

Harlequin Romance®

**THE BEST MAN'S
BABY**

Darcy Maguire


THE WEDDING PLANNERS



Mills & Boon Cherish

Darcy Maguire

The Best Man's Baby

«HarperCollins»

Maguire D.

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He didn't know he was a father...until now! For four years wedding planner Skye Andrews has kept a secret from hotshot lawyer Nick Coburn—they have a daughter.... Now Skye's working on a wedding where Nick is the best man—and their attraction is as strong as ever! How long can Skye conceal the real reason she had to leave their relationship behind...? Watch the fireworks explode when Nick discovers the truth...in Darcy Maguire's sassy, sparkling novel set in the cosmopolitan city of Sydney, Australia!

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Dear Reader,

I went to a friend's wedding recently, and was touched deeply by the ceremony, by the exchange of vows, by the circle of warmth encapsulating the bride and groom.

I felt how being near those totally and utterly in love has a lasting impact on all who share that moment.

I wanted to write about the women behind the scenes, the ones who make those special days happen, the ones who play fairy godmother, helping to create a memory built on love that extends beyond the span of days, months and years. The ones who, no matter how expert they are at helping others, can't quite sort out their own lives.

I hope you enjoy reading their stories as much as I enjoyed writing them. Look out for the third book in the trilogy, *A Convenient Groom*, #3809, coming next month in Harlequin Romance®!

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Darcy". The letter "D" is large and stylized, with a long horizontal stroke that loops under the "a" and "r". The "a" and "r" are written in a cursive style.

Darcy Maguire wanted to grow up to be a fairy, but her wings never grew, her magic never worked and her life was no fairy tale. But one thing she knew for certain was that she was going to find her soul mate and live happily ever after. Darcy found her dark and handsome hero on a blind date, married him a year later and found that love truly is the soul of creativity. With four children too young to play matchmaker for (yet!) Darcy satisfies the romantic in her by finding true love for her fictional characters. It was this passion for romance, and her ability to sit still every day, that led to the publication of her first novel, *Her Marriage Secret*. Darcy lives in Melbourne, Australia, and loves to read widely, sew and sneak off to the movies without the kids.

Books by Darcy Maguire

HARLEQUIN ROMANCE®

3745—HER MARRIAGE SECRET

3754—ACCIDENTAL BRIDE

3801—A PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT*

The Best Man's Baby

Darcy Maguire



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CHAPTER ONE

MEN in tuxes. Yum.

Skye Andrews paused at the doorway of Camelot's bridal-wear boutique, breathing deep and slow, drinking in the sight.

Five men milled around the room, all tall, and all in superbly tailored black tuxes with white shirts and metallic-blue silk ties and handkerchiefs.

The men looked so clean, so proper and so absolutely charming, as though they'd stepped out of a fairytale and into reality. She wouldn't see a sight like this at a bar or a club.

She crossed her arms over her chest.

This end of the boutique was a great asset to the family business. Her younger sister Riana's flair for creating original gowns for today's brides certainly gave the business a great reputation and a crucial boost.

Today, however, Riana was nowhere in sight—she knew she wouldn't be needed with Camelot's resident tailor on the job and the boutique's sales assistants in action, handling the groom's party with ease.

Charlie knelt on the floor, pinning the hems on a very tall, very well-built man. Charlie glanced towards her, his thick moustache quivering as he plucked a pin from his padded wristband. 'What do you think, sweetie?'

Skye nibbled her bottom lip, trying to think professionally, but she couldn't help herself. She stood back and lazily perused the fine lines of Charlie's tailoring, and the man beneath the suit.

The black fabric sat on the man's square shoulders and swept down his arms, ending just before the cuff, making a striking contrast.

His hands were large. Skye closed her eyes—she could almost imagine the strength in them, roaming over her body. 'Very nice.'

She shook herself. It had obviously been too long since she'd had a man in her life. She straightened to her full height and smoothed back her hair where she had tied it at her nape. She had to get out more!

Charlie shuffled the pins. 'I hear you're taking over for your mum on this one.'

'That I am. Flu.' Skye looked around the men in the groom's party, wishing she wasn't coming into the wedding plans at the tail-end. She preferred knowing who everyone was and the hierarchy within the families before the plans got to this stage, and these were all the faces of strangers.

She dragged in a deep breath and lifted her chin. She'd just have to cope until her mother was back on board. 'Hello everyone.'

Most of the men in the room turned towards her.

'I'll be your new wedding planner until Barbara is back from the flu,' she said loudly, her cheeks heating at the awkwardness of the situation. 'Will the groom please step forward?'

The man having his trousers hemmed turned his head slightly. 'What's the problem?' he asked in a deep, velvet-smooth voice.

Skye's chest tightened. That voice? It couldn't be. 'And you are?' she croaked.

Blood rushed through her ears. Not who she thought it was, and not the groom. Please, please, please, not the groom.

The man turned around.

Her heart lurched in her chest and thumped wildly, her vision blurring.

Nick!

It couldn't be. Not him, not here, not like this!

CHAPTER TWO

SKYE thought of the door, of running, but she couldn't tear her eyes away, let alone the rest of her.

His hair was still light, now a short-back-and-sides cut, but with the hair on top standing on end rather than combed back. His jaw was angular—she used to trail kisses down it, and his brow was creased—she wanted to step forward and smooth it with her fingertips like she'd done once, a long time ago, but she was frozen to the spot.

His deep blue eyes widened. 'Skye?'

'Nick,' she gasped.

'I am trying to pin here,' said Charlie from below.

'You look—' his gaze ran over her, over her simple grey skirt, white blouse and jacket '—wonderful.'

'You too.' She tore her attention from his brilliant blue eyes, looking directly at his chest, trying not to think about the man, in the flesh, finally being in front of her.

She opened her mouth but the words wouldn't come. What could she tell him anyway? Time had passed. It was way too late.

