



# Husband For Hire

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**To my grandmother, Virginia LaVerna Smith. I love you!**

**To Ruth Kerce, Teri Heyer, and Nancy McLane. Your friendships mean the world to me.**

**And, as always, for Dean, Katie, and Reid. Without you all, writing has no meaning.**

*Michele R. Bardsley*

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## About the Author

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# Prologue

***Strong man needed to do household chores.*** Victoria Simms peered at the copy of her hand-written ad. Posting it in the grocery store had been pure genius. Guilt niggled her, but she squashed the feeling. That stubborn granddaughter of hers had avoided men since the Wedding Incident and enough was enough. Maggie needed love, deserved love...and a grandmotherly shove in the right direction.

The doorbell rang. Victoria hurried to the front door and opened it. A young man stood before her--tall, broad-chested, lean, good-looking. He was dressed in a denim shirt, jeans, and work boots.

Most folks thought being eighty years old was the same as being dead. Hah! Certainly wouldn't hurt her eyes to look at a stud muffin all day. His name was...Alex Ross. Yes, that's what he'd said on the phone this morning.

She led him into the parlor of the two-story Victorian house and they sat on the comfortable brown sofa. A spring breeze filtered through the open windows, ruffling the lace curtains and Alex Ross's brown hair. Victoria frowned. Maggie preferred blonde-haired men. Brown would have to do, though. She cataloged his other features. Straight nose--not too big. Kind smile. Blue eyes. Victoria liked blue eyes.

"Do you have a high school diploma?" she asked.

"I have a GED."

"Education's important. So is physical fitness." Victoria poked his stomach. "You don't have a beer belly, do you?"

Surprise registered in his nice blue eyes. She flashed him an oh-dear-I'm-just-an-eccentric-old-lady smile. He rubbed his stomach. "I work out when I can," he said.

"Excellent. You mentioned on the phone that you were single. How do you feel about animals, children, and wives?"

"I feel--"

"Do you want a family? Nice house? A dog?"

"Um...does this concern the job?"

Victoria crossed her arms. "Of course it does. I wouldn't ask irrelevant questions, would I?"

"No, ma'am."

"You're a bright boy." *And perfect for Maggie.* Victoria told him how much she'd pay per week, then added, "as well as room and board."

"I wasn't expecting...that is, it's a generous offer." He smiled. Victoria felt walloped. Wait till Maggie saw that smile!

"What does the job involve, Mrs. Simms?"

"Handyman-type stuff," she answered. Heck, she'd find something for him to do.

She studied him as his thoughtful gaze examined the parlor. Her left knee ached. *Left knee ache meant true love.* Everybody in Tulsa knew her aches and pains never lied. She knew Alex Ross wasn't anything like Maggie's ex-fiancé. He wasn't the kind of man to lie or steal. She felt it to the marrow of her bones.

Victoria extended her hand. "You're hired."

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## Chapter One

*The large muddy hole waited for her.* Maggie Conrad stared at the watery muck because she had always faced reality head-on...and, well, she had no other choice. She'd rather stare at the ground, anyway, because the other option was to stare at her breasts as gravity slowly squeezed them out of her pink bikini top.

At least hanging upside down from the seven foot Ladder of Death had certain advantages. Since all the blood had rushed to her head, she no longer felt the pain in her rope-entangled feet.

Painting her grandmother's shutters "Gingerbread Pink" should have been easy. When she tied the ropes around the paint cans and looped them over the ladder's tray, she raised and lowered the heavy cans several times. Then she climbed up, putting her weight on the step with the printed warning "Do Not Stand On This." The ladder wiggled. She wiggled. She fell backwards. The ropes wrapped around her ankles, suspending her above a mud-filled hole.

Attempts to reach up and disentangle herself had been useless. Her throat hurt from shouting for help. Unfortunately, she and Gran lived in a neighborhood of elderly people who loved bingo and naps. How long had Gran been gone to the store? Aeons. Hours. *Twenty minutes.*

Maggie sighed, then closed her eyes, unable to look at her muddy destiny.

"Is that a new way to do Yoga?"

The deep, masculine voice startled Maggie. Her eyes flew open and she found herself staring at a jean-clad crotch. She closed her eyes, and opened them. The bulge was still there. It was rather large, she noticed. What was she thinking? She tried to wriggle away, but swayed forward, bumping into it. The man jumped back, missing the water-filled hole by scant inches. Mortification scorched her cheeks. Suddenly, the puddle looked heavenly. With her face covered in mud she wouldn't see the man who owned the crotch.

"Hold still." The jeans moved forward. Her gaze riveted to the steel buttons glinting in the morning sunshine. Irrational panic consumed her.

*The crotch was returning.*

Maggie screamed. The man retreated. He hunkered down, his expression one of concern. At least that's what it looked like from her funhouse view.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice gentle.

She swallowed her embarrassment, feeling foolish. He'd done nothing threatening. It wasn't his fault, his, er, bulge was eye level to her. Pretending she wasn't upside down and in pain, she said, "I'm fine. I'm just working out an act. I plan to join the circus."

"I see."

Her body protested its unnatural position. Her arms had lost sensation, and her breasts were about to introduce themselves to this stranger. "Please help me...without sticking your jeans in my face."

He frowned. No, smiled. Maggie bent her neck, getting a sideways view of his face instead of an upside-down one. He was too young to be a neighbor and too handsome to be a comfort.

"I don't see how else I'm supposed to untie the ropes. I have to reach up there," he said.

"Go to the other side."

He shook his head. "Not enough room. How did you manage to get the ladder between the holly bushes,--" he pointed to the puddle "--this swamp and the house?"

"I'm very talented," she grumbled. "Do what you have to, but do it quickly because I can't feel my feet anymore."

"Okay, I'm going to--" he cleared his throat"--press forward and untie your ankles. Wrap your arms around me and hang on so you won't fall when I get you loose. I'll hold onto your legs and lower you to the ground."

Humiliation flooded her as the man stood and reached for her feet. Her breasts pressed against his flat stomach as she tucked her face between his legs. She hugged his muscular thighs and tried not think about the man's anatomy, in particular, the part located under her chin.

Maggie felt his grip around her knees as he tugged on the ropes. Then she felt a warm palm sliding between her thighs.

"Hey!" she hollered, kicking her legs. "What kind of pervert are you?"

The ropes loosened, and her knees connected with his shoulders as her feet were freed. She kept kicking. Considering the luck she'd had recently, the man was probably a serial killer. The panic she'd felt earlier returned a hundredfold.

"Hey, what the--"

He tilted, his sneakered feet scrambling for purchase on the wet grass. His grip on her legs tightened and Maggie had no choice but to hold on for dear life as they both tumbled into the puddle.

Maggie spluttered as gritty water showered her face and filled her mouth. Since she'd landed on top, she had the advantage. She quickly turned around and plunked herself squarely on the man's chest with enough force to expel whatever air he had left in his lungs--which couldn't be much considering how hard he'd smacked into the ground. Mud and grass covered his face and hair and most of his clothes. A pair of blue eyes blinked at her as he tried to draw in a breath.

Maggie put her hand against his throat, pressing against his windpipe. "Don't move,

buster, I know karate." He didn't need to know she'd learned it from watching *Kung Fu* reruns. One thing Gran had taught her was when you didn't know what to do, improvise.

"I surrender," he gasped out, holding up his hands.

"Who are you?"

"Alex Ross."

"What are you doing here?"

"Rescuing a crazy woman."

Maggie knew she was overreacting. It wasn't like the man had actually touched her in an inappropriate place--but maybe he hadn't gotten the chance. On the other hand, he had rescued her. On the other *other* hand, she'd never been so embarrassed in her life--not even when Harrison had ditched her at the altar.

She leaned forward. "I appreciate you helping me out, but copping a feel was rude."

"Copping a feel? I was trying to adjust your shorts over the view."

What view? Oh heavens. Maggie realized her loose shorts--the biggest pair she owned and had chosen for comfort--must have fallen down and revealed her underwear. Her thong underwear. She looked down at her so-called rescuer. Oh yeah. He had been concerned about her indecent exposure when her face had been a mere inch from his--. "You shouldn't have looked," she accused.

His brows rose as if to say, "How could I not?" Then he grinned, his teeth flashing white through his muddied features. His stomach muscles flexed under her rear end and Maggie realized she hadn't fooled him with her karate routine. He was allowing her to sit on his chest and bully him.

The realization came too late. Before Maggie could scramble off, he grabbed her wrists and flipped her onto her back. She should be scared. Terrified. Yelling murder or help or fire or something.

His eyes held a teasing glint, and his body was relaxed, not rigid with tension or intent to harm. What an odd thing to realize about a serial killer, she thought dazedly. She probably had a concussion.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Maggie didn't answer, instead she considered her options. She could knee him, she supposed. She flexed her fingers, noting that his hands lightly held her wrists.

For a long moment they stared at each other, and Maggie wished a fissure would open beneath her. A woodsy scent--his cologne--filtered into her senses. She heard the buzz of bees around the honeysuckle bushes, the start of a lawnmower, the rapid beating of her own heart.

"Maybe you're a cat burglar." His grin widened. "A bungling cat burglar. I need to hold you for questioning until Mrs. Simms gets home."

Mrs. Simms? Her grandmother! Relief coasted through her. If he knew Gran, then maybe he was a neighbor's grandson or gardener or—

"Maggie!" Gran's voice trilled. "I see you've met Alex."

The man rolled off Maggie. She balanced on her elbows and stared at her grandmother.

Gran smiled down as if Maggie and Alex weren't covered in mud. She acted as though she caught this Alex person hovering over her only granddaughter all the time.

"Alex, er, Mr. Ross is my new handyman. He's going to help us out around the house."

"What?"



"Dear, don't you think you ought to get changed?" Gran's gaze transferred from Maggie's mud-spattered clothes to the ladder. "What were you doing?"

"Painting the shutters," answered Maggie. She glanced at Alex, who had stripped off his white t-shirt, turned it inside out, and used it to wipe his face. The curly brown hair on his chest narrowed down his washboard stomach, the silky line of hair disappearing into the jeans. Tan, muscled, and good-looking. She looked at her grandmother and frowned. Suspicion crept through Maggie like a cautious spider. What was going on?

"Why do you need a handyman?"

Gran waved airily. "To do...things. You know."

"No, I don't know. Besides, I live here now so I can help you."

"You'll be bored senseless doing manual labor, Maggie dear. Besides, aren't you supposed to be looking for a job?"

The reminder about her joblessness led to another reminder about her newly-acquired single status which led to the yucky, achy, crappy feelings she'd been fighting for the last six weeks. She wanted to dive back into the puddle and stay there. Instead, she stood and wiped away the mud on her arms and stomach.

Gran tsked tsked, then made shooining motions at Maggie. "Go take a shower, Maggie Lynn Conrad. Alex, you need one, too. Go on, now, both of you!"

"Mrs. Simms, are you suggesting I shower with this woman?"

"Alex, you devil!" Gran slapped her thigh and hooted.

Maggie whirled around.

Alex's mouth quirked up at the corners, amusement dancing in his blue eyes. He shrugged. "If it means keeping my job, I'll suffer through it," he said sadly.

Maggie fumed at the pitiful look he sent her. It was laced with just enough lasciviousness to make her want to poke out his eyes.

"Of course, you won't be shower-sharing with my granddaughter. It's not proper." Gran winked at Maggie. "Fun, but definitely not proper."

Maggie escaped to the back of the house. She trudged up the three steps and opened the screen door. She plopped down on the floor of the enclosed porch and began to take off her dirty socks and shoes.

Something about Alex Ross bothered her. He was too...handsome, she decided. And he had an irritating dimple near the right corner of his mouth.

Until recently, Maggie believed people had good intentions. She believed in giving everyone the benefit of a doubt and third chances, but after Harrison's double betrayal, she'd seriously re-evaluated those beliefs.

The problem with her, she'd realized, was she had "doormat" written in invisible ink on her forehead. No more! Alex Ross set off all kinds of internal alarms. She'd keep an eye on him. If he displayed one evil tendency she would call the police or mace him or something.

The door screeched and Maggie looked up. Alex entered, his muscled torso gleaming with sweat and dirt. She tore her gaze from the view and concentrated on the knot in the tennis shoe strings.

"Need help?"

Startled, Maggie dropped the strings. "No thanks."

He tilted his head. "I'm sorry I saw your underwear."

"If you don't mind," she said, again gripping her slimy shoe strings, "I don't want to discuss my underwear."

"Red's my favorite color."

Maggie pretended not to hear him.

"Give me a second chance. After all, you had a bird's eye view of my--"

"Don't say another word," she cried, yanking off the shoe. She stood and pointed the no longer white Keds at him. "I wasn't anywhere near *it*."

"It?" His brows rose, his blue eyes bright with merriment.

Obviously, he liked teasing, no, tormenting her. Maggie sucked in a breath. She knew this was a losing battle and decided to withdraw. She dropped the shoe and it thunked to the porch. "I appreciate your rescue. Really."

**"Ms. Conrad?"**

**At the question in his voice, she dared another look into his eyes. Sincerity had replaced the amusement. "I'm sorry about trying to fix your shorts. I shouldn't have touched you like that."**

**Surprise fluttered through her. The man appeared to be an endless contradiction. A man who relished teasing her with innuendos one moment, only to repent the next.**

**"Apology accepted." She turned to go into the house, but stopped, clenching the door's metal handle. No more Ms. Nice Girl. Just because he had a cute dimple and big blue eyes didn't mean Alex Ross was a good guy. Harrison had been a good guy; too, right up to the moment he'd stolen her job and her dream of a husband and family. She looked at Alex over her shoulder. "Don't get too comfortable, Mr. Ross, you won't be around for long."**

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## **Chapter Two**

**The next afternoon, Maggie cornered Gran in the kitchen. Leaning against the blue-tiled counter, she watched her grandmother stir soy sauce on the sizzling contents in the wok.**

**"How can you afford a handyman?" she asked.**

**"I'm rich. Besides, you've been piddling around here instead of getting on with your life. You need to forget about Hairyman."**

**"Harrison," corrected Maggie. Had it only been six weeks since he'd eloped with Sheila of the Tight Leopard-print Pants while Maggie waited in a suffocating white lace wedding dress with 600 people she didn't know? At least his desertion meant giving back the ugly family heirloom engagement ring. She didn't mind the three-karat diamond--just the gold "spinners" attached, each with one tiny gold letter, which spelled "Dimmons." Maggie shuddered. As heir to Dimmons and Sons Toy Company, Harrison had passed on the one-of-a-kind betrothal ring his great-grandfather had created in a fit of romantic whimsy. After she returned the ring, she received a pink slip for her trouble.**

**Harrison effectively dumped her twice.**

Maggie put her chin on her hand and leaned forward on the counter, watching her grandmother stir green stringy things with yellow round things. She thumped the counter, then held up her hand. "I swear on Grandpappy Joe's grave I won't date my boss ever again."

