileup on the Jersey Turnpike when Rico had been a baby. But he'd known—and adored—Frank, who'd entered their lives when Rico was in the first grade. But five years later Frank had been shot in a mysterious hunting “accident.”

“Your mom said that Frank's death had been hard on you.”

That wasn't true. Frank's death had been devastating to them both, but Rico had sucked it up when his mom hadn't been able to.

But then again, at the time Rico had focused on the details and questions surrounding Frank's death. Even as a kid Rico had known hunters got accidentally shot—but not while hunting on private property when supposedly no one else was around.

“Your mom was brokenhearted when Frank died,” Molly added.

As if Rico didn't remember. He'd been crushed, too. Frank had been the kind of father—step or otherwise—any child would love to have. The problem was, Frank's death had left them alone

again. There'd been a small insurance policy that time, but when the money had run out, his mom had been forced to go back to work and Rico had become a latchkey kid.

But hey, that was okay. He'd learned to be tough, to take care of himself. And to look after his mom, too.

Rico had only been twelve, but he'd earned a little cash by doing odd jobs, like sweeping storefronts and picking up trash. And together they'd been able to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table.

"Sometimes," Molly said, "when a person is hurting and gets involved in another relationship too soon, it can lead to disaster."

Now she was talking. Rico sat up straight. "That's exactly what happened when my mom hooked up with Tom Crenshaw."

Colette had met the photocopier repairman while she'd been working for a temp agency, and he'd swept her off her feet—something that could easily happen when walking on clouds instead of solid ground.

Crenshaw had talked a good story, but after the two of them got married, he got bored.

"She told me he ran off with a college student," Molly said.

"Yeah. A liberal-studies major who moonlighted at a topless bar."

"That's too bad," Molly said, her voice soft, sympathetic.

"No, it wasn't. My mom was better off without him. And she was better off without number four, too."

That one had been a used-car salesman with a gambling problem.

"At least she asked him to leave," Molly said, her voice reflecting her rose-colored worldview.

"It's too bad she didn't boot his butt out of the house before he pissed away the bulk of everything she'd managed to save over the years."

"So she made a couple of mistakes. That doesn't mean she should suffer by being alone for the rest of her life."

"What's the matter with being alone?" he asked her.

She didn't answer, which made him think that she lived alone and disliked it. That in the evening she watched chick flicks, as his mom was prone to do, which probably was the reason they both thought they were missing out on something.

But he shook off his curiosity. It didn't take a high-priced psychologist to figure out he and Molly weren't suited. No matter how partial he was to blondes, no matter how attracted he was to her.

So Rico reverted back to the previous conversation about his mom's lousy choice of men, particularly her last husband. "If I ever get my hands on that guy, he's dog meat."

"You'd hurt him?" Molly's brow furrowed as though she thought Rico was some kind of ax murderer.

"I probably won't get the chance to have words with him or lay a hand on him. From what I found out, more than one shady bookie had it in for him. And chances are he's sleeping in the Hudson."

She clicked her tongue, like a teacher who was disappointed with one of her young students, then blew out a weary—no, make that a sympathetic—sigh. "After all your mother's been through, I'd think you'd like to see her happy."

"Hey, there's nothing I'd like better. But I don't want to see her hurt. Again."

"Neither do I, but it'll be different this time. Dr. Osterhout is a wonderful man. Wait until you meet him." Mollyanna flashed him a hope-filled smile.

Damn. Talk about someone having a sunny attitude. "You're a lot like my mom."

She flashed him another smile. "Thank you."

He hadn't meant it as a compliment, but she hadn't picked up on that.

For a moment she plucked at the hem of her dress, then glanced up. Her emotion-laden gaze snagged his, making him almost feel guilty about something he should have said or done. “Your mom told me you might be able to help find my sister.”

He shrugged. “My mom sometimes asks me to do a favor for her friends.”

“I don’t expect a free ride.” Sincerity rang out in her voice. “I have some money put aside to pay for your services.”

That old car outside, with the dents near the bumper, suggested she couldn’t even pay attention.

But before Rico could come up with a response that wasn’t cynical, his mother swept into the room carrying a tray with two wineglasses and a glass of scotch.

“I’m sorry for taking so long. But while I was in the kitchen, I gave Daniel a call on his cell phone. He’s on his way over here now.” She placed the tray on the glass-topped coffee table, next to a crystal bowl filled with her signature potpourri. “I hope you two had a chance to chat.”