And he was getting married? She covered her mouth, trying to smother the wave of nausea racking her body. No. He couldn't be. Not after all she'd gone through, all the pain, the doubts and, ultimately, her sacrifice.

'What are you doing here?' he asked casually.

His deep voice washed over her like warm spring wind. 'I work here.' She swallowed, gripping the clipboard more tightly. 'I'm co-ordinating your wedding.'

'My wedding?' He lifted his eyebrows and laughed.

The sound rattled through her like a freight train. She glanced at the folder in front of her, the words a blur. Had she said something funny?

She shook her head. She was an idiot! Wouldn't she have noticed his name earlier if it were his wedding? 'You're not the groom,' she said tentatively, her mind still trying to grapple with his presence.

'Not a chance,' he said, his voice deep and smooth.

Skye let out the breath she was holding, feeling her knees shake under her weight. She took a tentative step, grabbing the back of the nearest chair. She looked at him. 'Then you are?'

'The best man.'

Skye stared at him. How did he know he was the best man for her? She shifted the weight on her heels. How could he know that he was the only man who had pushed her buttons? The only man who she thought of when she went to bed at night, the man who invaded her dreams and haunted her memories.

He crossed his arms over his formidable chest. 'I thought you worked in your family business?'

'I do.' She bit her bottom lip. 'I am.'

His blue eyes probed hers. 'You never said it was a wedding planning business.'

Skye swallowed hard. 'You weren't exactly looking favourably on the whole wedding scene.' She remembered his views on marriage and commitment intimately. If he'd known she was involved in the business he probably would have run screaming the first moment he met her.

Nick shook his head, his brow creasing. 'Isn't that strange? I never noticed that you didn't go into details about what you did.'

'You were too busy to notice,' she quipped. Her mind scrambled to make sense of meeting him again. He couldn't know, could he? The quick and disturbing thought welled in her throat. She swallowed hard. 'What are you doing here?'

His mouth quirked into a smile. 'I'm the best man, remember?'

She remembered all right. Every nerve in her entire body remembered him, mourned him, yearned nightly for him, measured every man that came through her life against him. 'Of course you are,' she said vaguely.

Nick smiled at her, his eyes glinting with purpose.

She shook her head. This couldn't be happening. She'd rehearsed it a million times. It wasn't meant to be here, like this. In a restaurant, in a club, or in a hotel foyer on some exotic trip she'd never taken, not here—she wasn't ready.

Skye dragged in a deep breath, trying to right her world again. 'I never expected you to be involved in all this—' she looked around at the suited men, at Nick and how well he filled out the tuxedo he wore '—how did you used to put it—wedding stuff?'

He shrugged. 'Times change.' And he let his gaze fall, skimming over her again, this time with a slow sensuality and an intimate thoroughness, as though he was remembering the magic they'd once shared.

Skye's belly tightened. She stepped backward, her cheeks heating. 'So, how are you?'

He smiled down at her. 'Good, and you?'

'Good.' Curiosity threatened to engulf her. There was no way she could ask him personal questions, not when four years lay between them like a chasm.

He looked good in a tux, and that blue silk tie set off the brilliant colour of his eyes. 'I hear you're with a prestigious law firm now,' she blurted. She bit her tongue. Dammit. Now he'd know she'd kept up with his career through the papers, the gossip columns and by whatever hearsay she could gather.

'Yes, I am,' he answered easily, his eyes narrowing. 'And you? Did you get what you always wanted?'

She just stared at him. What she always wanted...

She'd wished, dreamed and prayed night after night, day after day, from the day she had left him for what she really wanted, and now, here he was.

'O—kay.' She spun away from the man who'd stolen her heart and turned her life upside down. 'Is everyone happy with their outfits?'

There was a murmur of assent.

'Skye—' Nick's voice was deep and close.

'Right. Well, carry on then. I'm around if you have any questions,' she said to the men in general, ignoring Nick. She glanced at her folder, the words still refusing to be legible. 'Nice seeing you again, Nick... Mr Coburn.'

She forced herself to put one foot in front of the other.

'How about we have coffee later? Catch up a bit?' Nick was right behind her.

'I am trying to work here, folks,' Charlie whined, scuffling along the floor on his knees after Nick's trousers.

'No, I'm sorry. I can't.' Skye pushed through the doors, desperate to escape. The last thing she wanted to do was spend time with the man. She could hardly look at him for the wrenching ache in her chest, the sting behind her eyes and the torturous secret that stabbed her heart like a shard of glass.

He could never know.

Nick tore his gaze from the doorway.

He rolled his neck, massaging the muscles. It was only natural for him to react to her. She was even more beautiful than when they'd met four years ago. She was all woman now. And didn't he know it.

Her rich curves made his hands itch and just the thought of her full breasts, hidden beneath her white blouse, shot bolts of desire through his body.

Memories of trailing kisses over her smooth olive skin clawed at him, her deep red lips fired his blood and her sweet voice...Cripes, how had he ever let her go?

‘Please sir, keep still.’

Nick stood motionless.

Her dark hair had grown. It was no longer a chic bob but long and sweeping, pulled back with wisps escaping and framing her gorgeous face.

Nick clenched his hands by his sides. He still had a thing for her!

Any wonder? Nick rubbed his jaw. She was the one that had got away.

At least she had the decency to look embarrassed about running into him. Cripes. After what she had done to him, it was amazing that she could look him in the face.

He hadn’t seen a ring on her finger. Maybe the bastard that had stolen her away from him hadn’t come up with the goods. Maybe he’d dumped her.

Nick smiled. That would be justice for all the months he’d tossed, sleepless, in his bed alone.

‘Kindly stand still, sir.’

Nick looked down at the thin man hemming his trousers. He would have preferred one of the girls. He looked over to Pete who was chatting up the young blonde hemmer, and across to Tony, who was struggling to win a smile from the redhead.