"Good for you."

Maggie watched Gran add a handful of brown thingies. "Okay, I give up. What the heck is this stuff?"

"Dinner."

"You got this from the home shopping channel, didn't you?"

Gran stirred in some white chunks. "What if I did? I've always wanted a wok."

"But do you know what you're cooking?"

Gran harrumphed and turned a narrowed gaze on her. "Missy, I've been cooking for sixty-seven years. I don't need your smart-aleck advice. Why don't you see if Alex has arrived yet?"

"Alex?" Unease skittered down her spine. She hadn't seen him since yesterday's ladder incident. According to Gran, Alex Ross had arrived to check out the house to see what needed attention.

"He's moving in today. I invited him to eat with us."

Maggie clutched the counter. "What do you mean moving in? He's going to live here?"

"In the garage apartment. Won't it be nice to have a man at our beck and call?"

Renewed suspicion coursed through Maggie. "How much are you paying him?"

"None of your business," Gran sniffed. "That's between me and Alex."

"For heaven's sake!" Maggie rolled her eyes.

The sound of tires crunching on gravel alerted them to the arrival of a car. *Alex*. Maggie stiffened, her disbelieving gaze clashing with Gran's

determined one. "I don't like it."

"My house, my rules. Now go see if Alex needs help."

"Help Alex? That would be a switch." He made her feel antsy...nervous...vulnerable. Okay, if she were a teensy bit honest with herself, she'd admit her unease had to do with the way her pulse jumped when she thought about him.

*Stop being silly, Maggie.* He's just a handyman. Probably. Maybe he was a con man. Elderly people were easy targets for society's leeches. Maybe he planned to suck as much money as possible from Gran before moving on to his next victim. For some reason, her brain wouldn't reconcile this image with Alex Ross. Try harder, she ordered herself.

She had lousy judgment when it came to men. Otherwise, she wouldn't have fallen for a jerk like Milton. And if she started getting mushy toward Alex, she'd lose sight of his potential villainy.

Maggie left the kitchen, taking reluctant steps toward the front door. The doorbell rang. At least he hadn't walked in like he owned the place. *He had manners*, a tiny, chiding voice said, *unlike you*.

To catch the warm spring breeze, the front door had been propped open. Alex waited on the other side of the screen door, a duffle bag in his right hand and a suitcase in his left. His mere presence sent a jolt of awareness through her. Damn. Villain, she reminded herself. Until he proved otherwise.

"Hello, Ms. Conrad," he greeted as she pushed open the screen door. He stepped inside, his chest brushing against hers as he angled through sideways. Tingles of sensation fluttered across her. Maggie drew a deep breath. She saw Alex's lips quirk.

"How's it hanging?" he asked.

"Ha. Ha." Maggie let go of the metal handle and the door banged shut. She folded her arms over her chest and silently dared him to tease her again.

His half-smile slid into a grin. He held up one bag.

"Where to?"

"Follow me." Maggie led him down the hallway and into the kitchen. Gran had disappeared, and the contents of the wok had been dumped into a green

bowl shaped like a fish.

"That smells...interesting," said Alex.

"You probably don't want to know what it is."

They entered the screened porch, and Maggie opened the back door, jumping over the three concrete steps. She heard Alex's sneakers squeaking through the dewy grass as she led him across the yard.

Though dusk still stretched purple fingers across a gold and red streaked sky, night sounds had already emerged, the typical Oklahoma symphony of chirping crickets, wind-rustled grass, and old-house creaks.

The artist in Maggie loved when beauty surprised her senses, wrapping around her, singing to her soul. She paused, closed her eyes, and breathed in the moment.

"Beautiful view."

Maggie opened her eyes. Alex's blue gaze was focused on her, though she was sure he'd been talking about the sky. "Dusk is my favorite time of day."

"How do you feel about mornings?"

Something about his gaze made her cheeks heat. "Next favorite."

"I'll remember that."

Maggie and Alex crossed the yard, then climbed the rickety wood staircase attached, barely, to the outside of the garage. The door protested its opening with a loud screech. Maggie went inside, flipping on the light switch next to the door. When had Gran cleaned up the place? The simple furnishings sparkled and glimmered. A bed, dresser, and desk made up the front area. In back was a small utilitarian kitchen. Maggie pointed to another door.

"That's the bathroom. Your closet's over there."

Alex placed the bag on the bed and the suitcase near the dresser. "You don't like me, do you?"

"I don't know you."

He crossed his arms, and the muscles bunched nicely.

Goodness, the man was built. His knowing smile made her squirmy, so she turned and checked the dresser for dust.

"I'm a decent guy."

"That remains to be seen," said Maggie. Her heart thudded in her chest, and she twisted her hands.

He stared at her, his blue eyes wide with a sudden understanding. "I make you nervous."

"Do not." The childish retort left her mouth before she could stop it. She put her hands on her hips. "You don't make me nervous. I'm just a cautious person. I reserve judgment."

"Good for you." His smile might have mocked her, but the dimple ruined the effect. Made him cute instead, darn it.

He went to the bed and unzipped the duffle bag. She watched him take out folded t-shirts and jeans. A pair of high tops. An alarm clock. Already familiar--too familiar--with his front, Maggie felt compelled to check out his backside. After all, she wanted to have a balanced view. It was only fair.

His brownish hair, slightly long, looked silky, soft. The muscles in his back moved under his tight white T-shirt. Maggie's gaze dropped lower. His jeans fit perfectly around his rear end and the material molded to his thighs.

He straightened swiftly and looked at her. Heat rose in her cheeks when his lips curved upward. It's almost as if his expression said, *Like what you see? There's more.*

She swallowed her embarrassment, feeling like she'd been caught peeping at him naked through a window. She hugged herself and stepped backwards. "I guess...um...I'll go now."

"So soon?"

Maggie nodded, then raised her chin. "Unless you need help getting the rest of your things?"

"This is it."

"Not a lot," she commented, still wrestling with her mortification and the

funny, wiggly, hot feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"I only have a few basic needs."

"Uh, right. Don't we all." Maggie slapped a hand to her mouth and stifled a groan. "I mean, you know, food and shelter."

"Right." He stepped closer to her. "Food and shelter are very important."

He stood just within her space, close enough to touch, and Maggie sucked in a breath. All the air in the room seemed to disappear. She felt like she stood inside a vacuum, her shallow breathing the only sound, Alex's blue mesmerizing eyes the only sight.

"Villain," said Maggie.

"What?"

The spell between them broke, almost with an audible snap. Maggie felt like she'd escaped from a life-threatening experience. Relief shuddered through her and she inhaled deeply. Then she realized what she'd said. "*Vanilla*. Do you like vanilla ice cream?"

She noticed Alex's expression. His eyes gleamed--much the way a lion's did when looking at a particularly succulent gazelle. Then he shook his head, as if clearing away a thought, and the gleam disappeared. However, his slow smile did nothing to reassure her.

"I love vanilla ice cream."

"Good," said Maggie. "We have chocolate."

Alex laughed. "I like you Maggie Conrad. Would you like to go out?"

"Outside?"

"To dinner."

"No," she said hastily. No way. He was a heartbreak waiting to happen.

"Why not?"

"I...I...just broke up with someone and I've been recovering."



His gaze softened. "Broken heart, huh?"

She nodded, unable to verbalize the lie. Harrison had never possessed her heart. He'd just held the keys to her heart's dreams. "So, you see, I can't," she finished, opening her arms in a gee-there-it-is gesture.

Alex leaned closer and she caught another whiff of his woodsy aftershave that did nothing to disguise his pure masculine smell. He had a strong jaw line, high cheekbones, straight nose, and that dimple.

"The best way to get over a heartache to move forward."

Her gaze jerked from his chin to his eyes. "Forward?"

"A date. Dinner, dancing...and so on."

*And so* unsounded much too vague to Maggie. She couldn't believe she was even having this conversation. She looked at his face again, unable to keep from staring at his lips. Strong, firm looking, designed for kissing the daylights out of someone. She stifled a sigh. Harrison had had enthusiasm but no technique. Maggie knew Alex probably had a technique designed to curl a woman's toes.

She realized Alex stood mere inches from her, his face lowered, his eyes flickering with amusement and some other emotion. What did she know about this man? Nothing. He was a handyman. Probably a drifter. With great lips.

"Sorry, not interested," she said flatly, feeling sharp regret at ending all possibilities of trying out Alex's lips. Kissing Alex would be like sampling one nibble of a Go diva chocolate...it would lead to partaking of the whole box. She knew it would be fulfilling and decadent. Then she'd feel guilty for indulging herself and swear off candy...only to go back for more later.

Yep. Alex was a Godiva chocolate...and she was on a diet.

He drew back. "Well, that's plain enough, Ms. Conrad. Maybe some other time--when you've recovered sufficiently from the relationship blues."

"Don't count it," she warned. She tried to squelch all thoughts and sensations, but her body refused to take orders and continued to react to Alex's presence.

"Dinner will be ready in a few minutes," she said. "Be sure to wash up."

**Gran's been known to check under fingernails."**

**"Yes, ma'am," Alex said, saluting her.**

**She nodded, ignoring his twinkling gaze and smiling mouth. "See you downstairs, then." Maggie turned, telling herself she was not walking faster than usual, and hurried down the stairs.**

**\*\*\***

**Alex turned on his side and plumped the goose down pillow. The bedsprings squeaked and he grimaced. The quiet dark of the room engulfed him and he stilled, looking out the open window at the night.**

**In deference to his new living arrangements, he wore boxer shorts, but he usually slept in the nude. He missed his waterbed. A lot.**

**In fact, he wished now he had turned down Mrs. Simms...Victoria, he mentally amended, when she'd offered room and board.**

**At the time, he thought the arrangements proved ideal. He'd be able to legitimately come and go in the house and not be under suspicion. He hadn't counted on Maggie.**

**He sighed, adjusted his position again, and tugged at the annoying boxer shorts. Maggie. His body reacted to the mere thought of the bewitching woman. He'd wanted to kiss her this afternoon.**

**He'd never reacted to a woman with such...intensity. He had felt lust before. Hell, he would even admit to falling in love a time or two. But none of it had felt like this.**

**Alex pounded the pillow again, and gave up trying to fluff it. He scooted off the bed and moved to the window, looking out into the backyard. The branches of a huge oak tree rose to meet the night sky; it's leafy foliage blocking part of the glittering stars. The creak of a rope made him peer closer and he saw an old tire swing twirling. His imagination conjured a view of a naked Maggie, slipping long, tan legs through the tire, her firm bottom flexing as she adjusted to a comfortable position. She'd grab the rope, and hang back, just enough to show pert, beautiful breasts.**

**She'd wear those lacy red thong panties, he mused, and he'd push her on that silly swing, higher and higher.... Alex cursed as he realized the effect his little fantasy was having on his body.**

**Hellfire.**

**Think ice, he told himself. Glacier. North Pole. *Antarctica* . The whole concept of ice did nothing to cool his ardent response to the image he had of Maggie. Stop it, Alex. She's not interested. Hot sex with her isn't going to happen.**

**He waited, emptying his mind of other lurid thoughts, allowing the tepid breeze to wash over his body. Maybe he just needed a cold drink with a hundred ice cubes. Maybe a two-day cold shower. Alex smiled ruefully. Yeah, right. He'd asked her out without thinking it through. He hadn't accepted a job he didn't need so he could date Maggie. He had work to do.**

**Despite her strong reaction to him, Alex knew Maggie suspected him of some chicanery. She wouldn't be pleased with his false pretenses.**

**Anyway, Alex sensed Maggie was not a one-night stand kind of woman. He suspected she wasn't even a have-an-affair kind of woman. No, Maggie Conrad had an invisible sign that read "For Long Term Commitment Only."**

**Alex avoided marriage-minded women. Especially after Shannon. And Amanda. And Cecily.... Alex frowned. The list of women trying to get their hooks in him kept growing.**

**Alex rubbed his chin and averted his gaze from the tire swing lest his mind create another Maggie fantasy. Tomorrow he'd begin his research. Maggie would, he hoped, have something to do other than stay around the house and watch him. At dinner, Victoria had mentioned attending an all-day "Ultimate Bingo" match tomorrow.**

**Yawning, Alex crawled back into bed, making the mental lists he always did when he started a new project. When he fell asleep, however, the lists disappeared. Maggie invaded his dreams, a laughing, green-eyed nymph...who gleefully bashed him in the head with a tire swing.**

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## **Chapter Three**

**"What are you doing?"**

**Maggie's suspicious voice startled Alex. Crouched on the kitchen floor, he'd been examining the rickety drawer slides. As he jerked up, his head**

connected with the underside of the drawer. Muttering a curse, he withdrew from the cabinet and looked up.

Maggie stood less than a foot away, nibbling her lower lip. Her eyes sparkled with laughter, but she didn't crack a smile. She wore pink shorts and a crop top. Her bare midriff was tan and lean. His gaze was drawn to the dimple of her belly button. Oh, man. He'd better not let himself think about anything below her belly button. Or anything above it.

Alex rose, went to the refrigerator, and removed a tray of ice cubes. He popped out one, put it in his mouth, and returned the tray to the fridge. He'd been under Maggie's surveillance all morning. This was his third ice cube in an hour.

"Why don't you go away?" he mumbled. The ice cube occupied his whole mouth. He crunched down, grateful for the coolness sluicing down his throat.

Maggie put a hand to her ear. "What was that?"