Molly offered her friend a smile but bit her tongue. She didn’t know what she’d been expecting when Rico Garcia sauntered into his mother’s living room, but certainly not a tall, dark hunk.

Colette had been right about him being handsome.

Okay, so her unmarried son was drop-dead gorgeous, with that thick head of dark hair, those golden-brown eyes and a dazzling smile that sent Molly’s pulse skyrocketing.

He also had one of those avowed-bachelor auras, with a you-can-trust-me-baby dimple in his cheek and an I’ll-call-you-in-a-couple-of-days smile.

No, Rico Garcia was a heartbreak waiting to happen.

He was also cynical and rude.

She’d wanted to pop him in the chops when he’d called her Mollyanna. As if being optimistic was a bad thing rather than an asset.

So why was she still having a hard time keeping her eyes off him? And why did her heart do somersaults each time he branded her with a gaze?

“We chatted a bit,” Rico admitted as he picked up his glass and took a slow, steady drink.

They’d chatted long enough for her to know that Rico wanted to put a damper on his mom’s wedding plans. And that when it came to romance, he had a pessimistic streak that ran from the tips of his black, curly hair to the bottoms of his snazzy Italian-leather shoes.

And long enough for her to peg him a ladies’ man, a flirt and the kind of bachelor she steered clear of.

But they hadn’t talked nearly enough. Molly was eager to discuss Lori, to give the private investigator what little information she had. To find out if there was any way to locate her younger sister.

As they each nursed their drinks, Molly couldn’t help gazing at Rico when he wasn’t looking. There was something magnetic about the guy. Something compelling. Something she’d have to guard against, which shouldn’t be too difficult. In spite of being a romantic at heart, Molly wasn’t stupid.

“We have dinner reservations at Antonio’s,” Colette said. “I hope six o’clock is all right with you.”

“The sooner the better.” Rico leaned back into the sofa cushion and stretched out his legs. “I only had a bagel and coffee for breakfast and worked through lunch.”

Molly was hungry, too. And she’d heard some nice things about Antonio’s. The classy restaurant was under new management and had hired a chef who was supposedly incredible.

The telephone rang and Colette answered. Her face brightened, and Molly suspected it was Daniel on the line.

In spite of Rico’s concern, Molly truly believed that Colette couldn’t have fallen for a nicer man. Or for one who would treat her better.

“Of course I understand,” Colette said. “But why don’t I meet you at your office? I can sit in the waiting room, then we can drive to Antonio’s together.”

Molly had no idea what Daniel was saying, but Colette's side of the conversation gave her a clue. "Not at all, dear. I'm sure Rico and Molly won't mind riding together."

We wouldn't? Molly slid a glance at Rico, saw his furrowed brow and suspected he might have a few qualms himself.

And she couldn't blame him. This whole dinner thing was beginning to look suspiciously like a romantic setup. And if it was, Colette had better scrap that star-crossed plan right away.

"Of course, Daniel. I'll leave as soon as I put on some lipstick and get my purse. I can be at your office in fifteen minutes." Colette hung up the telephone, plopped her hands on the armrests of her chair and grinned. "I suppose I'll have to get used to calls like that. One of Daniel's patients has a dental emergency, and he can't meet us here."

Molly supposed it could be true. But why did she feel as if she were being railroaded? Did Colette really think her son needed a woman like Molly?

That couldn't be further from the truth.

Still, when she stole another peek at Rico and caught him studying her, her heart jumped and her pulse went a little screwy.

Darn it. She had her future all mapped out, and a man like Rico Garcia wasn't a part of it. She needed someone with a predictable schedule, someone who looked forward to spending evenings and weekends at home with the family. Someone who'd be willing to turn in his sports car for a minivan.

Of course, Molly did need Rico to help her find her sister.

Maybe she could talk to him about Lori when they rode together—an upside to Colette's matchmaking, she decided.

"Do you know where Antonio's is?" Colette asked her son.

"Yeah. It's on the corner of Ninth and Westlake Boulevard, isn't it?"

"No. It's on Raymond, just off Jefferson Parkway. Near the bookstore."

"I'll find it." Rico set his nearly full glass of scotch on the tray that rested on the coffee table. Then he got up from the sofa and looked at Molly. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

He seemed to be taking this all in stride, so why shouldn't she?

She placed her wineglass on the tray, then reached for her purse, slipped the shoulder strap over her arm, grabbed her trusty day planner and stood. "I can drive. I know where the restaurant is."

"No, that's okay," he said. "I don't like sitting in the passenger seat."