Nick looked at the door. He’d prefer Skye at his feet, begging forgiveness...

He had really thought they’d had something magical.

Four years...it seemed like yesterday. They’d been clicking on all fronts. She’d understood his commitment to his career, could talk with him, and make his body wild in the bedroom. She was all he had ever wanted in a woman.

For six months they’d been together—it had felt like no time at all, as if he’d been cheated—then she was gone.

He hadn’t realised she’d been seeing someone else. He should have guessed. He had sort of felt that she had been slipping away in those last weeks. The more time they’d spent together talking about what he wanted in life the more she had seemed to distance herself from him.

He had thought it had been just a mood, or a phase. He clenched his fists by his sides. It had been another man.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He never wanted to experience that sort of pain again.

He shrugged, trying to douse the fire deep in his body, trying to still his pounding heart and push the image of her wide, dark eyes from his mind. And the rest of her beautiful body.

He still had it bad. Cripes. Even after all these years...

He straightened tall and threw out his chest. He was older now, and a hell of a lot wiser. He knew what he wanted and what he didn’t. And he didn’t want to be haunted by Skye Andrews any more.

He was going to get that two-timing vixen out of his mind, body and heart, once and for all.

‘All finished, sir,’ the man at his feet stated dryly, getting to his feet and shooting him a far-from-pleased look. ‘Finally.’

‘Thank God.’ Nick strode to the changing room, tearing the tie from his neck and flicking open the buttons on the jacket and the waistcoat.

Because he wasn’t finished with Skye Andrews, not by a long shot.

CHAPTER THREE

SKYE gripped the phone tightly, her mouth dry. 'Tara, have you been in touch with Bridal Creations?'

'Not lately,' her older sister responded matter-of-factly.

'Weren't you going to snaffle one of their planners?' Skye crossed her fingers. Please say yes. Please let her say she has her. Please say she didn't have to put up with Nick Coburn in her face for the next couple of weeks.

She bit her lip, the reality seeping into her. As if a new girl could jump right into an ongoing wedding—she was delusional. She was stuck with the guy.

There was a tinge of hope for her—if the new planner teamed up with her and did the Harrison-Brown wedding with her then she could be Skye's assistant, and deal with the best man while Skye dealt with the bride and groom.

'I am thinking about it,' Tara said coolly. 'But there are several issues to consider when enticing an employee away. The main one being if she shows no loyalty to them, what chance is there that she'll show loyalty to us?'

'Money talks,' Skye blurted.

'And money invariably costs. More and more.' Tara paused as though she was considering. 'I'll have to think of a way to entice her to work for us that goes beyond just a pay-packet.'

'Think faster.'

'Have you got a problem?'

Skye paused. She'd successfully kept the identity secret of the man who had changed her life years ago. Tara hadn't needed to know all the details then, and definitely not now.

Skye knew exactly what her sister would do and there was no way she wanted her bull-headed sister crashing into Nick and throwing accusations around and making demands...

She shivered. She didn't want a lecture from her sister either and Tara was damned good at those, having been in charge of the family's business for over three years.

Skye sighed. 'Just taking on Mum's wedding client on top of—'

'I've got everything else under control, Skye. I have two weddings of my own on the go, as you know, but Maggie and I will take care of all the bookings and follow-ups with everyone but the clients themselves.'

Skye sagged back in her chair. 'But you don't know—'

'You've documented your progress well.'

'I have?' She sat a little taller. Praise from her older sister was rare, but then, having a man like Patrick in her life made a big difference. It was amazing what a little love could do.

'So don't panic. I spoke to Mum just an hour ago. She has every confidence that the Harrison-Brown wedding will go off without a hitch if she's not back on board before the fateful day,' Tara stated dryly. 'Oh, and she sounds terrible so please don't hassle her unless absolutely necessary.'

'Sure.' Skye stiffened. There was no way on earth she could talk to her mother about this. She was worse than Tara when it came to being bull-headed. 'I don't foresee any problems.'

'Good.'

Skye rang off. No problems. Except that the man she'd walked out on four years earlier was back in her life!

Breathe. Just breathe. There was no reason to panic. She would hardly see the guy, probably didn't need to see him at all. She nibbled her lower lip. She could probably avoid the man completely until the rehearsal and the wedding.

She strode to the window and stared out at the busy street. Was one of the cars outside his? Had he gone yet? Had he had his fitting done, taken off that amazing tux, and gone back to his life? She crossed her fingers and leant her head against the cool glass.

Did he have someone in his life? She bit her bottom lip, a chill sweeping through her.

She stared out at the sky. Nick probably didn't even think twice about running into her. Odds were it had to happen eventually. She just wished it was still years down the track, when she was older, more mature, stronger and far more capable to cope with surviving an ex-boyfriend who was a lawyer.

Skye sighed. Nick had probably already dismissed her from his mind as an old girlfriend, over and done, and that was all she was. He had enough of those running around the city, from what the papers reported.

She licked her dry lips. It was probably a daily occurrence for him. There was no reason to think there was anything more to it.

She heard the knock and the door open. 'Just put the cup on my desk, Maggie.' She needed the cuppa desperately, but she wasn't about to show Maggie that, or the fact that she was bothered.

'I would,' said a distinctively male voice. 'But I don't have the cup and I'm not Maggie.'

Skye swung to face him, her insides coiled tight. Nick!

Nick Coburn wore a dark suit that silhouetted his shoulders as nicely as the tuxedo had. His white shirt and deep green tie were neat, pressed and tidy. Did he have someone ironing his shirts for him? She stiffened. Or was he just sending them out? 'What are you doing here?'

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. 'I told you, I'm the best man.'

She took a deep breath. Where was her professionalism? Where was her detachment, and all that cool, calm sense that she'd employed in her life so well over the last few years?