"Nothing," he said, swallowing the rest of the ice. She shrugged, and glanced at the cabinet. "If you're looking for the Will, Gran keeps it in her bedroom closet. And she's not the type to tape envelopes of cash under the kitchen drawers."

"Darn." Alex snapped his fingers. "What about stocks or bonds? Gold coins?"

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. "You're joking."

Yeah." He grinned. "You catch on quick."

Red crept into her cheeks. She hadn't yet gotten around to accusing him of taking the family silver, but he had a feeling she would.

"I'm not here to filch anything." He paused, gauging her wary gaze. "Unless I could possibly steal your affections."

The red in her cheeks deepened. She put her hands on her hips and tossed her ponytail. "Steal anything, buster, and I'll call the cops."

He laughed, and she looked away, taking a sudden interest in the stove. She turned back, her expression one of annoyance. "Just don't break anything, okay?" She spun around and stalked out of the kitchen.

Alex watched the sway of her hips. The shorts molded her firm behind and showed off her long sleek legs. He groaned. He wasn't going to survive. He opened the freezer and took out another ice cube.

\*\*\*

Maggie found Gran in what she privately called the "Home Shopping Channel Rejects" room. It used to be the sewing room, but the sewing machine had long since disappeared under the growing pile of junk: Elvis prints; neon-glow blankets; flower-shaped candy bowls; and something called The Atomizer. Gran claimed the pretzel-shaped contraption strengthened thigh muscles. Late morning sunlight streamed through the neon pink blinds, giving a rosy hue to the junk crowded into every available space. Gran pawed through a bright purple trunk, muttering to herself.

"Alex is looking through the kitchen cabinets," announced Maggie.

"He's fixing the squeaky drawers." Gran tossed out an object.

A black high heel barely missed Maggie. She jumped out of the way of a tennis racket and a crocheted doll. "Gran! What are you doing?"

"I gotta find my lucky bingo marker. It's Ultimate Bingo today, you know. Betty Lee's going with me to the Senior Citizens Center. I need all the luck I can get to beat that hag."

"Betty Lee is your best friend."

"Hah! She's an uppity old broad who dyes her hair. Doesn't even look good as a blonde."

Maggie rolled her eyes. "About Alex...."

Gran looked over her shoulder at Maggie. "Why should I let him go?"

Despite the fact she hadn't suggested Alex be "let go," she bristled. "Because he's...he's...incompetent." After all, he did bump his head on the drawer. Handymen should know not to do that. "And have you noticed he eats ice? A lot of it."

"Water's not exactly scarce. We're not going to miss a

few ice cubes. Besides you know what they say about chewing

ice."

Maggie waited, but Gran only continued her frantic search. A knitting needle sailed through air, followed by a large stuffed teddy bear. She ought to cancel the cable. Her grandmother was addicted to buying useless products. Maggie sighed. "Okay, I give up. What do they say about eating ice?"

"Ah-ha!" Gran triumphantly held up the neon green bingo marker. She rose and dusted off her hands.

Maggie watched as her grandmother straightened the rest of her "bingo" outfit--a mauve pantsuit, short-sleeved white blouse, and low-heeled white pumps. She wore her pearl necklace and earrings. Her grandmother looked charming and fragile--someone right out of a Hallmark card commercial. Affection bubbled through her. Gran grinned. "Chomping ice is a sign of sexual frustration."

The effervescent Love of Grandma fizzled.

"I don't believe you said that."

"It's true." Gran nodded sagely. "I've been an ice nibbler for years."

"Heavens above," sputtered Maggie. "I--I don't want to know. You're just making that up."

"Nope." Gran's eyes twinkled. "What's the matter, Maggie? You feel an urge to crunch some cubes?"

"Certainly not."

"There's another cure for sexual frustration, you know." Gran tilted her head. "You do know, don't you?"

"I'm not discussing it with you," replied Maggie.

"Why ever not? I was doing it long before you were born. I could probably tell you a thing or two about—"

"Gran! I refuse to talk about my sex life or lack thereof."

"Should I come back later?"

Maggie whirled at the sound of Alex's voice. The glint in his eye told her he'd

heard enough of the conversation to be amused.

"We're just talking about Maggie's--"

"Feet." Maggie bit her lower lip. "They ache."

Gran chortled. "It's her feet that ache, all right."

A car horn blared. Gran said, "That's Betty Lee. I'll see you all later."

Maggie saw the calculating look Gran sent Alex and she wanted to trip her grandmother. Not a very granddaughterly thought, she knew. Gran swept past them and out the door. Her footsteps clattered down the hall, then the front door banged shut. Maggie clasped her hands together and stared at Alex. He wore jeans and a black T-shirt, which defined his physique in a saliva-inducing show of muscles. He hooked his thumbs through the jean's belt loops and rocked back on his heels. She inhaled a fortifying breath, then plastered on a smile. "Well. So. I'll just go...do something."

The smile curving Alex's handsome face did not reassure her. She wished he wasn't blocking the door so she could escape without getting near him. Her knees wobbled when she got too close to him. Surely, if she attempted to slide past, her knees would collapse, she'd topple over, and break her neck.

"You can get back to work." She shooed him toward the door.

"I'm on a break."

"Oh." She felt jittery. And it was Alex's fault. She pursed her lips. "Well, I need to go..."

"Do something. I heard you." He spread out his arms. "No one's stopping you."

*You are*, she wanted to shout. She took a step forward, but Alex blocked her.

She stopped. "What?"

"Your feet. You shouldn't walk on them if they ache."

"They're fine. Much better now, thank you."

"I couldn't let you ruin your insteps or your soles," said Alex in a too-sympathetic voice. His blue eyes gleamed wickedly. "I'll be happy to

assist you."

"How?" she asked. "I mean--no."

"I give really great...*foot*," he whispered, leaning close to her. "It'll cure your aches."

Maggie wondered who'd cured his aches, then remembered they were talking about feet. Weren't they? She shook her head, hoping the motion would realign her thought processes.

She opened her mouth to tell him no, then caught his gaze. Blue fire dared her to get burned.

Her mouth went dry. Her knees wobbled. Oh hell. "My feet are off-limits. So are my aches."

He smiled. The dimple appeared. Maggie briefly wondered about tasting that dimple, then realized she barely knew the man. She wasn't putting her lips anywhere near that darn indentation. Instead, she tossed him an impatient look.

"I'm hungry." She saw his eyebrows rise. "For food," she clarified. "C'mon, I'll fix sandwiches."

Alex gestured for her to go through the door first, but gave her little room to maneuver. Her breasts brushed against his chest as she edged out the door. Her nipples hardened and her skin tingled and her breath shallowed. She hurried to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator,

hoping the cool air would revive her. As she grabbed the lunch fixings, Alex leaned against the counter. "You're grandmother said you were a painter."

"I'm good at slapping on a coat of paint." Maggie intentionally misunderstood him. Her artistic endeavors were intensely personal and she wasn't about to discuss them with Alex. Harrison had glanced at her abstract painting of a garden and had said, "Very nice. What is it?"

Maggie felt Alex's gaze on her, but she concentrated on the sandwiches. She spread mustard on the bread slices, then unwrapped the ham. "So what did you do before becoming a handyman?"

"This and that." An emotion flickered in Alex's eyes as he took the sandwich Maggie offered him. Guilt, she thought. Alex looked guilty. Of what? Maggie



didn't want to believe he'd do something reprehensible. But then she hadn't believed staid and proper Harrison would dump her, either. She renewed her vow: She would not be a doormat. She opened the refrigerator and took out a couple of sodas. "In a glass or straight from the can?"

"I'd like mine with ice," said Alex. "Lots of it."

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Alex entered the office, rounded the corner of the one-of-a-kind oak desk, walked past the chrome bar that housed expensive wines, and dodged the mini-conference table with its comfortable wingback chairs. He paused before the large curtainless window. Working on the thirty-second floor had scenic advantages. He looked at downtown and watched busy ant-like people scurry around corners and rush into buildings. Cars turned left or right into the one-way streets that criss-crossed the area. It was Friday, his official day off as Victoria's handyman.

Alex returned to the desk, sat down, and leaned back the brown leather chair. He propped his feet on the cherry wood desk. He scanned the *Daily Times*, and began the morning ritual he'd developed over the years. His orange juice and bagel sat untouched next to the pile of office memos and file folders. Morning sunshine filtered across the huge, dark-paneled office. The soft light crept over his desk as he spread out the folded newspaper. Alex read the same paragraph three times before he gave up. The image of Maggie hanging upside down from the ladder

intruded on his thoughts. She'd probably never forgive him for seeing her underwear. Lacy red. A seductive color that had become his favorite. He grinned as he remembered the way she'd plopped on top of him and threatened him with that pitiful karate chop to the throat as if she were a Titan instead of a munchkin.

Even with mud spattering her face, he'd seen the freckles on her nose. Her red hair had been in a ponytail. In fact, he hadn't seen her with it down. He wondered how she'd look with it down around her bare shoulders. Alex reigned in his thoughts. Don't go there, he warned his libido. He would not think about how close her luscious mouth had been to--damn. His blood stirred, pure lust claiming him. Red underwear, sassy lips, and fathomless green eyes should not be enough to justify the raw heat coursing through him. Had it been that long since he'd been with a woman? He looked down at the newspaper, staring at the print. She'd probably use that fake karate chop if she found out he wasn't really a handyman. He didn't like being in Victoria Simms' home under false pretenses. But he had no intent to harm--only the

desire to observe. To research.

Alex heard the click of the doorknob turning, then the door crashed against the wall. His brother entered and stalked toward him.

Splaying his hands on the desk, Simon leaned forward. "What the hell are you doing, Alex? My secretary just told me the infomercial was canceled."

"I'm yanking the product, Simon."

"Are you crazy? We just spent six months and thousands of dollars coming up with the damn thing!"

"I started this company so I could invent things that help people. America does not need another version of an ice cream scoop."

Simon's blue eyes widened. "An ice cream scoop? It's more than an ice cream scoop." His face smoothed into the buy-this-product-because-I'm-handsome look. That look was why Simon had taken over the public relations and advertising of the business. Simon possessed the uncanny ability of turning every disadvantage into an opportunity. Alex knew his brother's competitive

nature had pushed the company to the industry's forefront. "Alex, this scoop is the next thing in kitchen convenience. The interchangeable cups make it unique. You can use the small one for melon balls and the large one for ice cream. The attachment is pure genius! One click of a

switch--"

"I invented it," interrupted Alex. "I know what it does."

Simon studied him, concern lighting his blue eyes. "Okay, you're burned out. You need a vacation. Look, I'll re-authorize the infomercial--"

"No."

Alex sighed. Restlessness gnawed at him. He'd lost touch with "average." He'd lost touch with his roots, with himself. "I haven't lived an ordinary life since...."

"Don't glorify the macaroni-and-cheese days, bro. Remember the basement apartment we lived in? The cockroaches were the size of Buicks."

Alex rubbed his jaw and realized he'd forgotten to shave this morning. Alex turned and met his brother's gaze. "How's Danielle?"

Simon's frown smoothed at the mention of his wife's name. "Tired. Happy. Ready to give birth." He smiled. "A few more weeks and I'll be a papa."

An emotion snaked through Alex. Oh man. He was jealous. Jealous as hell of his brother's happiness. The kind of happiness that continued to elude Alex. He wasn't interested in marriage--or even in finding a wonderful woman. But he still wanted...what?

"I'll keep the Automatic Scoop De Loop on wraps--for now." Simon leaned on the desk. "So where have you been this past week?"

"I've been doing research for a new product." Alex crossed to his desk and picked up the newspaper. "I took a job as a handyman."

"You did what?"

"It started a couple of weeks ago. I was in the grocery store and I noticed the trouble the elderly had reaching items on the high shelves. I know who I want to help, but I'm not sure how."

"And being a handyman is going to help?"

"I saw this old woman--Victoria--post an ad. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to do hands-on research."

Simon shook his head. "We pay people to do research."

"It's important to me. I can't explain it. I need...inspiration."

"Geesh, Alex. Why can't you go to Mexico, drink margaritas, and look at half-naked women for inspiration?"

"Not every man thinks giggling airheads with big breasts are inspirational," Alex drawled.

Simon's blond eyebrows rose in disbelief. "You do need a vacation. You're delusional."

Alex smiled. "Just wait and see. Taking this job is the smartest decision I've made in years."

He looked at the paperwork on his desk so Simon wouldn't see the doubts niggling him. Convenience Unlimited's next product would be its greatest. After finishing his research, he would not only return the income Victoria insisted on paying him, he'd give her an idea fee

of some sort. A large fee that would assuage his guilt, delight Victoria, and prove to Maggie his intentions had been honorable all along. Alex relaxed, and shelved the rest of his concerns. As

soon as he found the perfect convenience product, he'd get out of the house and away from Maggie. Then he wouldn't have any problems with his conscience...or his libido.

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## Chapter Four

"I'll take the cuckoo clock and the punch bowl set," Gran said into the phone. Her gaze was glued to the home shopping channel blaring on the television. "Give me one of those apple corers, too."

Alex watched in fascination as Victoria ordered a potato peeler and a cubic zirconia ring. He hoped she was spending her bingo winnings. He frowned. How could she afford all this stuff?

He'd joined her in the living room, which was adjacent to the parlor where he'd been "interviewed" a mere ten days ago. Victoria occupied the comfy pink wingback to the left of the equally pink couch, where he was stretched out. Maggie had spent the last three days avoiding him. He didn't mind...much. She'd apparently decided him trustworthy enough to leave him alone for a while. Unfortunately, his concentration was shot to hell because he couldn't stop thinking about her.

How could he devise the next best thing for the American household if he couldn't even think straight? He sighed.

"Ooh," squealed Victoria. "I need a set of Kookie Cutters."

Alex straightened and looked at the television. Kookie Cutters was his product. He'd designed them over a year ago in a fit of whimsy. They were cookie cutters with a "theme." He'd created several different kinds, but the Birthday Bonanza was his favorite. The largest cutter,

about the size of a cookie sheet, was a birthday cake. The smaller cutters

included shapes of balloons and presents. The idea was to introduce a bit of fun and "art" into parties. Once decorated and arranged, the cookies beat the hell out of plain old cake and ice cream.