She didn't suppose he did.

As he placed a hand on the small of her back, a jolt of heat shot clear through her.

Oh, for goodness sake, how could his touch have that kind of effect on her when he was definitely Mr. Wrong?

As he escorted her out the door and to his car, she couldn't help commenting about an article she'd recently read in a women's magazine. "They say you tell a lot about people by the cars they drive."

He glanced at her Toyota. "That's what I'm afraid of."

In spite of the warmth from his touch, her backbone stiffened. "What's that supposed to mean? I can afford a better car, but I've been saving my money to pay for a private investigator."

"I wasn't sizing up your bank account, just your driving skill." He nodded toward the rear of her car, where the trunk had been dented.

"I bought that car used, and it came that way. I could have paid for some bodywork but chose to save the money and use it to cover the cost of finding my sister."

"And what about that little red rosebud tied onto the antenna with the ribbon?"

She crossed her arms and stopped dead in her tracks. "What's wrong with that?"

"Do you forget where you're parked?"

Once in a while, when she had her mind on other things. But she'd be darned if she'd admit it.

The best defense was a good offense, she'd always been told. "You don't think that I've got you figured out, too? What kind of man drives a vintage sports car?"

"One who likes to eat in diners, drink cherry Cokes and listen to oldies on a jukebox."

"Or perhaps one who wants to appear more manly, more powerful? More potent?"

"Yeah, right." He surprised her by opening the passenger door. "Get in." His voice held a rugged, demanding edge, yet his hand gently slid from her back.

The man was a contradiction if she'd ever met one.

As she stooped to climb into the passenger seat, she flashed more of her leg than she'd intended. She glanced up, not at all surprised to see him watching, appreciation glimmering in his eye.

"By the way," she said, "I just figured out another reason you have this car. You like to watch women get in and out of it."

He shot her a crooked grin. "Yep. You've got me pegged, all right."

Something told her that she didn't. Not completely. But there was no doubt about some things. Rico Garcia was a ladies' man. And after his initial gruffness, a real charmer.

If a woman wasn't careful, she could be easily swept off her feet.

Rico closed her door, then walked around the car and slid behind the wheel. As the engine roared to life, Molly decided to hang on to her hat.

And to her better judgment.

## Chapter Three

At a quarter to six Rico and Molly arrived at Antonio's, a waterfront restaurant that offered diners the charm of old-world Italy and a gorgeous view of Lake Lassiter as it sat amidst the rolling lawns of the city park.

When Rico told the hostess they were with the Osterhout party, the young woman led them past a rustic stone fireplace and into a dining room with textured white plaster walls separated by dark wood beams. She escorted them to a linen-draped table near the large bay window that would allow them to watch the sun slide into the pristine water.

Rico held Molly's chair as she took a seat, then sat across from her.

It was one of the most romantic settings she had ever seen, and for a moment it seemed as though she was on a date with the handsome private investigator—as silly as that was. She'd never date a man like Rico, but that didn't mean she was immune to his heart-strumming smile or his musky, mountain-crisp scent.

She was, however, determined to ignore the effect he had on her.

Rico asked the hostess if she'd send over some bread.

"Of course, sir."

When the woman walked away, Rico cast Molly a Casanova smile. "Did I mention being hungry?"

"A couple of times." She couldn't help but grin.

"The dentist will have to forgive me for being rude and not waiting. But I've got to eat something."

"I'm sure he and your mom will understand."

She'd meant to bring up the subject of her sister while they rode in his car, but the timing hadn't seemed right. So they had talked about his Corvette, about the mint condition of the interior, the speed it reached on an open road. The car suited him, she supposed.

Moments later, when one of the busboys brought water and set a basket on the table, Rico offered Molly the first choice of several small precut loaves of fresh-baked bread—French, sourdough, pumpernickel....

She took a slice of the baguette, and he chose the sourdough.

"So," he said, taking his knife and smearing a thick slab of butter on his bread, "tell me about the sister you want to locate."

Molly wasn't sure where to begin. There were some things she never revealed to the men she ate dinner with. In fact, there were some memories she'd never even shared with her friends.

But this was different. Rico was a private investigator, and she'd tell him anything she could remember that might help him locate Lori.

"I was born in Los Angeles," she began, "the oldest of two girls. My dad was an on-again, off-again junkie, and I don't remember much about my mother other than she left one night to buy a pack of cigarettes and never came back."

Rico listened intently, his demeanor taking on a professional air, which made it easier for her to share the things she kept close to the vest.