'What can I help you with?' she asked as calmly as she could, avoiding looking at the man directly, trying to slow the thunderous pounding of her heart and the flood of heat to her face.

'I'd like to discuss my speech at the reception. I need some advice.' He strode across her small office and dropped into the white fabric sofa in the corner as though he was perfectly at ease.

She lifted her chin. 'Oh, of course.' Professional she could handle. She just couldn't afford to go anywhere near personal, or go into details of what exactly had happened four years ago.

'Shoot.'

He scrutinized her, his gaze intense, as though he was looking into her very soul...

A shiver raced down Skye's back, sending ripples of awareness across her skin and into her body. She crossed her arms over her chest and concentrated on breathing and not on the barrage of questions tossing around in her head.

Nick arranged several of the red heart-shaped cushions around him and then gazed directly at her. 'I'm not sure whether I should go with a joke to start my speech with, or not?'

The tension in her eased a little. Work mode, she could do. 'There is a popular misconception that the best man has to be witty, funny and entertaining.' Skye strode behind her wide white marble-topped desk, sitting down in her red chair, pretending this was just any other man in her office. 'Be funny if funny works for you. But it's more important to be genuine.'

'So your advice is—?'

She arranged some papers in front of her, concentrating on what she usually said to the best man and not on the rush of blood in her ears. 'Keep it simple, genuine and brief.'

'Okay.' Nick clapped his hands together and rubbed the palms against each other, not taking his eyes off her. 'Understood.'

Skye stood up, the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end. 'Is that all?'

Nick didn't move. He looked at her, the intensity in his deep blue eyes disconcerting. 'Don't you want to hear it?'

‘What?’ She bit her bottom lip. Why he’d come? Why he’d shown up in her life now after all these years or what he’d heard somewhere, what he suspected? Her heart pounded against her ribs. Or what he wanted now?

‘My speech.’ He leant his elbows on his knees, his blue eyes gleaming. ‘Do you want to hear it?’

Her knees gave out beneath her and she sagged back into her chair. ‘Sure.’ She waved him on. ‘Sure, go ahead. I’m all ears.’

He rubbed his hands together. ‘Terrific, but it’s not quite ready at the moment so I’ll be back when the first draft is done.’

‘Great.’ She sighed. She should have seen that one coming. ‘Not a problem.’

He leant forward, his eyes probing hers. ‘Are you sure? You seem a bit tense.’

Skye lifted her chin. ‘I assure you, Mr Coburn, that no matter what went on with us in the past I am a professional. I’ll do my job where the Harrison-Brown wedding is concerned. No problem at all.’

He shot her a curt nod. ‘You don’t have a problem with me being the best man?’

‘Of course not.’ She was obviously transparent. She pulled back her shoulders and met his deep blue eyes. ‘It was four long years ago, Mr Coburn. It has no relevance here today.’

A muscle quivered in his jaw. ‘I’m interested in finding out how your life has gone during those long years, Skye.’

Her name on his lips sent a shiver down her spine. She raised an eyebrow. ‘I don’t see that it’s any of your business.’

‘I’d like to make it my business. We were friends once,’ he said, his voice low and smooth. ‘Don’t you owe me at least a cup of hot chocolate?’

Her chest tightened. He’d remembered her favourite drink! She shook her head vehemently. ‘I don’t think so. Besides, we didn’t part on the best of terms.’ She’d made sure of that. She couldn’t have him looking her up a few months down the track. She’d had to make it final.

‘Really? I hardly recall.’ He stood up and smoothed down his trousers. ‘But it’s just a cuppa. Unless your husband wouldn’t like it?’

‘I’m not married,’ she blurted, heat rushing to her cheeks.

A smile teased the corners of his mouth. ‘So, there’s no argument then. Say, twelve o’clock at that café down on the corner.’ He cocked a thumb in the general direction.

Skye opened her mouth but no words would come. He was as arrogant and as confident as she’d suspected from his reported exploits. Which only made him more dangerous than ever.

She wanted to slap herself in the head. She should have left that question about a husband unanswered. It would have been better for her if he thought she was committed to someone. She would have been safe. ‘I—’

He shut the door firmly behind him.

She closed her mouth and stared at the door. Nick Coburn wanted to meet her later, wanted to talk, wanted to catch up on old times, and catch up on what she’d been doing these few years?

She covered her mouth, stifling the urge to scream. If only he knew!

What on earth was she going to do?

Nick Coburn tapped the melamine table-top with his pen, staring through the café’s front window for the hundredth time. He glanced at his watch—it was past twelve-thirty.

Maybe he should have waited for an answer from the woman, but dammit, she sent his mind and his body into a spin just being near her.

She should come. If only driven by curiosity.

Skye had always been punctual, considerate and giving, except for having a damned affair under his nose. He ran a hand through his hair. He wouldn’t have thought she’d be the sort of woman to juggle two men, play the field to that extent. It had baffled him for years. His sweet, innocent girlfriend had turned out to be a stranger.

Another lesson notched up. And she was a hard lesson.

He stared at the papers in front of him blankly. It would probably be best if he kept his current modus operandi and stayed the hell away from her. Dating models was great for his image, his ego and his exposure to the general public. Just not so good for his sanity or his wallet. Luckily he kept each affair brief. He glanced at the door to the café. But it was time for a change.

His mobile shrilled. He grabbed it and stabbed the button, his body already warming at the thought of her. Was she running late, stuck in traffic somewhere or going to offer an apology? 'Coburn.'

'Nick, how'd you go with your fitting?' Sandra's voice was sweet and lilting.

He looked at the ceiling. Sandra was tall, blonde and wily. Almost model material. He'd met her several times at Paul's place and then at the engagement party. She probably would have made for a nice distraction but now, after seeing Skye again, feeling what she stirred deep inside him, he had bigger challenges at hand. Like getting her out of his system once and for all.