"I want the Wild Wedding set," said Victoria. She slanted a look at Alex. "Better include the Baby Bunches set, too."

Unease skittered up his spine. He shifted on the couch, wondering why he had a sudden urge to pack his bags. He shook off the feeling. Guilt did that to a man. He looked at Victoria, who still gleefully ordered items. Why didn't he just tell her and Maggie the truth?

Victoria would probably understand. Maggie probably wouldn't. He shouldn't have let them believe he was a handyman. He should have just asked outright if he could do research in their home. In his experience, though, the minute someone found out he was an inventor, they had an idea they wanted to run by him. People aware of his project would have all sorts of suggestions, he was sure. He knew he wouldn't find inspiration around people who acted either self-conscious or overly helpful.

The only way to find the idea he'd been searching for was to do so in an "untainted" environment. Alex sighed. The minute his research was over, he would tell Victoria and Maggie the truth. He felt like a selfish liar, but he'd live with it. This project meant more than any other he'd attempted, because he'd been slowly losing his edge...no, his *desire* to create. He'd tinkered and fixed and redone things his whole life. For the first time in his thirty-seven years, he

didn't want to make something different or better or new.

And it scared him.

What would he do if he didn't invent? Who would he be without Convenience Unlimited?

"Are you awake, Alex?"

Victoria's question startled him out of his reverie. He looked at her. "Are you finished buying out the world?"

She grinned. "Nope, but I'm done for the night." Her sharp brown eyes studied him. "I know Maggie's been a bit prickly, but she's been through an emotional wringer."

"She told me."

Her gray brows arched. "She told you about the marriage?"

"Marriage?" Alex felt punched in the gut. He figured Maggie had ended a relationship. He hadn't realized she'd been married. He didn't know why the thought disturbed him so much.

"Really, I shouldn't say anything," said Victoria. "Maggie will tell you if she sees fit. But I'm thinking maybe you should know that Harrison--that's her almost husband's name--saw to it that she lost her job."

Almost husband? Alex was confused. This guy sounded like a jerk. Alex didn't like to think about Maggie being hurt. He frowned, then caught Victoria's speculative gaze.

"She thinks the whole thing is her fault." Victoria leaned forward. "That man manipulated her from the very beginning, Alex. Maggie craves security. She wants a home and a family...and love. She thought she'd have those things if she married Harrison."

*Death to Harrison.* Alex swallowed back the knot of anger clogging his throat. "Did she--did she love him?"

Victoria shrugged. "Like I said. You should hear it from her." She stood and stretched. "Time for me to tuck in." She reached down and patted Alex on the shoulder. "You're not at all like Harrison. You're honest and hard working. Maggie will see that soon enough."

Her words froze him and he stared up at her.

"Good night," she said, then she left quietly.

"Damn it," muttered Alex. He stood, clenching and unclenching his fists. Honest and hard working, huh? The room seemed unbearably stuffy. He walked through the house, exiting through the back door in the kitchen. Chirping crickets greeted his entrance onto the enclosed porch. The door leading outside screeched loudly and Alex winced. Stars winked at him from the night sky and a spring breeze teased his senses with the faint scent of honeysuckle. He heard the creak of the tire swing's rope and headed toward the leafy oak tree. A few feet away, he stopped and sucked in a breath. Maggie clung to the tire, her laughter soft as she twirled around and around. Her enticing long legs stretched out, then she grasped the top of the tire and leaned back.

His heart lurched and he took an unsteady step forward. Even with her clothes on, Real Maggie looked so much like Fantasy Maggie that he wanted to run to her and...and...well, he wouldn't think about it.

But he couldn't force himself to leave, either. He watched her, envying the damn tire every time she scooted her sweet little bottom forward and back. He shoved his hands into his pockets and walked to her. "Need a push?"

"Oh!"

He barely registered Maggie's startled expression when the tire swung around, bringing her fabulous legs into brutal contact with him. Pain exploded and he bent over, his breath leaving his body in a strangled whoosh.

"I'm so sorry," cried Maggie. She extracted herself from the swing and hovered at his side, patting his back.

"Do you want to sit down?"

"No," he groaned. "Let me die in peace."

"Oh, Alex. I didn't mean to." Obviously distressed, she moved to stand in front of him and rubbed his shoulders. "What can I do?"

The pain receded to a dull ache and Alex slowly straightened. Thank God she hadn't had more momentum or he'd be prostrate on the ground. He looked down at her. Her eyes were filled with remorse and concern. She continued rubbing his shoulders. He captured her hands and

pressed them to his chest. "That's not where it hurts."

She inhaled sharply as she glanced at his middle. "Well, I'm not rubbing anything down there."

He chuckled. "I didn't intend for you to, Maggie."

Her hands felt small and warm under his. His heart pounded triple time and his throat felt dry. Moonlight trickled through the oak's foliage, but it barely penetrated the cocoon of darkness. He felt like he and Maggie were the only two people in the world. She looked at him, a question in her eyes. Her hands grew restless, but his fingertips stroked the soft skin and she

stilled.

**"I demand compensation for the injury." He drew Maggie closer.**

**"I apologized," she countered in a breathless voice.**

**"You didn't hurt me verbally, you hurt me physically, so words aren't a fair payment."**

**She tried to pull away, but he held on gently, hoping she didn't really want to go. She stopped. "I told you, I'm not going to--"**

**"Kiss me," he interrupted.**

**She stared at him. "W-what?"**

**"It's a simple request," responded Alex, much more casually than he felt. He looped her arms around his neck, relieved when she left them there. He grasped her waist, wishing she'd worn another crop top instead of the sleeveless shirt tucked into her shorts.**

**He wanted to feel her bare skin.**

**The sweet weight of her breasts pressed against him, and despite his recent "accident," his body stirred at her nearness. She looked up at him, almost shyly, and he watched the play of emotions on her face. Alex lowered his head, his mouth only a whisper away, and waited, hoping**

**Maggie would decide his lips were worthy of hers.**

**\*\*\***

**Maggie waited a heartbeat, desperately tempted by Alex's magnificent lips. But then she softly kissed his cheek and moved out of his embrace. She turned away, afraid of the rapid pounding of her heart, afraid of the wobbly feel of her knees, afraid she was terminally attracted to Alex.**

**Leaves tickled by the wind created cavorting shadows on the ground. Maggie watched their dance, slightly mesmerized, as she tried to calm the feelings jittering through her. "I'm sorry about hurting you," she murmured. "It wasn't intentional." Alex's deep voice sounded both reassuring and maddening sensual. "I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable, Maggie."**

**She faced him, forcing a smile to her lips. "I think we should**



discuss...parameters. I know we feel some sort of attraction, but it's not--that is, we can't act on those feelings." She frowned and rubbed her forehead. She wasn't making any sense. The man even affected her sentence structure!

"We can be friends," offered Alex.

Maggie nodded. "Yes. That's a great idea." She approached the concept with both disappointment and relief. He'd offered it quickly enough, though, hadn't he? Especially when he realized he wouldn't get a kiss *ormore* from her.

"I'd like to be friends with you."

She gazed up at him. Unable to discern the emotions on his shadowed features, she decided he sounded sincere. She wanted to believe he truly offered friendship--and so she

put out her hand. "Friends, then."

He shook her hand, then chuckled. You're quite a negotiator. I'm glad we've moved from suspicious handyman to friend."

"I'm still keeping my eye on you," she said quickly. "Gran is a trusting soul, but I'm not."

"Yeah. You're a real toughie."

His soft reprimand made her realize how harsh she must sound. She bit her lip, then squared her shoulders. She'd reserve her judgment of him, but she would not be a marshmallow this time. She would not melt under his charm. She couldn't afford another battering of her heart or her ego.

"I can push you on the swing. As long as you keep your legs tucked under."

Maggie smiled. Exhaustion poured through her bones, and she shook her head, dismayed to feel the oncoming headache. She'd been thinking too much--because of Alex--and the comfort of her bed beckoned. "It's past my bedtime. Good night, Alex."

"Good night, Maggie."

She felt his gaze on her as she walked to the house. Her body reacted immediately. She knew the heat pouring into her was not the typical response to *afriend*.

In her bedroom, Maggie burrowed under a thick quilt. Her head found the plump goose down pillow, and she sighed contentedly. But long after she'd settled in, she stayed awake. What was Alex doing? What was he thinking? Had he been able to fall into bed and sleep?

Stop it!

She closed her eyes, determined to find some rest and forget Alex. Yet it was a long time before she finally slept.

\*\*\*

The phone rang and Maggie groggily opened one eye. It rang again and she groaned. She hadn't slept well. *Ring. Ring. Ring.* She grabbed the receiver. "Hello?"

"Mags! You sound like a grumpy old bear. How are you, darling?"

"Brian?"

"Of course. In town for a few days and ready to party. We'll go to Brookside. I adore the bop spots there."

"It's ..." Maggie tried to read the numbers on the clock and gave up. "Morning."

"It's almost brunch, darling. Mimosas, bagels, and omelets. Interested?"

Maggie usually enjoyed Brian's impromptu visits. He'd been her friend since high school and had become enormously successful in the clothing design business. He lived in New York, but kept an apartment in Tulsa--for reasons that still escaped her. The town and the people in it had not been kind to the man.

However, she wasn't exactly in a brunch mood. "I'll go out with you tonight, Bry, but I'm not leaving my bed. Not even for mimosas and omelets."

"Never were a morning person, were you, Mags? See you at six tonight. Bye."

Maggie hung up the phone. Just as she drifted back to sleep, the sounds of hammering bolted her awake.

\*\*\*

Alex stopped hammering when he felt the tap on his shoulder. He turned around. Maggie was a sight to behold. Her long white T-shirt nightgown read, "Mornings Suck." She wore no bra and he saw the faint outline of her panties. Her hair stuck up as if it were trying to leap off her head. She looked bleary-eyed, puffy, and he wanted to kiss her.

"Not a morning person, huh?"

"I'm going to kill the next person that says that."

"Well, it'll only be morning for another two hours," said Alex.

Maggie rolled her eyes. "Do you have to fix the staircase now?"

"I guess I can risk breaking my neck a few more times."

She sighed. "Do you need any help?"

"Breaking my neck?"

"Repairing the stairs."

Alex laughed. "If you want to help, go see about breakfast. I think your grandmother's cooking something in the wok."

She groaned. "Not the wok."

"Afraid so." He cleared his throat. "It might not be the best time to ask, but my brother and sister-in-law invited me out tonight. I wondered if you'd like to go, too."

Maggie blinked. "You have relatives?"

"Is that so amazing?"

"I just thought...never mind." She bit her lip. "I have plans tonight. I'm sorry."

"It's no big deal," he replied, ignoring the disappointment settling in his stomach. "Maybe another time?"

"Maybe."

Alex's grip tightened on the hammer. "Guess I'll finish this."

"Guess I'll go save breakfast."

They stared at each an endless moment, then Maggie stepped back, turned, and walked away. Alex watched her go, then went back to work, hammering nails into the wood with

more force than required.

\*\*\*

At a quarter till six that evening, Maggie opened the door. Brian entered, carrying at least four sacks. He dropped them and hugged her. He wore blue jeans, black cowboy boots, and a beautiful green silk shirt. His bleached-blond hair was cut short on the sides and spiked on

the top. Unusually handsome, with beautiful green eyes, Brian had plenty of females chasing him. To their everlasting disappointment, Brian was gay.

"You look scrumptious, dear. Now, let's go doll you up."

"What's wrong with me?"

"Your hair, your make-up, and your clothes. Did I leave out anything?" He grinned impishly, revealing dimpled cheeks.

"What are in the bags?"

"The Maggie make-over kit. Some of my new designs. Also make-up and perfume, courtesy of *moi* ." He looked expectantly at her.

She gave in with a laugh. "All right."

"Excellent. You must be as gorgeous as I."

Brian worked his magic and an hour later, Maggie stared at a stranger in the mirror. Her red hair was pulled up in a Grecian style. A gold band glittered from the top and long curls draped her neck. Brian had applied her make-up, making her eyes look sultry, her cheeks slim, and her lips pouty. The outfit, however, skirted the edge of decency. The filmy light green material of the skirt, swirled in layers at mid-thigh. She wore a green body suit--a slightly darker shade than the skirt. It hugged her curves and gave her an amazing amount of cleavage. A jacket made out of the same filmy material

draped her arm. Matching green heels, dangling gold earrings and a gold bracelet twisting up her right arm completed the ensemble.

"I don't recognize me."

"Good. We'll be other people tonight." Brian struck a pose. "I shall be Zeus. You shall be Aphrodite."

Maggie's brows rose and Brian shrugged. "I'm in a Greek mood, darling. Now let's go boogie down."

Even on a weeknight, Peoria Street was crowded, particularly between 31st and 41st, known as Brookside. Brian's garage apartment wasn't far from the area, so they parked his Jaguar and walked a few blocks to where most of the clubs and restaurants were located.

The first club was crowded. The pounding music reverberated loudly and several couples occupied the dance floor. Maggie and Brian squeezed through to the bar and ordered wine spritzers.

"Drink up, darling." He grinned, tipped his glass and drank. Maggie did the same, promising herself a limit of three drinks.

"One dance, then we're street bound," Brian proclaimed. He led her to the dance floor just as a slow tune began. He clasped her waist and Maggie looped her arms around his shoulders. The tension slid from her body, and she began to enjoy herself. She hadn't been out like this

in a long, long time and it felt good. Damn good.

"How many broken hearts have you left behind this time?"

"None." Brian's expression faltered. "Do you wonder why I come back here?"

"Yes."

"True love, darling. Unrequited love, actually. I've never given up on him, but...ah, it is so sweet and so painful. And I simply can't stop myself."

"I'm sorry."

Brian looked at her, his smile gentle. "Do not pity me, dearest. It is better to know love and suffer its arrows than to never know it at all."

His bittersweet acceptance of the situation tore at Maggie. At the same time, she felt at a loss to comfort him and a strange jealousy. She hadn't known the kind of love Brian spoke of. Her sudden yearning for it scared her. Is that why she'd settled for a life with Harrison? Because she didn't feel miserably in love?

The doors to the club opened and a jumble of people entered, laughing and talking. Maggie glanced at them, then froze. Her stiff posture alerted Brian, who craned his neck

around. "What? Did you see a movie star? A ghost? An ex-lover?"