"My father was pretty worthless," she admitted, "so I took over as a surrogate mother to my younger sister, Lori."

Rico took a sip of water and watched her over the rim of his glass. He didn't speak, didn't prod her to keep going, but an intensity in his eyes told her he was listening carefully.

"My dad wasn't big on wasting what little money he brought home on groceries, so I'd have to be a little creative." She shrugged. "You know, soda crackers and beer nuts for breakfast, stale-bread-and-ketchup sandwiches for lunch. That sort of thing."

Again she tried to read something in his eyes—sympathy, disgust. Something that might suggest she ought to keep quiet and hold on to the rest of the ugliness. But he merely listened, hiding his opinion as a professional should.

Earlier he'd told her that he'd seen the seedy side of life. She supposed he was realizing that she'd seen a bit of it herself.

She picked up her fork and ran a finger across the edge of the tines, then replaced it beside her plate. For a moment she struggled with making eye contact, then shrugged it off and caught his gaze. "One day when I was eleven, we were left alone for several days, and I had to scavenge around for food..."

His dark brow twitched—the only sign of a response she'd seen so far.

"Not in Dumpsters," she told him, in case his thoughts had gone in that direction. "But there was a little taco shop down the street—Rosarita's. And sometimes the manager would give me some leftover menudo or a couple of bean burritos. There was also a newsstand that sold coffee and sweet rolls to its customers. The guy who worked on weekends, Harold, would give me day-old donuts for free."

"I knew a couple of guys like that."

She wasn't sure what he meant, but for some reason she sensed they'd touched upon a commonality.

"Anyway," she said, "I found this dirty, scraggly dog that afternoon, hanging out at the rear entrance of the Laundromat. It was hard enough finding food for Lori and I to eat, but I couldn't just let that little guy stay on the street."

The hint of a smile tugged at Rico's lips. "I figured you for an animal lover."

"I don't know about that. I don't have any pets now."

"Why not?"

She shrugged. "Cats and dogs need love and attention, and I'm not home very much. It wouldn't be fair to them. But I'm sure glad I took Petey back to our apartment that day."

"Why?"

"Two days later, in the middle of the night, he started barking like crazy and licking my face. And when I woke up, I smelled smoke."

"Smart dog."

"Petey was definitely a hero. Thanks to him, I managed to get my sister to safety."

"Sounds like you were a hero, too."

His voice had softened, hinting at a tenderness she'd yet to see in him. But she brushed off the hint of sentiment, as well as the compliment, unwilling to take any credit for doing what she'd always done—looking out for herself and her sister. "When the fire department arrived and found Lori and me unsupervised, with no food in the cupboards and the power turned off, they notified the police."

"I hope they nailed your old man for child neglect."

"They did. They also found drug paraphernalia all over the place." In spite of her desire to be objective and informative in revealing the past, tears stung her eyes. She blinked away the emotion the best she could and continued. "Lori and I were taken to the county receiving home that night and got the first hot meal we'd had in ages."

"Good."

"Yes, it was. But they wouldn't let Petey go with us." She swiped at her eye, catching an escaping tear. "I think he ended up at the pound."

"At least he was better off there than on the streets."

"I hope so." She sucked in a wobbly breath and slowly blew it out. "But I owed that dog something and I've always felt as though I let him down."

"You were a kid. And it was out of your hands."

"I keep telling myself that, but I still feel badly about leaving that sweet little dog behind."

“When did all that happen?” he asked.

“Twelve years ago. I was eleven, and Lori was six.” She glanced at the table and swept her hand across the linen, flattening out imaginary wrinkles. “A couple months later the social worker told us that my father had signed the paperwork that released us for adoption.”

Rico didn't seem unusually sympathetic—or cynical—which actually made it easier to talk, to pour her heart out.

His professional demeanor shouldn't have surprised her, though. She'd done a little research on the Internet and learned that Garcia and Associates claimed to be both elite and discreet. And the firm had been enormously successful. She doubted a company achieved all that if the owner allowed his emotions to get in the way.

And that was fine with her. She wasn't looking for sympathy; she was looking for her sister.

“Is that when you and Lori were separated?”

“It happened about six months later. They found a home for Lori, but the couple who adopted her didn't want two children, especially one who was almost a teenager.”

“What was their name?”

“I don't know. When I asked the social worker if I could call or send Lori a letter, I was told that it had been a closed adoption. Her new parents thought she would be better off starting fresh, forgetting the past.”