'Mine went fabulously. That designer that Camelot has there is amazing. You should see our bridesmaid dresses. They're unbelievable. No sleeves, no straps, just cupping my breasts and then sweeping down. All soft, pink and silky, caressing my skin like you wouldn't believe.'

'Really?'

'Oh, yes. And you should see what she's done with the wedding gown. Goodness, that's the only place to get your dress. It's all white with off the shoulder straps that are extensions of the dress rather than just straps. And all studded with tiny pearls and the finest lace around the edges. Then there's the veil... But silly me, rattling on like this.' She paused for breath. 'How did you go?'

'Fine.' He looked towards the door.

'I bet you looked so amazing in your tux. I can't wait for the wedding, can you?'

He didn't want to hear about himself. He didn't want to hear about her dress, or the wedding. He looked at the door, his body tense. He wanted to know about Skye. 'What do you know about the planner and the business?'

'Darling, I know heaps, of course. I wasn't going to let Cynthia just take on any wedding planner. Camelot's going to do Kasey Steel's wedding, you know? It's in early spring. It's been splashed through all the papers.'

'What about the planners?'

'Well, they're all sisters, three of them, and then there's the mother. The oldest sister does a bit of wedding planning and proposal planning. What will they come up with next?'

'I don't know.' He twisted his cup, watching the remains swirl around the bottom. 'And—'

'And then the youngest is the fashion designer. She does all the dresses and they are to die for.'

'And—'

'And the mother and the middle daughter are the main wedding planners. It's so cute, isn't it? Keeping it in the family.'

'Very cute. What about details?'

She dragged in a deep breath. 'Well, I know they shot out of mediocrity with the announcement of their doing the Steel wedding. Before that I don't think they were as motivated or something. I don't know. But I know the wedding planner daughter was not even there full-time.'

Nick straightened the depositions in front of him. 'What else about the young wedding planner woman? Do you know anything else about her?'

'Why do you ask?' asked Sandra, her tone sharp and biting.

Nick clenched his hands. 'No reason. Just that the mother has come down with the flu, apparently, and the young one is taking over Cynthia and Paul's wedding.'

'Really? Well, I hope she's good,' Sandra stated dryly. 'And I hope she's decided to take her job seriously and do it properly.'

'Sure to.' It was obvious Sandra's knowledge didn't go far. No surprises there. 'Look, Sandra. I have to get going. Work and all.'

‘Of course. Sure.’ There was a long pause. ‘Well, bye then.’

Nick hung up and stared at the mobile. What else could Skye possibly have been doing if she wasn’t working at Camelot full-time? A course at university? Another job? Another man?

He gulped down the last of his coffee, almost cold, swallowing hard. He pushed the unpleasant thought from his mind. First things first.

He plunged the phone back into his jacket pocket and looked at his watch. Almost one. His lunch hour was up. He gathered the papers in front of him—he’d hardly looked at them. He had to get over Skye as quickly as humanly possible and get back to focusing on his work.

He stood abruptly, almost skittling his chair. Skye was surrounded by unanswered questions and he had every intention of getting all the answers, by whatever means possible.

Whether he liked the answers or not.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘SKYE, you have a phone call on line one from John, line two from the Macdonalds, and line three from the Donovans—a new query.’

Skye smoothed back the wisps of hair that had escaped her coiffure and sighed deeply. The phone had been ringing half the morning and most of the afternoon since she’d run into Nick. If she’d had to cope with bookings and follow-ups to caterers, florists, churches, reception centres and all the rest as well, she’d have gone mad.

‘Tell John I’ll call him back later.’ Skye was glad she was too busy for that call. She’d have to explain why she had left a message on his answering machine cancelling their date. ‘The way things are going, much later. Ask the Macdonalds if you can help them. Tell them I’ll ring them back otherwise. I’ll take the new query.’

‘Okay,’ Maggie chimed.

Skye punched the phone for line three. She looked at her watch again. Almost five. Only a few more minutes and things would slow down. She could finish the day’s work and run home.

She needed to take a hot shower, scream into her pillow and sort out what on earth she was going to do about Nick Coburn.

She answered the Donovans’ queries easily. She’d done this enough times to know all the answers to all the questions couples came up with when they wanted to hire a wedding planner. She wished her life were as easy.

‘Skye, I’m heading home. Anything else you need me to do for you before I go?’ Maggie swung her head around the door.

‘No, I’m fine. Just itching to get home.’

‘Yeah, it must be really weird for you to be here so late.’ Maggie hooked her bag over her shoulder, wiping her nose with a tissue. ‘You’re usually gone by two.’

‘Can’t be helped. With Mum sick—’ She looked at the work still in front of her, her stomach leaden. She hated being this late home.

‘We should send her flowers.’

Skye nodded. ‘She’d like that. Remind me tomorrow, can you?’

‘Sure. Night, Skye.’

‘Night, Maggie.’ She was a great asset and an enthusiastic young woman who was eager to help with all aspects of the business.

The work was tedious. She felt every minute passing like a deep thud in her chest. If only Tara could dig up another planner from somewhere to lighten the load, she could get back to the routine that worked best for her.

At six she couldn’t take it any more. She tidied her desk, grabbed her coat and purse and flicked off the light. The rest could wait until morning. She had responsibilities that were more important than work.

Skye moved through the darkened offices. The quietness of the place at night was almost surreal after the hectic bustle of the day.

She rarely got to hear the silence. Not for years. She had her hands totally and utterly full at home.

She poked her head around the door of Tara’s office and smiled. Empty. There were days when Maggie swore Tara spent the entire night working. These days, with the new guy in her life, her sister was lucky to get in to work on time.

She flicked off the last light and let herself out, locking the door securely behind her. She sighed. She hadn’t locked up in years either. So much had changed in her life...

‘You didn’t show up.’

Skye swung around, her heart leaping in her chest.