"None of the above."

Maggie squashed the urge to duck her head and scurry away. Discreetly, she watched the tall man in khaki pants and blue silk shirt escort the leggy brunette to a table next to the railing that surrounded the dance floor. The flash of his smile made Maggie's heart ache.

"Don't keep me in suspense, darling! Who is it?"

"Just a guy. Gran hired him as a handyman. He's here with some bimbo. I don't like him. Not really. And--" she stopped because her voice trembled.

"Oh my." Brian whirled them around so that Maggie's back was to Alex. Where is he?"

"Blue shirt, khaki pants, devastating smile."

"Got him. Honey, he's gorgeous! Well, what shall we do about this?"

"Nothing. Let's get out of here."

Maggie caught the look on Brian's face and grimaced. "Forget it. Don't do anything. He and I are just friends."

"Delude yourself, darling, but I'm not buying it."

Brian whirled again, and Maggie realized he'd danced them practically next to Alex's table. Before she could react, Alex looked up from his intimate conversation with the brunette. She knew the moment he recognized her. His look went from appreciation to shock. His blue eyes widened and his mouth dropped open as he took in her appearance. Brian chose that moment to

draw Maggie deeper into his embrace and kiss her neck.

Alex's eyes narrowed dangerously and his jaw clenched. He rose from the table, said something to his date, and made his way toward them.

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## Chapter Five

Brian laughed. He swung Maggie around, and led them into the dancing crowd. "Don't look so stricken, darling. He's jealous."

"Be serious," she hissed. "He's only going to say hello. Let's leave!"

"Why are we running away if he's only going to say hello?"

"Shut up, Brian."

"A bottle of Asti Spumante says he follows us."

"It's a bet. Now get me the hell out of here."

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Alex cut through the gyrating dancers, unable to see Maggie or her date. His gut churned when he thought about that blonde bastard nibbling her neck. She didn't want to date *him*, but it was apparently okay to go out to clubs with an Adonis, looking as if she'd just walked off the pages of *Vogue*. Alex fought to control the emotions twisting inside him. What the hell was wrong with him?

They had vanished. With a groan of frustration, he stopped searching and returned to the table. Danielle stared at him with raised eyebrows.

"What?" he asked.

"I've never seen you this way. Who is she?"

Alex grimaced. "No one."

"Ah."

He sighed, unable to get the image of Maggie and Adonis out of his mind. "She said she didn't want to date. She wants to be friends. With me."

"You're terribly worked up over no one," said Danielle as she sipped her juice.

"Where's Simon?"

"Still on the phone, I imagine." Danielle smiled. "You don't have to talk about it. Have you heard Simon's latest inspiration for our daughter's name?"

Alex tried not to look relieved at the change of subject. He relaxed a little. "I'm scared to ask."

"Pandora. We'd call her Pannie."

"Ugh. No niece of mine will answer to Pannie. What is he thinking?"

"He's not." She looked up, her wife radar obviously alerted. "I see Simon. Why don't you go on? We won't wait for you too long...just in case you find your friend."

Alex smiled. "Thanks, sis. Simon's a lucky man."

"He certainly is."

Alex kissed Danielle's cheek, bypassed Simon, and left the club. He thought he saw the vibrant green of Maggie's dress through the people lingering on the sidewalk. He followed that spot of green to another club a block away. This one wasn't as crowded and he spotted Maggie at a table in the back area.

A young man approached him. "Would you like to dance?"

"Huh?"

He wiggled his hips. "You know, bee bop, hip hop?"

Alex blinked, unable to form an answer. His brain fumbled to understand the situation.

The man peered at Alex, then shook his head. "Such a waste of a heterosexual. They don't call this club *Gay Paradise* for nothing." He pointed to the sign above Alex's head.



**"Thanks," said Alex hoarsely as sudden comprehension hit him. "But I think I'll hang out for awhile, anyway."**

**"Let me know if you change your mind."**

**Alex wiped the sweat from his upper lip. What was Maggie doing here? He scanned the room. Maggie had left the table, but her date remained sipping a drink with an umbrella in it. He stalked to the table, annoyed when the smiling blonde Adonis greeted him with a genial nod. Alex sat down, resisting the urge to ram his fist down the guy's throat.**

**"I'm Zeus," the man said. "I noticed you chasing my Maggie around. She's Aphrodite tonight. Goddess of Love."**

**"Clever."**

**"I thought so," Zeus said brightly. "As I said to Maggie when I helped her into her clothes--"**

**"Excuse me?" interrupted Alex. "You helped Maggie into her clothes?"**

**"It only seemed right since I helped her out of them."**

**Anger pumped through Alex's veins as he envisioned this good-looking Lothario putting his hands on Maggie. Another emotion pulled at him, a deep ache he recognized as hurt. He had wanted to be the one to make love to her, but she had rejected him, and chosen someone else. His anger fizzled. He wasn't being fair; he had no rights to her.**

**He glanced at Zeus. "You're a lucky bastard."**

**"Aren't I? By the way, did I mention I'm gay?"**

**For a minute the words didn't register, then Alex glared at Zeus.**

**"Brian Lettison. Best friend, confidante, and all-around-wonderful guy."**

**Alex clasped Brian's offered hand. "Alex Ross. I should kill you."**

**"But that would take time, wouldn't it? And you've obviously wasted enough. What happened to the brunette?"**

**"She's my sister-in-law."**

**"What a relief. I don't think Maggie noticed the woman was pregnant or**

she'd be even more upset." Brian's gaze flicked over Alex's shoulder. "Beware, the Ice Queen approacheth."

Alex swiveled in the chair and saw the cautious arrival of Aphrodite. "Hello, Maggie."

"Hello, Alex." Her voice sounded cool, and her expression revealed only a mild interest in his presence. He tapped down the emotions rioting through him. She was so beautiful. A flowery scent infiltrated his senses, and underneath, the subtle scent of Maggie. His mouth dried and he swallowed the nervous knot in his throat.

"Well, Mags, I'll leave you to your doom. I'll expect the Asti Spumante tomorrow at lunch." Brian grinned, obviously unrepentant for his nettling of Alex.

"So, Alex, do you frequent *Gay Paradise* often?"

The sarcasm in her voice set his teeth on edge. "I followed you here. I wanted to meet Zeus."

She stared at him, her gaze enigmatic. "You've met him. I'd hate to keep you from your date. I'm sure she's expecting you."

Her nonchalance irritated him. He curbed his desire to kiss the daylights out of her. Instead, he plucked a curl from her shoulder. "You look beautiful. The dress is terrific."

He saw her slight shudder as he used the curl to trace her collarbone. She wet her lips, and he bit back a groan. Her lush mouth begged for a kiss, and even though she probably didn't know it, her green eyes telegraphed a potent desire.

Alex played with the silky tendril of hair, wrapping it around his finger, then dropped it. He stood, his gaze never leaving Maggie's face, and caressed her neck until his fingers reached the fluttering pulse at the base of her throat. Her breath hitched, her lips parted, and no longer able to resist, Alex leaned close.

"I'm not asking this time, Maggie. But if you want me to stop, you better say so now." He cupped the back of her neck and gave her a fraction of a second to respond before capturing her lips. She tasted of mints and alcohol. He traced the seam, and she opened under his tender onslaught.

Alex drank her sweetness, tasting the corners, nibbling her lower lip. He swallowed her breathless moan, then slid his tongue inside, drawing her into an intimate dance, deepening his possession.

Fire raced through his veins as Maggie responded, mating her mouth to his, stroking and suckling, with a fierceness that matched his own.

"Let's get out of here," Alex murmured.

Maggie pulled away, her green eyes swirling with need and desire. "Wh-what about your date?"

"Danielle's happily married to my brother. And very pregnant."

Doubt seeped into her gaze, and he wanted to wipe that look from her eyes. She still didn't trust him, and he wanted Maggie's trust. Right now, though, he'd settle for whatever she gave him. He lowered his head and took Maggie's mouth again, pouring the heat of his blood, the thunder of his heart, the cry of his soul into their kiss.

When they pulled apart, Maggie whispered, "Let's go."

Alex asked Maggie to wait, then called Simon's cellular from a pay phone and asked his brother to call a cab. He took Maggie to the limousine.

Before she could ask questions, Alex improvised an answer. "I have a rich friend. I help him out a lot with his business and get a few perks for my efforts."

Maggie settled into the seat and looked around the limo. "It's nice."

He directed the driver to Woodward Park, located a less than a mile from Brookside. Maggie was unusually quiet and introspective. This new facet of her behavior both concerned and fascinated him. Did she regret their kiss?

They arrived at the park. Slipping out of the comfortable confines of the limousine, Alex clasped Maggie's hand as they walked through the park. The moon shone and the stars twinkled. Wind rattled through the trees harmonizing with the cricket night songs. Alex inhaled the faint scents of roses and honeysuckle. When he glanced at Maggie, she was staring at him.

"We aren't going to be friends, are we, Alex?" She sounded both wistful and relieved.

He shook his head. "Yes and no, Maggie. I want to touch you. Kiss you. Make love to you."

"We haven't had a first date," she protested.

"Where would you like to go?"

"Nowhere fancy." Her voice was quiet, serious. Alex wanted hear her laugh. He tugged her hand, leading her to the nearest swing set. "C'mon, Maggie. Let's have a swingin' good time."

Her smile flashed in the dark. They both hopped into the swings, and laughed, drinking in the sweet air, and enjoying each other's company.

They stopped to get a breath, and Maggie asked, "When are we going to make love?"

His already aroused body agreed NOW was a good time, but Alex knew better. Not until he told Maggie the truth, and he would, soon. He needed to be honest with her, she deserved that much. If he told her the truth now, the intimacy between them would break, and he was just selfish enough to want these moments to last. They'd get to know one another, and of course, practice kissing. He smiled. Kissing Maggie Conrad was definitely at the top of his list of things to do.

"We'll take things slow," he finally replied. He kissed the underside of her jaw and nipped her ear. "I'm not rushing you into anything, Maggie."

"Thank you, Alex." The gratitude in her voice shamed him.

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"I should just tell her," said Alex. "All she can do is throw me out of her house and out of her life."

"Is complaining about the situation you insisted was your 'best idea ever' the only reason you dragged me to this joint?"

"You love Harry's Hamburgers. Besides, you're my only family, Simon. It's your ear or a therapist's." Alex bit into the juicy hamburger, though his stomach rebelled against food. He felt both elated and lousy and all because of Maggie. His feelings for her tumbled around inside him like a washing machine on "spin." For two weeks, ever since the night at Woodward Park, they'd danced around each other. It was almost as if they'd never spoken of

making love, of being so much more than friends.

"Okay. Here's my take. Tell Maggie the truth."

Alex shifted in the hard plastic booth. He chewed on a tart pickle; the taste mixed with the sour emotions he felt. Since he'd earned his wealth and his reputation, every woman he'd been involved with had been beautiful and conniving. Was his subconscious putting Maggie in the same category? Did he really believe she would turn into someone else once she found out about his money?

"Earth to Alex."

Alex blinked. "What?"

"From what you've told me, Maggie doesn't seem like the barracudas you usually date."

"You're making me feel so much better. Thanks." Alex finished the hamburger and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Maggie has been looking for a job during the days, then locking herself up in the basement at night. We hardly ever see each other."

"Avoiding you, huh?" Simon stole one of Alex's fries. "Maybe you should wait awhile, bro. Test the waters a bit before you spill the beans. By the way, are you any closer to finding the next wonderful gizmo?"

Alex shook his head. "No. I know a lot about cleaning gutters, scrubbing oil stains off driveways, and fixing squeaky drawers, but none of it's given me a drop of inspiration."

"I could get the Scoop De Loop back online in a few days."

"Not yet. I just need to unwind. Hell, going to Mexico doesn't sound like a bad idea anymore."

"It would probably help if Maggie wasn't there. You said she was looking for a job?"

"Yeah, she's a graphic artist. Some of her sketches and watercolors are displayed around the house. She's really talented."

Alex sighed. He wanted to help Maggie get a job, and had been thinking about calling in a few favors. He'd even thought about giving her job at

Convenience Unlimited, but what if things didn't work out? He would never behave like Harrison and fire her. Yet he also knew Maggie's pride wouldn't let her stay, either. No, he had to think of something else.

"Don't worry, big brother. Everything will work out."

Alex looked up, meeting Simon's wide smile with a concerned frown. For some reason, his brother's words were less than comforting.

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Much to Maggie's relief, Alex had been gone most of the day. With yet another "Don't call us, we'll call you," response from two potential employers, she'd given up the job hunt early and come home. The basement felt confining. She'd been staring at a blank sheet of paper for fifteen minutes, unable to concentrate on sketching. Finally, she packed up the pencils and left, deciding to paint the damn shutters. She put on some ragged jean shorts and a halter-top, then went to the garage and got the paint.

Maggie dragged the ladder to the house and set it up. Luckily, it hadn't rained and the muddy hole had disappeared. Alex had probably packed it with dirt. He'd been busy doing a lot of outside work, possibly avoiding her as much as she'd avoided him. She couldn't explain her reluctance to further a relationship with Alex. Heavens, she desired him. And had he pursued her at Woodward Park that night, she would have given him anything. But the next morning had brought old fears and new doubts crashing back. She'd been cowardly--simply pretending their passion hadn't flared, that they hadn't made intimate promises to each other. And Alex let her.

He wasn't Harrison. She knew that. Still a tiny seed of suspicion remained. Why should she believe him? Why shouldn't she? Why oh why couldn't she just take pleasure with his body and forget the rest?

She carefully ascended the ladder clutching the paint can--no way was she going to repeat the same fiasco which had thrown her into Alex's arms--and popped the lid. She'd done the mixing in the garage, and spent several weeks previously scrapping the old paint off the shutters, with no ladder problems at all.

Maggie finished the upstairs shutters first, then dragged the ladder to the back of the house, returning to the side to finish the downstairs shutters. The hard work easily made her forget about Alex. She grinned. Yeah, right. Rolling her shoulders to ease the knots, she finished the last coat. Satisfied with the glistening pink shutters, she walked around the corner of the house

and threw away the empty paint can.