Forgetting me.

Molly's eyes grew misty again, and she cursed the emotion that welled in her chest. She'd only wanted to relay the facts that would facilitate his investigation.

She'd never been a crybaby before, and for some dumb reason, it mattered what Rico thought of her.

Damn. Rico didn't know what to think, what to do.

The story Molly had told him made him angry at her parents, angry at the system. And it pissed him off that he couldn't think of anything to say or do to comfort her.

He'd always been uneasy when women cried, which was a big reason he never let any of his dates or lovers get close enough to lean on him.

Not that he couldn't sympathize with people.

Hell, he'd had clients that he'd felt sorry for, like good-hearted husbands and wives who'd learned their “loving” spouses had been cheating on them. Or poor Mrs. Chisolm, the grieving widow who'd known nothing about her late husband's business, then had been bilked by an unscrupulous employee she'd trusted.

But this was different. And it was too close to home.

He handed Molly the linen napkin that had been draped across his lap, hoping she'd wipe away the painful memories, as well as her tears.

“Thank you.” She took the cloth from him, then blotted her eyes and sniffled. “I'm sorry for falling apart.”

“You're allowed.” He cleared his throat, wishing he could say something comforting, something witty. When nothing came to mind, he clamped his mouth shut.

“Lori is eighteen now,” Molly said. “And no one can stop us from being sisters again. So I need to find her.”

“I'll see what I can do.”

“Thank you, but I don't expect any favors.” She placed the napkin beside her water glass, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and sat up straight. “I'll pay your fees.”

“We can talk about money later. I'll do the initial investigation as a courtesy.”

She sniffled again, and he struggled with the urge to reach across the table and take her hand, to offer her more than a napkin.

Before either of them could speak, his cell phone rumbled.

“Excuse me.” He glanced at the screen, saw a local number he didn’t recognize. “Hello?”

“Honey, it’s me.”

His mom.

He glanced at the two empty place settings. “Where are you?”

“I’m at Daniel’s office. And there’s been another emergency. He’s on call for another dental group this weekend, and I’m afraid we can’t make it to dinner for at least an hour. Please go ahead and order for you and Molly. We’ll pick up some fast food, then meet you back at my house. We can have coffee together. In fact, please save room for dessert. I made some of those fudge brownies you like.”

Rico looked at Molly, wondering again if this was indeed a matchmaking ploy on his mom’s part. But what the hell. They were here now. Just the two of them. And he was starving. “Sure, Mom. I’ll talk to you later.”

When the line disconnected, he sat back in his seat and looked at his pretty blond companion. “It’s only going to be you and me this evening.”

Molly arched a delicate brow. “Is it my imagination or do you get the idea that your mom is trying to set us up?”

For a moment he stumbled on which direction to take. After all, he knew better than to get involved with any of his mom’s friends or acquaintances, especially since his relationships didn’t last very long and he didn’t want things to get...sticky for anyone involved.

But Molly didn’t seem too head over heels about being with him. And the tone of her voice suggested she was taking this all in stride.

“The same thought crossed my mind,” Rico admitted, “but I figured she’d given up on me a couple of years back. I’m not the marrying kind.”

“Well, I am the marrying kind,” Molly said with a smile. “And your mom knows it. I appreciate the gesture, but I don’t want to get involved with you. You’re not my type.”

He wasn’t?

Why not?

Not that it mattered. He was just curious, that’s all.

Hell, even if he’d go so far as to have a fling with one of his mom’s friends, things would really get sticky if Molly was expecting white lace and promises while all he wanted from a relationship was sex.

“So,” she said, “I think it’s easier if we let her know there’s no chemistry between us.”

No chemistry?

The hell there wasn’t. He’d seen her look at him when she thought he wasn’t paying attention, seen her run a nervous tongue across her lips and fiddle with her silverware. He made her nervous, in a sexual way—and he’d lay his last dollar on it.

In spite of having no interest in dating someone like Molly, something tugged at him—chemistry, lust or whatever she wanted to call it.

He didn’t want to be conceited, but most women found him attractive. Very attractive.

And Molly didn’t?

For a moment doubt niggled at his ego.

“So,” she said, skipping right over his bruised pride. “Assuming you’re going to help me find my sister, how long do you think it will take?”

It took him a moment to recover, to jump right back into the conversation they’d been having before his mom called, to ignore the fact Molly might not find him attractive.

Hell, he knew they were total opposites and a breakup ready to happen. But what did that have to do with sex?