Nick stood behind her, looming like a brick wall, dark suit, dark coat and a very dark look.

'I know,' she managed breathlessly.

He came close, looking down into her face, his jaw set firm. 'Would you like to give me an explanation?'

'Would you mind if I caught my breath? You startled me.' She touched her chest, trying to still the pounding of her heart. It was just the scare. Nothing else. 'This isn't the day and age to be jumping out at women late at night.'

'You have nothing to be frightened of from me.' His voice lowered dangerously.

She doubted that! She swung away from him and strode towards the car park, thankful that the street-lights were all intact. It was a good neighbourhood—she just didn't like taking chances.

His footsteps were heavy behind her.

'Really? Nothing to be frightened of from you?' she tossed over her shoulder. 'I can't imagine that you've grown up that much.'

'You'd be surprised.'

She darted him a quick glance. Surprised at how little he'd grown? Sure, he'd filled out some more and his face looked a little less fresh, but he was the same Nick Coburn she'd known. She was sure of it.

'I'm fine to get to my car on my own,' she snapped, lifting her chin and lengthening her stride.

He came up beside her. 'I'm sorry if I gave you the impression that I drove all the way out here to escort you to the car park. I'm here for answers.'

Skye faltered. Did he know? She shook her head, urging her legs to walk straight to her Mitsubishi sedan. She pressed the auto entry pad, watching the light inside go on, illuminating the back seat.

Damn. She froze, her cheeks heating and her pulse raging through her body. Damn, damn, damn.

Nick caught her arm and turned her to face him. 'Skye?'

She looked up into his strong face, his jaw sporting a slight shadow, his hair mussed a little as though he'd been working on a difficult case.

'Okay. Okay.' Skye stared at his chest. 'If you'd waited around for me to respond to your invitation in the first place you would have discovered that I'm flat out.'

'You were working?'

'Yes. Working. Flat out busy and couldn't spare a minute—disasters...you know.' Skye looked at the ground, where his shoes met the pavement, unable to look into his face on the off-chance that he'd see the lie in her eyes.

'You could have called,' he stated casually.

She looked up at him. 'Where? I know nothing about you.'

Nick stood in front of her, boldly intimidating, the soft light from the street-lights casting shadows across his face. 'You know I work at Stevens and King. You could have called there.'

She bit her lip. Caught out. Damn. She'd thought about it but figured he'd talk her around in circles until he eventually got his own way. 'I didn't think—'

'Hmm. Yes.' Nick's voice was cutting. 'I can see that as a bit of a trait of yours.'

She crossed her arms over her chest, glaring up at him, eye to eye, a swell of indignation surging up her body. 'What is?'

'Not thinking of other people.'

Her blood heated. 'You know nothing about me. My entire life is thinking of other people. Twenty-four seven.' He had a nerve. She baby-sat people's weddings, co-ordinating hundreds of people, a myriad of details, all for other people. And then there was home, where she barely got two minutes to herself...

‘Tell me about it,’ he said softly. ‘All about it. I want to know.’

She shook her head, clamping her mouth closed. She’d fallen into that one. He had a way of getting people to say things and there was no way she could afford to fall into that trap.

‘I’m interested,’ he said softly, slipping his hands into his trouser pockets.

Skye shook her head. ‘You’re just interested because I was the one person in your life who decided not to play your game.’ She put her hands on her hips. ‘I said no.’

‘Other people have said no to me.’

‘And gone unscathed?’

He laughed. ‘Not exactly.’

A hot ache fired in the pit of her stomach at the deep rumble of his laugh. She lifted her chin and glared at him. ‘Leave me out of your games, Nick,’ she snapped, fighting her body’s traitorous response.

Anger. Her only strength was in anger. She couldn’t afford to weaken. She shrugged out of her suit jacket and opened the back door, tossing it across the back seat. She couldn’t afford for him to see what was in the back. She jerked backwards and slammed the door.

‘They aren’t games, Skye,’ he murmured, reducing the distance between them, looking down into her eyes, at her lips. ‘I’m all grown up now.’

She stepped back, swallowing the ache in her throat and resisting the urge to moisten her lips and look at his mouth. Memories coursed through her mind and body, of the magic his lips could evoke in her, of what they’d once shared, of how much she’d lost.

She pressed her legs against the cold steel of the car, grounding herself. ‘That only means you’re more dangerous than ever.’

‘Thank you.’ He looked down at her, his face half-shadowed. ‘But I promise I won’t bite. Come to dinner with me.’

‘I’m sorry, I can’t.’ She looked at her watch and cringed. ‘I have to get home.’

‘Another man?’

She shook her head. The accusation, and his tone, took her back four years. He hadn’t taken her leaving him well—she’d had no choice but to agree to his assumption. Rejecting him totally and utterly on every level had been the only way to ensure that he wouldn’t come after her. ‘It’s none of your business.’

‘I’m trying to make it my business,’ he said softly, his voice deep and velvet-edged.

‘Please don’t.’

‘You’re telling me that you’re not married, not in a serious relationship, yet you’re refusing me?’

He crossed his arms over his chest. ‘On what grounds?’

‘Sanity.’

‘Ha!’

‘Go back to your tall, lanky models, Nick. Leave me out of it.’ Skye grabbed the door handle.

He raised an eyebrow. ‘So, you’re intimidated by what you’ve read in the papers?’

She paused. Darn. She hadn’t meant for him to know how closely she’d been following his life. ‘I’m hardly a model, Nick, and you have to admit they have been your standard fare of late.’

‘Agreed, but that’s not because of their looks,’ Nick said carefully, running his gaze over her as though he was cataloguing just how different she was from his blonde bombshells. Maybe that was the point.

She stared down at the door handle. ‘But they make good trophies hanging off your arm.’ She nearly had enough clippings of him with one pretty woman or another to fill her shoebox—almost as though he was trying to outdo himself, or set a record.