She wiped her brow, grateful for the cool breeze Mother Nature provided. It wasn't hot yet, but as the afternoon wore on, she knew it would be. Spring in Oklahoma didn't last too long; summer was too impatient.

Dragging a new can to the top of the ladder, Maggie painted the only shutters accessible to her. Four windows were spaced evenly across the top. She'd have to get on top of enclosed porch's roof to finish two sets of shutters.

She pushed the ladder to the edge of the porch, and climbed up, setting the paint can on the roof and scrambling across. Her sneakers slid, but Maggie caught herself and gingerly worked her way toward the shutters. She finished one set, then dragged her paint can and brush over to the next. Her knees scraped against the sandpaper-like roofing material as she crawled toward the second set of shutters.

"No problem," she muttered. She squatted, and dipped her brush, but before she could apply the paint, her shoes skidded against the roof. Her left ankle twisted viciously as both legs shot out behind her, dragging her toward the edge of the roof. She flattened out, trying to grab anything to stop her descent.

"Maggie! What the hell are you doing?" Alex's panicked voice yelled at her.

"I'm falling!" she shouted. Her nails scraped as she fought to hold on, but her body continued its painful slid, until her legs met nothing but air. She desperately grabbed at the last of the shingles, which broke off in both of her hands.

Maggie screamed as she plummeted over the roof's edge.

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## Chapter Six

Eons passed as Maggie fell, but instead of splatting on the hard, unmerciful earth, she found herself clasped in two strong arms. She glimpsed Alex's relieved expression as he caught her, then he stumbled and fell backwards. Maggie threw her arms around his neck as they crashed to the ground.

Maggie sprawled against Alex's chest, still holding on to him for dear life. For a few moments, they clung to each other, drawing in deep breaths. She

shuddered and felt Alex's arms tighten around her.

"Are you all right?" he wheezed.

"I don't think anything's broken ...but my ankle's throbbing," she responded. Alex felt warm and solid beneath her and her wicked mind wondered how much more enjoyable their positions would be if clothes weren't involved. She raised up and looked at Alex. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He smiled. "You seem to like being on top."

Alex's innuendo echoed her own naughty thoughts and tendrils of heat curled through her body. She rolled off him and sat up, cringing when pain danced in her ankle. The strong scent of paint and dirt assailed her senses, then another odor infiltrated.

"This sounds weird, but I swear I smell hamburgers," she said.

"You do." Alex stood. On the ground was a crushed white bag. "I brought you one in case you hadn't eaten lunch."

Maggie looked at the bag longingly as she massaged her ankle. "Everything on it?"

"Yep." He watched her movements, then squatted, testing the soreness with gentle fingers.

"Ow!"

"Can you move it?"

"I can't do the lambada, but I don't think it's broken."

"I'll get some ice to pack on it, then I'll take you to the emergency room."

The trip to the hospital was short. Alex scooped Maggie out of the passenger seat, ignoring her protests like a typical macho male. Secretly, she was glad, because she didn't really want to hobble into the emergency room. And Alex's solid warmth made her feel safe and secure. She tried not to snuggle too deeply in his embrace.

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"I can walk."



"Humor me," said Alex as he carried Maggie out of the emergency room.

"The doctor said it'll be fine. It's just bruised. And it's wrapped so tightly, it shouldn't hurt to walk."

Alex deposited her into his truck. "The doctor also said to stay off it as much as possible today and keep it elevated."

Maggie's glare didn't faze him, so she resorted to pouting. He ignored it. After a few minutes, she realized they were heading in the wrong direction. "Where are we going?"

"We just spent almost three hours in the emergency. You haven't eaten." He glanced at her. "You're a little crabby."

"*You* free-fall off a two-story house and see how you feel."

"I'll finish painting the shutters."

"Fine."

Alex drove downtown and parked on a street crowded with cars. Despite Maggie's grumblings, Alex helped her walk to a nondescript building. Elegantly etched on the glass door was "Welcome."

Alex ushered her into a quiet, beautifully decorated lobby that screamed, "Expensive!" The small room was half-paneled, half creme-painted walls. Two leather wingback chairs beckoned weary travelers. A chandelier lit the space. No signs, other than "No Smoking Please," existed.

"What is this place?"

"A restaurant."

Maggie gestured around the room. "This is a restaurant?"

"No, this is a lobby."

Next to the wingbacks, the wall cracked open. Maggie realized it was a seamless door. A tall woman entered, dressed in a black evening gown, stiletto heels, and perfect-coiffed blonde hair. Her eyes twinkled as she wrapped Alex in a hug.

**"Alexander," she said in an accented-voice. "You have been away too long." The woman kissed his cheek.**

**"Clarisse. Beautiful as always."**

**Maggie felt invisible. She didn't compare to this elegant creature, and she wished she could disappear through the wall as easily as this woman had entered. Clarisse turned a surprisingly warm brown gaze on Maggie.**

**"So lovely!" Clarisse pressed a manicured hand into Maggie's. "Alex has such good taste, yes?"**

**"Yes."**

**Alex laughed, then grasped Maggie's elbow. "Two for an early dinner?"**

**Clarisse winked. "Of course! But I may have to throw out some people. You know how busy we are."**

**The door opened and Clarisse led them into another dark-paneled room. A glass bar with leather stools curved the entire length. A huge saltwater tank with colorful tropical fish made up the back wall. The plush carpet was a rich chocolate brown and matched the paneling. Again, the walls were creme-colored with no paintings or signs.**

**"Are you sure you can afford this?" Maggie whispered as they followed Clarisse through another invisible door.**

**Alex bent down. "Just this once."**

**His words gave her no comfort, but she couldn't tell the man how to spend his money. Maybe she'd offer to go dutch, or pull out her credit card, though this place might max out its limit.**

**The dining area was made up of private half-circle booths. A single lit candle adorned the middle of each white, cloth-covered table. The lighting was muted as was the tinkling, soothing music.**

**Clarisse led them to a booth. Maggie and Alex scooted in on opposite ends. Alex lifted her legs onto his lap. She raised her eyebrows.**

**"The doctor said to keep your ankle elevated as much as possible," he said. He rubbed her calves. The tender pressure of his callused fingers infused her body with tingling heat.**

**"And what did he say about the rest of my legs?"**

**"Gotta keep the blood circulating."**

**"Oh."**

**Though it was nearly impossible to ignore Alex's warm touch, Maggie distracted herself by looking for a menu, but she didn't see one. Clarisse had disappeared, but soon a waiter--in a tuxedo minus the jacket and cummerbund--appeared. He placed two glasses and a carafe of water onto the table, took their drink orders, and left.**

**Maggie looked at Alex. Even in his jeans and simple T-shirt he looked like a man who belonged here. She, on the other hand, preferred a good, sloppy hamburger, and a soda. Clearing her throat, she asked, "When do we get menus?"**

**"No menus here," replied Alex. "The chef makes something different each day and it's never the same thing twice in one week. And it's always good."**

**"It appears to be very exclusive."**

**"It is."**

**Settling deeper into the soft cushions of the seat, Maggie tried to squelch her uneasiness. How could a handyman pay for lunch at this place? How did a handyman even know about such a place? A restaurant with no name...a French hostess...no menus...all clues which added up to...what?**

**His rich friend.**

**Of course. Alex's friend had undoubtedly brought him here. And it appeared Alex would spend a month's earnings to impress her.**

**"Clarisse owns the restaurant with her husband. He's the chef."**

**An odd relief snaked through Maggie when Alex mentioned Clarisse's husband. She frowned. "I don't mean any offense, Alex, but are you sure this won't be too expensive?"**

**"Stop worrying about it, Maggie."**

**She didn't want to make Alex feel bad with her continued badgering about**

money. She resolved to pay half, though, and wouldn't take no for an answer. After making the decision, Maggie relaxed.

The flickering candlelight, the intimacy of the booths, and Alex's gaze made Maggie feel...warm. He'd released her legs from his sensual torture. He leaned closer, playing with the cloth napkin, his fingers inches away from hers resting on the table. Her heart began to thud. Alex's blue eyes would not release her from their intense scrutiny and she felt bolted to the seat. He seemed to sense her reactions and his lips curved into an sensuous smile. Maggie almost jumped out of her skin when the waiter reappeared.

He placed two glasses of Raspberry tea and two Caesar salads in front of them, asked them if they needed anything else, bowed with a flourish, and left again.

Maggie dug into her salad with an enthusiasm born of desperation. This attraction to Alex was becoming unbearable. She truly didn't know him. She didn't trust him. And he had become an integral part of her fantasies. His touch on her shoulder startled her. Her fork flew from her grasp, skittered across the table, and landed with a soft plop on the carpet. Speechless, Maggie stared at the salad, the table, and finally Alex.

The waiter materialized, picked up the fork, and handed Maggie a clean one. He vanished, again, and she almost looked for the magician's smoke. Alex's chuckle drew her attention. She bowed her head.

"Why are you so nervous?"

She refused to look at him. "I'm not nervous. You just...surprised me."

"Pardon the cliché, but you're as jumpy as a cat on a hot tin roof."

Maggie put down her fork and pushed away the salad. "This is too fancy for me. I don't fit in here." She had substituted one truth for another, but no way would she confess to Alex that she wanted to see him naked. Worse, she wanted to get naked with him.

"Would you like to leave?"

She shook her head as renewed embarrassment scorched her face. "It's just dinner."

"Right," Alex agreed. "I've other plans for our first date."

Heat zinged the pit of her stomach. Oh boy. She was in trouble.

The meal, as Alex had promised, tasted excellent. Maggie was sure the actual names of the dishes were unpronounceable, but it boiled down to salmon, scalloped potatoes, and some scrumptious vegetable stuff that melted on her tongue. She suspected baked squash. Maggie had not eaten food so delicious, and although she enjoyed it, she felt relieved when the dishes were cleared.

They declined dessert, despite the mouth-watering display of chocolate concoctions. To her amazement, Alex scooted out of the booth without waiting for the check. She followed awkwardly. "I insist on paying half," she blurted. "It's only fair."

He smiled. "It's already taken care of. Shall we go?"

"Wait a minute. I--I feel like I should pay something."

Alex cocked his head; the look in his eyes made her shiver with an odd anticipation. "I'll find out what you owe--if it'll make you feel better."

She nodded, and Alex led her out of the restaurant.

Alex didn't speak another word as they drove home. The tense silence had Maggie in knots by the time they arrived. The setting sun's light filtered through the trees as they pulled into the gravel drive.

"Thank you for dinner," said Maggie. "It was wonderful."

"You're welcome." Alex's lips pressed together. "I have a confession."

Maggie's heart pounded harder. "What is it?"

"I...I'm not who you think I am. I'm—"

"About time!" Gran's voice shouted as her gray-haired head poked through the driver's side window. "Where have you been? I'm not paying you to lollygag around, Alex."

"Gran!" exclaimed Maggie. Her heart still beat erratically. What had Alex almost said?

"You two get inside. I gotta tell you something."

Gran withdrew and walked to the house. Alex looked at Maggie. "We'll talk later, okay?"

But Maggie couldn't wait. She had to know..."Are you married?"

"No."

"Hurry up!" yelled Gran from the front porch.

Relieved, Maggie smiled. "Her majesty commands us."

They got out of the car. Despite Alex's reassuring smile, Maggie suddenly realized she probably wouldn't like what he had to confess. She pushed away the encroaching dread, but its heavy tendrils clung to her emotions.

With Alex behind her, Maggie followed Gran into the house. She almost stumbled over the suitcases.

Gran whirled around and faced them. "I'm going to Vegas."

"What?" said Maggie.

"I said it plain enough, didn't I?" Gran grinned. "I can't let Betty Lee down. She needs me."

"You said she was an old hag."

Gran elbowed past Maggie and started rummaging in the closet. "I said no such thing, Maggie Lynn."

"What about Alex?" asked Maggie.

Gran turned around. Alex leaned against the doorjamb, effectively blocking the front door. "I left a list for you." She faced Maggie. "I'm leaving for the weekend—not forever."

"But Las Vegas? Gran you're too—"

Gran folded her arms and raised her eyebrows. "I'm too what? Old? Might fall and break a hip or get robbed or wake up in a bathtub of ice cubes missing a kidney?"

Maggie bit her lip, unable to verbalize her concerns. Gran had always done what she wanted—no matter what. "I worry about you."

"I'll be fine, dear." She closed the closet door and picked up a small bag. "Now move it or lose it."

Maggie stepped back and Alex barely got out of the way before Gran barreled through the front door. She looked over her shoulder. "Don't stand there gawking you two. Bring the rest of my things."

A powder blue Gremlin rolled into the driveway just as Maggie and Alex lugged two suitcases onto the porch. Betty Lee, her bleached-blond hair a sharp contrast to her wrinkled, pale face, poked her head out of the driver's side window. "Let's go, Victoria. There's a jackpot with my name on it!"

After Gran and the suitcases were wedged into the small car, Betty Lee backed out of the driveway, spewing gravel. The tires squealed as she sped off down the street.

Maggie looked at Alex. He grinned. "We're alone."

The promise his eyes took her breath away. She broke eye contact, suddenly feeling unsure about everything. She spotted the porch swing and hobbled over to it and sat down. To Maggie's surprise, Alex followed her, and hunched down by her feet.

"How's the ankle?"

"It's better," she lied. Her left ankle throbbed like hell.

"Really?" He removed her tennis shoes and socks, then tugged on her toes. "Looks to me like your feet are suffering from the ache."

"T-the ache?"

"Remember, Maggie? I told you I give great foot." He sat cross-legged on the porch. Grasping her right foot, Alex kneaded the bottom with strong, warm fingers. She sighed and leaned back, closing her eyes. He stroked, massaged, *tortured*. The top of her foot and her toes received equal attention. She swallowed back a groan. How many nerve endings did feet possess? He started to give the same gentle treatment to her left foot, his fingers carefully stroking around the bandaged ankle. Maggie almost couldn't stand it. "Didn't you have something to tell me?"

"Later."

He continued his gentle assault. She felt hot and tingly and...and *achy*.

"Your calves look tired, too." Alex's voice was gruff.

Maggie's eyes fluttered open. Calves? His fingers circled her ankles. She nodded weakly. "Definitely tired," she agreed.