Or attraction.

She leaned forward, her breasts straining against the knit fabric of her dress. “You do think we’ll find her, don’t you?”

Who? Her sister. “Yeah, probably. I’ll assign the initial footwork to Cowboy, one of my new associates. He’s already in the Los Angeles area working on another case, so he might be able to uncover something.”

“Cowboy?” she asked.

God, she had pretty eyes. He’d never seen a pair that green before, that expressive.

“Is that his name?” she asked again. “Cowboy?”

“No, it’s just a nickname. He’s from Texas and has one of those slow Southern drawls. But he’s a damn good P.I. and he’ll turn up something.”

The waiter stopped by to take their dinner order. Molly chose the angel-hair pasta, Rico asked for the prime rib.

“Thank you for helping me.” She cast him a smile that made his stomach wobble and his chest thump.

They didn’t talk much after that, just watched the sun set over the lake, listened to the sounds of a baby grand piano playing a romantic concerto in the lounge.

It was hard to ignore the ambience.

Or the beautiful woman seated across from him.

A couple of times, when she looked out the window, he stole a glance at her, studied the way the white-gold strands in her hair glistened in the candlelight.

She turned, caught him staring, and their gazes locked. Something passed between them—that chemistry she said was lacking, he suspected.

He sensed she’d been lying, so why had she said it?

When their meals were served, they each dug into their plates, savoring the taste, the silence—and ignoring the sexual attraction that hovered over the table like a purple elephant with green hummingbird wings.

After they finished eating, the waiter came by to ask if they wanted to see the dessert tray. “The tiramisu is a specialty of the house,” he said.

Rico declined for them both, telling Molly, “My mom wants us to save room for coffee and brownies at her house.”

“All right.”

When the bill arrived, Molly tried to pay, but Rico refused to even consider it—and not because he was too macho to let a woman treat.

It hadn’t started out as a date, but it had kind of evolved into something like that. And even though he’d never take her out again, he wanted to wrap the evening up right.

No need for her to think of him as a jerk. Or as some guy who didn’t know how to treat a lady.

He did.

As they walked out of Antonio’s, Molly gasped and grabbed his forearm, sending a surge of heat through his bloodstream. “I left my purse inside.”

Apparently the woman he suspected would forget where she parked her car at the mall couldn’t keep track of her personal belongings either.

He tossed her a smile. “Wait here. I’ll get it for you.”

“All right. Thanks.”

He returned to their table and found her purse hanging by the shoulder strap on the back of her chair, so he picked it up and carried it back outside.

She stood near a rosebush, gazing at a new moon.

The black fabric of her dress hugged her body in a perfect, sexy fit. He was again struck by that damned “no chemistry” comment she’d made earlier, and his ego took another stumble. In spite of his better judgment, the rebel in him flared to life.

“Hey,” he said as he sauntered toward her, the purse dangling from his hand.

She turned and smiled. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He closed the distance between them until they were face-to-face. “I have a bone to pick with you.”

Her eyes grew wide. “You do? Why?”

“I don’t want you lying to my mom.”

“What are you talking about?” Her furrowed brow and the indignant tone of her voice taunted him, tempted him. “I would never lie to her.”

He slipped his hand around to the back of her neck, under the silky curtain of her hair. His thumb caressed the softness along her jaw.

Her eyes widened, yet she didn’t flinch, didn’t push him away. “What are you doing?”

He brushed his lips across hers once, twice.

She sucked in her breath but didn’t move. Didn’t speak, didn’t stop him. Instead she placed a tentative hand on his chest, then slowly gripped the lapel of his jacket—to steady herself, no doubt. Or maybe to draw him closer?

Her lips parted, and he boldly swept his tongue inside, tasting, seeking.

He’d only meant to tease her, to taunt her as she’d been doing to him. But damn. She turned toward him, sliding her arms around his neck, heating up the kiss to a blood-pounding, head-spinning level.

When a car turned in to the parking lot, flashing its headlights at them, Molly finally came to her senses and pulled away. “What in the world was that all about?”

“You’re not my type either,” he told her. “So tell my mother that I’m rude or a cynical jerk. Tell her I’m a die-hard bachelor who never wants to settle down with one woman. That I’m stubborn and cocky and too damn set in my ways.”

She merely stared at him, her lips swollen, a red flush on her cheeks and neck.

“But don’t tell her there’s no chemistry between us,” he added, flashing her a rebel grin.

“Because that, sweet Molly, would be a bold-faced lie.”

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