He stiffened. ‘Well, yes, they do, but it’s more that there’s a mutual understanding that the relationships are superficial.’

She let go of the door handle and turned and faced him, crossing her arms over her chest. 'Do you tell them that?'

He shrugged. 'Not in so many words.'

'I wouldn't think any woman would like to think she meant so little to you.' She rubbed her arms, her body chilling. Had she meant so little to him? 'You're a chauvinistic ass, you know that?'

'In my defence, I make sure every woman that comes into my life knows how little I think of commitment and marriage and all that junk.'

'And if she had any argument?' She knew from experience how clever he was at arguing his point. It was all she could do to keep track of the original dispute and her stance when she'd locked horns with him on one issue or another.

'You didn't.'

Skye shook her head. 'I was young and foolish.'

'You were beautiful. Are beautiful,' he said softly.

'Save your sweet talk for someone who cares.'

'You don't?' He raised his eyebrows, his eyes wide and deep, almost giving him a touch of vulnerability. 'You don't think very highly of me, do you?'

She shook her head, not trusting herself to say anything to that. What could she say? He'd been her world...

'We were good together, Skye.' Nick's voice was deep and husky. 'Remember?'

She swallowed the lump in her throat and shrugged. 'But some things aren't meant to be,' she said as calmly as she could. She opened the car door and slipped inside.

He put a hand on the car roof and leant over her. 'Some things could be worth another shot.'

She froze, her heart skipping a beat, looking up into his eyes, their brilliant blue colour shining in the light from the car. 'What are you saying?'

He shrugged. 'Come out to dinner with me.'

She shook her head. She was dreaming. Her wish could never come true. Nick Coburn was driven by his career—nothing else mattered. 'I told you, I can't.'

'Tomorrow night, then?'

She shook her head, fighting every nerve in her body and every dream in her silly head. There was no future with Nick Coburn.

He pulled back, straightening tall. 'I'm not going to give up on you easily.'

'Then I'll make it hard.' Skye slammed the door of her car and shoved the key in the ignition. She twisted it and the engine roared to life.

She flicked on the headlights and pulled out of the car park, vividly aware of the dark form standing rigid, watching her.

She had too much to lose to make anything easy for Nick, way too much. And she knew him too well to let him anywhere near her defences, because when she was with him, she didn't have any.

Nick was a disaster waiting to happen.

CHAPTER FIVE

SKYE pushed open the front door to Camelot, her mind a jumble of clients, times and Nick. She looked down at her watch. She was late this morning, but she'd had to make up for coming home so late last night.

She hoped her mother would recover quickly so she didn't have to keep working to this extent, especially anywhere near Nick.

She froze in the doorway. The foyer was filled with flowers—yellow roses, red roses, pink roses, white roses, carnations, daffodils and bunches of mixed blooms, all vibrant with colour. She breathed in the sweet scent, as if she'd stepped into a flower shop or a much-loved garden on a warm spring day. 'What's all this?'

Riana stuck her head out from behind a grove of carnations. 'It's what it looks like—a lot of flowers,' she said, a cheeky grin across her face.

'Nice to see you.' Her younger sister was an amazing designer, specialising in wedding gowns, with an artistic temperament and a total disregard for office hours. She flitted in and out as she pleased, doing her gowns, and that was about all.

Riana picked up a rose and put it to her nose. 'And nice to see you. Mum being sick must be a bummer for you.'

Skye nodded. 'Rick's being romantic with Tara again, is he?' Skye's chest filled with a beautiful warmth as she looked around the foyer. She was so glad her sister had found someone to love, and someone who loved her so much. It made her think that happy-ever-afters weren't so impossible after all.

She pressed her lips tightly together, fighting the sting behind her eyes. Tara was so lucky.

Skye pulled one of the closest yellow roses towards her and dragged in the warm, rich scent. It was her favourite flower. She remembered all the times that Nick had brought home yellow roses for her.

He'd been an amazing lover. Romantic and caring—in the hours they had together, just brief snatches in time. The rest was work. All work. His driving need to be all he could be his primary focus.

She'd accepted that, and loved that passion for his work in him. She was busy too, and it was only later, when life had thrown her a curve-ball, that she had discovered there would be no future for her with Nick Coburn.

'No.' Riana rearranged the flowers in one of the bouquets. 'The flowers are not for Tara.'

'You?' Skye could imagine her younger sister having a string of boyfriends willing to make such a grand gesture for her. She was pretty, young and full of energy.

Riana smiled. 'They're for you.'

'Me?' Skye's breath caught in her throat, her heart pounding against her chest. She stepped forward tentatively, touching the small card that lay nestled in the nearest bunch.

Say Yes.

Nick! She'd thought yesterday that he was bluffing. Today... She looked around her and cringed. He had to have bought the entire florist's stock!

She bit her bottom lip. She knew what he was like with challenges in his life—tenacious, stubborn and devious, not to mention dogged. She'd seen him go after cases, seen his determined study at night, seen how his mind worked.

She was in trouble!

'So, are you going to say yes to the mystery guy? It isn't John, is it?'

She shook her head. John. She hadn't thought of him at all. She slapped her forehead. 'I forgot to call him back.' He was the latest in a series of dates set up by her mother, okay company but nothing like Nick.

'I didn't think so. John doesn't strike me as the romantic type and especially not the type to splurge a heap of his hard-earned money on this—' Riana drew in a deep breath '—amazingly romantic gesture.'

Skye wished he had. John would have been easier to handle than Nick Coburn, and she suspected that romance wasn't exactly what Nick had on his mind...

'So what should I tell him?' Riana looked at her expectantly, brushing her dark hair off her face, looking as much like a manic matchmaker as their mother.

'Nothing.'

Riana raised a perfectly arched eyebrow at her.