He stroked upward, then down. He massaged her calves the same sensuous way he had her feet. Maggie sat up and stretched out her legs. The man had a magic touch. She watched as he rose up on his knees and leaned forward. She automatically opened her legs. She realized, too late, that she'd unintentionally given him access to the most vulnerable part of her body, but Alex did not move any closer.

His blue eyes telegraphed a smoldering message that made her heart thud in her chest. He kneaded the tops of knees, stroked her calves, and watched her. His touch went no further. He didn't press his body into the gap separating them.

She was going to spontaneously combust. Desire seeped into her, thick and hot and heavy. Panic wiggled through her. She couldn't feel this way. What did she really know about Alex? She obviously couldn't trust her own body. And her instincts, when it came to men, were wrong.

"S-stop."

His hands stilled immediately. He looked at her, waiting. She licked her dry lips and Alex's hungry stare followed her movements. Her heart lurched and her body quivered. He would kiss her if she asked. He might, even if she didn't. She cleared her throat. "The rest of me is ..."

His hands trembled against her calves. She saw sweat trickle down his neck, and the anxious set of his shoulders. She suddenly realized how much control Alex was exercising on her behalf. It should scare her, yet it made her feel powerful instead. He wanted her, but would do nothing unless she asked. Before she could decide if she needed her thighs massaged, Alex rose and offered his hand. His grin was a bit strained and...she looked down, so were his jeans. The bulge was back, she thought ruefully, and bigger than ever.

"I want you, Maggie," Alex said.

A question lit his gaze. He wanted to know the next step. How was she supposed to respond? *Take me now, lover boy?* She grasped his hand and he pulled her up, catching her around the waist, and taking the pressure off her ankle. She stared at him, trying to sort through the heated messages sent by



her body and the sensible ones sent by her head.

Hadn't she misjudged Harrison? She had to be sure of Alex--and sure of herself. She couldn't allow herself to be blinded by her own longings. Hadn't she almost married a cheating louse because she believed in the dream of love? Would she have walked down the aisle with Harrison if he hadn't left her at the altar?

The thought stopped her cold.

"Alex, I think we should talk about--"

A faint sound interrupted her. Maggie looked down at Alex's jeans. The sound was emanating from his lower region. "Your pants are ringing."

"Damn it."

Alex released her, lowering her to the porch swing, then digging into his back pocket for a credit card sized cellular phone. She stared at it, then his embarrassed expression, before he answered the phone.

He said, "What?" Then, "I'll call you back later." He clicked off and shoved the phone into his back pocket.

"Let me guess," said Maggie, crossing her arms. "Your rich friend lent you his cell phone, right?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

"He does you a lot of favors, Alex. What do you do for him?"

He shrugged, clearly unwilling to talk about his mysterious friend. "It's not something I can discuss."

Alarm skittered through Maggie. "You'd tell me if whatever-it-is was illegal, wouldn't you?"

He laughed. "It's not illegal. It's just too complicated to explain." He rubbed his jaw. "I have some errands I need to run and I better check out the list your grandmother left me."

Maggie's yo-yoing emotions spun to an halt. He obviously didn't want to spend the evening with her. Not that she'd made any plans to spend the evening with *him*. She'd just thought...what did it matter? Hurt settled like a

hard lump in her stomach. Maggie rose. "I have things to do, too."

"I'll see you later," he said, brushing a wayward curl from her shoulder. She shivered at the light touch, then straightened.

"Good night, Alex." With as much dignity as possible, she limped into the house, pretending she hadn't seen the flash of guilt in his eyes.

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The next afternoon, Alex entered the back door of the kitchen, grateful for the blast of air-conditioned air. He stripped off his shirt and wiped his face. Cleaning the gutters had taken two hours, but the hard work had gotten him out of the surly mood he'd been in since this morning. Grabbing a can of soda, he leaned against the counter and drank it down, grateful for its cool sweetness.

Without a task to occupy his thoughts, Alex found himself once again thinking about Maggie. Taking her to Clarisse's restaurant had been pure ego on his part. He'd wanted to impress her, instead he'd encouraged her suspicions. And then the damn cell phone had rang.

Alex put his shirt on the kitchen counter and thought about Maggie's reaction. She seemed willing to believe he had a rich friend who conveniently provided luxuries. But this deception battered his conscience. His short stay here had already given him an idea for a useful product. No more Kookie Kutters or Scoop-de-Loops.

There was no reason to keep lying. He'd tell Maggie the truth today. Yes, he'd just go to Maggie and say, "I'm a wealthy businessman pretending to be a handyman so I can come up with a good idea to help the elderly."

It sounded too stupid to be true.

Alex finished the drink and put the can in the recycling bin under the sink. The phone rang and he automatically answered it, then wondered if he should have. "Hi bro!"

"Simon! Why are you calling me here?"

"Because your cell phone is turned off."

"What's wrong?"

**"Nothing. Danielle wanted me to check up on you."**

**\*\*\***

**Gran had called late last night with the hotel's phone number and had cut the call short to "slam some slots." This morning, Maggie had felt too edgy to look at the classified ads. Not one interview had merited a job offer. Rejection, in any form, sucked. And she'd gotten a lot of it lately. Point in fact: Alex had opted to finish painting the shutters last night rather than spend another moment in her company.**

**Maggie decided the only way to relax was to sketch. She changed clothes, put her hair in a ponytail, and escaped to her basement studio. The cool, musty air, filled with the scents of ink and paint, greeted her like an old friend. She sat at the desk, smoothed out a sheet of clean paper, and began to draw.**

**After a few hours, her stomach's growls of hunger broke through her concentration. Maggie stretched, working the kinks out of her neck and shoulders. Despite her desire not to, she had sketched Alex. Glancing at the clock perched on the table behind her, she grimaced. She'd been holed up forever. And she was starving. She emerged from the basement, blinking at the blaring sunshine streaming through the front door's picture window. Maggie rounded the corner, going down the hallway toward the kitchen. She heard Alex's voice, and for some reason, found herself slowing until she hovered just beyond the entrance to the kitchen.**

**"I can't go to the opening. No, that wouldn't be a good move. She already thinks I'm up to something and I can't give her another reason to be suspicious."**

**Maggie sagged against the wall as her heart dropped into her toes. Alex had been up to something all along. But what?**

**"I know what I said. I'll take care of it. Look, don't call me here again. Yeah, okay. Bye."**

**Grabbing the doorjamb to steady herself, Maggie made enough noise to attract Alex's attention. He'd just replaced the receiver and she saw him hesitate, the muscles in his bare back tensing before he turned, a half-smile on his lips. He appeared casual, but he couldn't maintain eye contact. His gaze found an invisible speck of dirt on his jeans. Maggie spotted his T-shirt on the kitchen counter. Alex's magnificent chest beckoned her gaze, but she resisted the temptation.**

Almost.

He wasn't even trying to explain. Did he think she was naive? Or maybe he thought she hadn't overheard the phone conversation. Maybe he didn't care.

Maggie's lips trembled despite her efforts to remain calm. She didn't want to over-react. After all, he could have been talking about...she stopped. She was doing it again. Hadn't she created excuse after excuse for Harrison's behavior? And now she was trying to justify Alex's.

She straightened her shoulders and waited for Alex to look at her. When his guilty blue gaze finally met hers, she said, "You're fired."

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## Chapter Seven

"You can't fire me," said Alex.

Maggie watched as he put on his shirt. Darn his muscled chest. She couldn't stop staring at it. He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. She put her hands on her hips. "I can fire you. You're fired. See? Easy."

Alex shook his head. "Even if you could fire me, why would you? For a phone infraction?"

"You can use the phone. It's the lying, cheating, and--and stealing I object to."

"What did I steal?"

*My affections*, she wanted to shout, *just like you wanted*. And she noticed he'd left out lying and cheating.

"I heard what you were saying, Alex. So don't make excuses."

Alex's half-grin disappeared. He stepped forward, his brows creasing as he invaded her personal space. Maggie stepped back, her heart hammering in her chest, and swallowed the uneasiness creeping up her throat. "So tell me what you think you heard."

"You were plotting something. Something you don't want me to know about."

Alex leaned down. "You're right, you know. I am plotting something." His voice was soft, almost caressing. "Do you want to know what my diabolical scheme is?"

"Y-yes." She felt a little weak in the knees. She backed up another step and hit the wall. Straightening, she placed her hands on his chest to stop his encroachment. He moved closer and her hands slid down to rest against his abdomen. As he lowered his head, his breath brushed her

cheek.

"I was planning...our first date."

"Wh--"

His mouth captured the word still hovering on her lips. Heat poured through her, killing the protests lodged in her throat. Desire. Want. Need. Her body refused to listen to common sense and instantly caved to the slow, sweet assault of Alex's kiss. He devastated her senses with a mere touch. Hell, a mere thought...because she easily imagined them together, naked, enjoying all sorts of wicked delights. She wanted him to touch her--everywhere. And she wanted to explore every part of him. Her hands crept up his chest and around his neck. She pulled him closer and deepened the kiss, wanting, more than anything, the feel of his bare skin against hers.

She wanted to make love with Alex.

Maggie broke the kiss, putting her fingers against Alex's lips when he tried to capture her mouth again. "Wait."

He grazed her cheek with his thumb. "I guess we got carried away."

"That night in the park you said we couldn't be friends. You said we were going to make love. But I can't, Alex."

"Did you love him that much?"

Maggie blinked. "Him?"

"Your fiancé."

"No. Yes. It's difficult to explain." She ducked Alex's sympathetic embrace and his too-knowing gaze. Harrison's actions had humiliated her. He'd left

her at the altar. Worse, he'd stolen her dreams of a family and home. But her heart had somehow remained intact. If it hadn't, then why did she feel the way she did about Alex? How could she so easily imagine herself in bed with Alex if she'd been in love with Harrison?

"I'm confused. Nothing makes sense."

"Look, Maggie, we're both a little wary of what's going on between us. I'll back off if that's what you want."

Maggie felt like a giant fist squeezed her insides. "What about our date?"

He stepped back and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "I'd like to take you out. But you don't seem sure about us. I have a difficult time keeping my hands off you. And there's something you need to know." He looked away and Maggie saw his jaw tense. "I have to go out for awhile, but when I get back, we'll talk, okay? About everything."

"I have to go out tonight, too," she replied. If he could play it cool, so could she. "Maybe we can talk tomorrow."

"Okay. We'll talk tomorrow."

They stared at each other. Maggie wanted to say something to change what had just happened. But the moment had been lost. She felt miserable.

"I'll see you later, okay?" said Alex.

Maggie nodded, then watched as Alex turned and walked out of the kitchen. She heard his steps on the back porch, then the screen door screeched open and banged shut. The urge to cry almost overwhelmed her. Maybe she should have given in and made love with Alex. Maybe she needed one night of hot, wild sex to stop feeling so achy and unhappy.

Yeah. And then what?

Maggie left the kitchen and went upstairs. She needed to get ready. After all, she'd told Alex she had plans.

Several hours later, Maggie inserted the key into the back door's rusted lock. She never entered the house this way and the darn lock knew it. The lock resisted the key even though it should've been a perfect fit. Sort of like her and Alex. She resisted him...and what if they were a

perfect fit? Jamming the key into the hole, she turned it and opened the door.

The lights in Alex's garage apartment weren't on and his truck wasn't parked in the driveway. She wondered where he'd gone. Okay, okay, she admitted to herself, the real

reason she'd come through the back door was to see if Alex was home.

Maggie flipped on the kitchen light and tossed her keys onto the counter. She'd hadn't planned to go out. She had to follow through after she blurted out the lie. So, she'd gone to the movies and watched a three-hanky romance. The answering machine's blinking red light caught her attention. She pressed the "play" button. A man's deep, smooth voice invaded the quiet kitchen. "Ms. Conrad, I'd like to set up an interview with you. Please call me at the following number ..."

Maggie grabbed a pen from a nearby drawer and jotted down the phone number. The voice sounded vaguely familiar and the company--Convenience Unlimited--was a local well-

known business. She didn't remember applying for a position with Convenience Unlimited, but she'd sent out a lot of resumes. Or maybe a colleague had passed along her name. She re-played the message and double-checked the information, then erased it.

Maybe things were looking up.

\*\*\*

Alex waited on the front porch. Maggie had promised to meet him around six o'clock. It was five minutes past. He stroked a petal of the red rose. Should he have gotten a dozen? Did Maggie even like red? Maybe she liked yellow or white or peach better. He needed to find out what she liked and didn't like. He wanted to spend a lot more time with her. Of course, everything depended on whether or not she forgave him for his deception. Once he confessed his

identity tonight, he hoped the slate would be wiped clean. They could start over with each other. Take it slow. Develop their relationship. He couldn't help but wonder if the money and prestige

would make a difference to her. He knew she'd been counting her pennies while trying to find a job. Even as the cynical side wondered how she'd react to dating a millionaire, he believed Maggie wouldn't care.

Glancing at his watch, he frowned. Seven minutes past. Had she changed her mind?

Her car pulled into the driveway. Maggie got out. She carried her portfolio as she hurried to the front porch. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks were flushed, and her smile was more carefree than he'd ever seen. Would she look like that after they made love?

"Alex! Hi. Sorry I'm late."

Alex looked at her simple black knee-length dress. Shimmery white hose encased her long, gorgeous legs and black high heels gave her two more inches of height. Her red hair was pulled into a French braid. "You look beautiful, Maggie."

"Thank you."

"Are you ready to go?"

"Like this?" She glanced down at her dress.

"You can go naked if you like."

She laughed. "Let me put up my portfolio, then we can leave." She hesitated. "Where are we going?"

He handed her the rose. "It's a surprise."

Forty-five minutes later, they pulled into a paved driveway blocked with high black metal gates. Alex punched in the code and the gates slowly swung open. As they drove onward, the house became visible. Two stories tall, it had adobe walls and a red-tiled roof. The area around the front porch had been landscaped with a desert look: lava rocks, cactuses, and animal statues.

"It's gorgeous."

"My friend likes it a lot."

Alex drove past, following the paved road. Two minutes later, he turned onto a dirt road that ended at a large pond. He got out and helped Maggie out of the truck. He took her hand and led her to the large willow tree that overlooked the pond.