'Where's Maggie?' She was usually in at this time of day. And, of all people, Riana would know—the two of them hung out together a lot of the time.

'She called in to say she felt sick.' Riana perched herself on the small corner of the reception desk that didn't have flowers on it. 'She figured a day of rest, chicken soup and watching a soap or three would fix her up. And I decided that I could man her desk for her while I design the Macdonald gown, and Tara's, too.'

'That's great. Thanks.' Skye bit her lip. The last thing they needed was Maggie out sick for any length of time.

'So—' Riana clapped her hands and grinned. 'Who should I tell that answer to?'

Skye stiffened. 'Nothing to no one.'

'No reply? To this? Are you crazy?'

A delivery man strode into the room with flowers in his arms. 'Another delivery for Skye Andrews,' he stated dryly. He placed the three foot high bouquet of red roses, complete with glass vase, on the floor beside Maggie's desk.

Riana stared at the vase then at Skye. 'We'll drown in flowers if you don't answer him.'

'Okay, we'll answer him.' Skye looked around the offices, willing her mind to work. 'Where's the shredder?'

'You're not going to shred all these beautiful flowers? You can't,' Riana squeaked. 'Skye?'

Skye strode across the reception area and froze in her office doorway. If she'd thought there were a lot of flowers in the foyer there were twice as many in her office. Every surface was covered in them.

'Riana!' She turned back to her sister.

Riana strolled up to her, standing beside her in the doorway. She shrugged. 'The first delivery guy was here waiting when I opened up this morning.'

Skye stared at the beautiful bouquets. Just how many deliveries had there been? 'How am I going to work?'

'Say yes.'

She shook her head. The fact that every flower was one of her favourites and there weren't any that she disliked meant something. Did Nick keep notes in his little black book on each woman he dated—how else could he have remembered?

Skye strode across her office to her desk. If he thought that she was still the young girl she'd been when he'd first met her, he was mistaken. She'd grown up. She wasn't going to roll over and accept anything at face value, especially this.

She knew what he was like, knew what games he liked to amuse himself with, knew how much he enjoyed getting people to roll over on their previous decisions and come round to his way of thinking.

He wasn't going to get that sort of satisfaction from her, not after everything she'd been through. If Nick Coburn wanted to play, fine. She had a few games of her own!

Nick flicked another page in the deposition, glancing at the phone again. Any minute now and she'd call him and say yes. He couldn't help but smile.

Her place would look like the Botanical Gardens by now. He couldn't help but smile. If she had been in any doubt that he was serious about his invitation to her, she wouldn't be now.

He looked at the clock on the wall. Hell, she was stubborn. She'd lasted longer than he'd first thought she would. How many flowers did a girl need to conclude he was seriously interested in taking her out?

Nick would do whatever it took. Money was not an issue. He felt a swell of satisfaction. Just to think it made him taste his sweet success. He'd done what his father, and his brother, hadn't.

Marrying his mother at twenty-two had, as far as his father was concerned, put paid to his aspirations of becoming a lawyer. He said it had doused his energy and his drive, sucking away his commitment to going back to school.

Nick knew his father had struggled to make enough for their family to get by, sometimes doing two shifts at the factory.

Six children was a bit much. With all the bills, clothing and then feeding them all, his parents barely managed most of the time.

Nick Coburn didn't want that for himself. No way. And neither did his father. He wanted his sons to achieve what he hadn't.

He toyed with the pens on his desk. He'd seen his father put all his energy behind his older brother, Robert, encouraging him through school, cheering him on in his achievements at university and urging him to greater career aspirations.

Nick had seen his father shake his head at his brother's lack of drive. Heard his criticisms of him when Robert had got all serious over a woman. And seen him cry at Robert's wedding.

Nick had never seen his father cry. It hadn't felt good. It had felt like a giant hammer had slammed the air out of his lungs.

He didn't want to feel like that again. Ever. He was going to get where he was going—come hell or high water. Nothing was going to stop him.

He'd make his father's dream come true for at least one of his sons before he left this world.

A knock sounded. His office door opened and his secretary came in quietly, carrying a steaming cup of coffee. She hovered next to his desk.

He could smell the heady brew. 'Thanks, Liz.' He took the cup from the greying woman. 'Any news?'

Liz pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. 'I just heard that there's been a spate of anonymous deliveries of flowers to hospitals, to nursing homes, and to medical clinics all over the city.'

Nick coughed, splattering coffee over the desk.

'Oh, dear.' She rushed out of the door and was back again, her hands full of tissues and a box of them under her arm. She mopped up the coffee.

Nick pulled a handful of tissues from the box and dabbed the documents in front of him, trying to clear his throat.

'Are you all right?' she asked.

'Fine.' He hadn't expected that! He fought a smile. Skye was something else. There wasn't an atom in his body that doubted that the flowers were his.

Liz walked to the door. 'Some people have money to burn.'

'Yes, well. Thanks, Liz.' He tossed the clump of sodden tissues into his bin. 'But I was actually referring to what you may have heard around the office about the promotion.'

'Oh. Nothing yet, sir. They say they're going to meet early next week to discuss who'll make senior partner.'

'Okay.'

She turned at the door, her face creasing as her smile widened. 'It was a lovely gesture, don't you think? The flowers. It would have put a lot of smiles on a lot of faces.'

‘Yes.’ Nick rubbed his jaw. Skye would be smiling all right. The vixen. She was meant to be ringing him with her ‘yes’, thanking him profusely for his incredibly romantic gesture of sending so many flowers to her, not playing philanthropist.

He stared at the work in front of him—it could wait a few minutes. What was her problem? It was only dinner...

He wrenched open his top drawer, pulling out his address book. She wanted to play hard to get? Wanted to torture him some more with what he couldn’t have?

He flicked the book to the right page. Only this time he wasn’t prepared to walk away.

He punched the numbers on the phone. But first, he needed all the facts.

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