"Oh Alex!"



Alex grinned. The moonlit picnic had been Danielle's idea. Under the willow tree was a white-and-red checkered cloth. A bottle of wine chilled in a silver bucket next to a large wicker basket. The contents included brie and crackers, strawberries and cream, caviar, an assortment of

berries, and chocolate. As Maggie sat down, Alex reached into the basket for glasses and plates. He uncorked the wine and poured it while Maggie unloaded the food. They filled their plates and

ate.

"Look," said Maggie, pointing to the pond. A graceful white bird coasted into view. "Is that a swan?"

"Yes. There are a few more, too. Beautiful birds, aren't they?"

"Yes. *The Ugly Duckling* was my favorite fairy tale. I identified with the poor duck."

Alex put down his plate. "You felt like the duckling?"

"When I was younger. My parents died when I was eleven years old. I lived with Gran and Gramps until I started college. They loved me, but I still felt...lost. Like I didn't belong. And I wanted to belong to someone."

She briefly met his gaze before looking down at her plate. Emotion swept through Alex. He'd seen a glimpse of the sad little girl in the eyes of the woman. He resisted the urge to take Maggie in his arms and make promises he wasn't sure he could keep. Instead, he gulped his wine,

knowing it was time to tell her the truth.

As he put down his glass, she turned to him. "I almost married my boss."

Surprise stilled his movements. Maggie was staring at the pond, absently tracing the rim of her wine glass. He realized she was about to confide in him.

"I worked for Dimmons and Sons Toy Company for almost seven years. I met Harrison accidentally--in the copy room. I had no idea who he was at first. He charmed the socks off me. We dated for about six months. I thought I was in love and said yes when he proposed."

She sipped her wine. "He was late to the rehearsal dinner. I saw the lipstick stain on his collar and pretended not to. I wanted to be married. To have the

kind of relationship both my grandparents and parents had. And I wanted kids."

"You wanted to belong to someone," said Alex in a soft voice.

She looked at him, her eyes wide. "Yes." She straightened. "To make a long story short, he eloped with his secretary on our wedding day, then fired me from the company. And to top things off, he stole my design ideas and used them for advertising campaign."

Alex clenched the stem of the wine glass. The crystal cut into his palm. Harrison was not only a jerk, he was stupid, too. Only a blind fool would let a woman like Maggie Conrad go.

"I'm sorry, Alex. I'm ruining our evening."

He leaned forward and kissed her. Her lips were warm and pliant and she tasted like chocolate. He wanted to be the man in her life. He wanted to give her everything. But first, he had to tell her the truth. He pulled away slightly. "I have something to tell you."

"I have something to tell you, too."

"You do?"

"Yes. I got a job today."

"That's great!" He hugged her. "What lucky company hired the talented Maggie Conrad?"

She grinned. "Convenience Unlimited."

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## Chapter Eight

Dread dropped like anvil, crushing the breath out of Alex. "What company?"

"Convenience Unlimited. You know--they make all those kooky items you see on television infomercials." She smiled. "I probably shouldn't talk about my company that

way. Mr. McCormick showed me the Scoop-de-Loop during the interview

today. It's going to be one of the first projects I work on."

"Not if I can help it," muttered Alex.

Maggie's eyebrows rose. "What did you say?"

"Now I'm very happy," replied Alex. He was going to kill his brother. Maybe Danielle, too, after she had the baby. This sounded too much like one of her ideas. Maggie snuggled into his embrace. "Things are really looking up. I have a new job." She kissed his neck, and

despite the turmoil of his emotions, desire licked through him. "And I have you," she whispered as she rained tiny kisses along his jaw. As she tortured him with her sweet lips, desire warred with his conscience. How could he tell Maggie the truth now? She would think he'd gotten her the job. Or worse, she would think he was just like that jerk Harrison. Especially if he gave into temptation and made love with her.

Alex gently pulled away and cupped her face. "I'm a little tired. Do you mind if we end our evening early?"

Hurt flickered in her eyes. He kissed her nose. "I'm not rejecting you, Maggie. I want to be with you. It's just that I'm not feeling well. I guess wine and chocolate don't mix."

Concern replaced the hurt. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine."

They packed up everything and folded the blanket. On the long drive home, Maggie fell asleep against his shoulder. He liked the way she fit in his arms. The way she put her hands on her hips when she was mad. He even enjoyed how she smelled like charcoal after she'd been sketching. Now, because of his brother's interference, there was a good chance she'd walk out of his life. And he didn't know how the hell was he supposed to stop her.

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Maggie sat down in her new chair behind her new desk and looked out on the incredible view of the Arkansas river. Below, joggers cruised along the sidewalk under the lush, leafy trees. Mothers walked their babies. Lovers held hands, paused to kiss every so often, then wove

contentedly between the hurried people in business suits and tennis shoes.

Looking at her office, she couldn't get over the way her life had turned around in the last two months. If Harrison had married her, she'd be in his mansion, doing...what? Maybe being a socialite. Or trying to get pregnant. Ew! The thought made her ill. What a fickle woman she was,

almost marrying a man she could no longer think about without getting nauseous.

And what if she had met Alex after her marriage? Would she feel the same way?

Oh yes.

She would have felt the same attraction, the unexpected and unexplainable draw one person sometimes has to another. A connection was there and she hadn't married Harrison and

she wanted Alex Ross.

"Settling in?"

Maggie sat upright in her chair. "What?" She saw Simon McCormick against the doorjamb and remembered she hadn't closed the door. "Hello Mr. McCormick."

"Locked up in your thoughts, huh?" Simon entered and sat down in the chair in front of her desk. "How do you like the office?"

"It's wonderful. I expected a cubicle."

"The president insisted on every luxury."

"I should thank him."

"He's still on a vacation. You'll find out who he is soon enough."

Maggie's smile faltered. What an odd way to phrase it. "I just can't imagine how he found out about me. I still don't remember sending a resume to the company." She paused, realizing how ungrateful she sounded. "I'm sorry. New job jitters. I'm thrilled to be on board at Convenience Unlimited."

"We're thrilled to have you." He rose. "I'll leave you to get situated." Just as he got to the door, he turned. "And Maggie, just remember, the boss really

likes you. And sometimes...well, people can let their judgment get clouded."

"I don't understand."

He smiled, then shook his head. "Just ignore me. I guess my mind is what's clouded."

"That happens to soon-to-be fathers," joked Maggie.

"Yeah. Danielle's two days past her due date. In fact, I better call her. Please let me know if you need anything."

"I will."

Simon left, quietly shutting the door behind him. Maggie sat down, unable to explain the weird apprehension coating her stomach. She felt like she was in a movie where everyone knew the lines but her.

"Okay, enough worrying." She scooted closer to her desk. It was time to get to work.

\*\*\*

When Maggie pulled into the drive, she saw Alex on the porch, shirtless, his back muscles taunt as he reached up to screw in a light bulb. When she shut the car door, he turned around and issued a bone-melting smile. Her knees wobbled as she stepped on the porch. Lord, the man was built. Heat swept through her as she took in his broad chest, flat stomach, and lean hips. She envied those tight-fitting jeans, and tried to psychically force the steel buttons to fall off.

Alex, obviously unaware of her riotous state of lust, planted a tender kiss on her temple and she felt the heat pool between her thighs. What would he do if she ravished him right on the porch in broad daylight?

"How was your first day at work?" he asked. He cupped her cheek, his gaze fastened on her mouth.

Brazen hussy that she was, Maggie licked her lips, nibbling just so on the bottom one. His hand snaked around and cupped her neck, drawing her into his embrace. Her heart stuttered in her chest and she tried to swallow the dryness suddenly coating her throat.

*Kissmekissmekissmekissme.*

Alex lowered his head, his gaze dark, his eyelids half-closed, the heat of his smile melting her willpower. "D-did you ask me something?"

"Hmmmmmm." He nuzzled her neck, then nibbled the sensitive spot behind her ear.

The shrill ring of the phone startled her, but Alex continued to torture her with small, wet kisses. She exposed more of her neck, dropping her purse and portfolio. She barely heard them thunk to the porch because Alex had found the shell of ear. *Ring. Ring. Ring.*

"Shoot." She reluctantly pulled away. "I better answer that. It might be Gran."

She picked up her abandoned purse and smiled her thanks when Alex got her portfolio. His hand found the curve of her rump as she entered the house, and she laughed at his playfulness. He followed her into the kitchen, where she answered the still-ringing phone.

"About time," gruffed Gran. "This is my only call, you know."

Maggie cradled the receiver between her shoulder and chin and put down her purse. "What kind of hotel limits your calls to one a day?"

She grabbed the phone with her right hand and massaged her neck with her left, stifling a groan when Alex began to rub and knead the tightness around her neck and shoulders.

"The roach motel," said Gran.

"Yech. I thought you were on the Las Vegas Strip."

"I sort of got moved downtown by some nice gentleman in blue uniforms."

Maggie had a difficult time deciphering Gran's words because Alex's fingers were working magic. They trailed down her spine and fixated on the knot in her lower back. "So you

finally got put into an asylum, huh? What did you do--scale the brass lion at MGM Grand?"

"No, I decked Elvis."

**"You what?" Maggie laughed. "You must have had too many free drinks. You're not making any sense."**

**Gran's sigh would've filled up a hot air balloon. "What's the matter with you? I'm not having any fun. I'm in the joint. The big house. The big J. Get it?"**

**Maggie stilled, comprehension slowly dawning. "The Big J? That's a new hotel, right?"**

**"I thought I raised a brighter girl. I'm in jail, you twit. Come get me." Gran hung up, but Maggie listened to the dial tone for a full ten seconds, hoping the voice that sounded so much like Gran's had not really been her dear, 80-year-old grandmother announcing she was an Elvis-decking criminal behind bars in downtown Las Vegas. The entire phone call had been some kind of delusion. A dream. A catastrophe.**

**She slammed down the phone, turned, and ran smack into the warm, solid chest of Alex. He grasped her elbows, his concerned gaze on her face. "My God, Maggie, what's wrong?"**

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## **Chapter Nine**

**Maggie didn't even care that Alex's rich friend had come to the rescue again and loaned out his expensive jet with leather seats, television with VCR, and foldout sleep couch. However, she was immensely grateful for the fully stocked bar. By the third vodka, she had loosened her grip on the armrests of her seat and was beginning to believe Gran had played a big joke.**

**"Elvis is dead," she announced. "Gran couldn't have punched him. I mean, him being buried in a grave at Graceland and all."**

**Alex sat across from her. He leaned over and pried the**

**drink out of her hand. "She probably smacked an impersonator."**

**Maggie took it back and glared at him. "Who'd impersonate Elvis? There's only one King of Rock 'n Roll. And he's forever horizontal at Graceland."**

**She took a big swallow and tried to snort her disgust at the situation. Unfortunately, the vodka hadn't finished its journey down her throat and abruptly changed directions--going up instead. The burning liquid exited her**

nose in a generous spray--much like a sprinkler watering a lawn--as she attempted to hack up both lungs. And her pancreas, too.

Silence filled the cabin. After all, what did a person say after a moment like this? *Oh sorry. Did I get any snot on you?*

Heat scorched Maggie's cheeks. She released her grip on the glass and let Alex take it, humbly accepting his offer of a few tissues. She couldn't look at him; her nose felt like she'd inhaled a jalapeno. She wished the plane would crack right under her plush seat, so she could plummet to her death. God, she'd been acting like an incoherent idiot.

"Sweetheart...are you okay?"

Maggie refrained from asking Alex if she'd gotten any snot on him, instead she nodded and concentrated on the wadded-up tissues.

"You're having a bad day. It'll be a while before we get there, why don't you take a nap?"

He led her to the foldout couch, gave her a pillow, and tucked a nice, fluffy blanket around her. She closed her eyes, enjoying the warm press of Alex's lips against hers as he kissed her "good nap."

Ninety minutes later, they landed at McCarran Airport, taxiing to the executive terminal used by several tour companies' planes and helicopters. Maggie felt nauseous and anxious as Alex helped her off the jet.

"I hope I don't throw-up," said Maggie. "That would just suck."

"You'll be fine," soothed Alex as he led her through the small building. As they stepped out the front glass doors, a limo pulled up.

"I'm getting used to this kind of luxury," teased Maggie, despite the headache beginning to form inside her skull. She didn't want to think about how Alex had managed to order a limo.

"I'm lucky my new boss is so understanding, or I'd be looking for another job."

"The situation is unusual," said Alex. She looked at him, saw a hesitation, then a slight shake of his head, as if he'd mentally deciding against something. When he looked up and caught her gaze, he smiled, then turned to stare out the window.



**Maggie sighed. She'd been whisked to Vegas so she could**

**rescue her grandmother from jail. How different it would be if she and Alex had gone off for the weekend, arriving by private plane, then taken by limo to a luxurious hotel. She lost herself in the little fantasy, then immediately felt guilty and selfish for wishing she'd been on a lover's trip with Alex instead of spending her time worrying about her grandmother.**

**Themed-hotels lined Las Vegas Boulevard--from the huge emerald-green MGM, to the big pink big top of Circus Circus.**

**Maggie felt like she'd been dropped onto an movie set for giants. Dusk was creeping over the mountains and the lights of the Strip hotels were beginning to blink on. Soon, they arrived at the police station and after several inquiries and wrong turns, they found an information desk.**

**The matronly woman behind the counter stared at a computer, punching the keyboard with long, purple nails. "Mr. Howard King dropped the charges," she finally said. "Victoria Simms and Betty Lee Ricksey paid their fines."**

**The clerk grinned. "Oh, I remember these two. Fighting and fussing and poor old Elvis in the middle holding his toupee. When they left, the one with the orange hair said she was going to get married."**

**"Orange hair?" asked Maggie.**

**"I think it was the one called Vicky."**

**"Vicky?" Maggie blinked. "Married? To who? Where? When?"**

**"This isn't the registrar's office, honey. You'll have to go courthouse to get that kind of information." She started to turn away, then paused. "I do know she was going to marry the bald Elvis."**

**Back in the limo, Maggie sat in a daze, not even registering the glittering lights of the Strip. "How did I get 'I'm in jail because I punched Elvis' confused with 'I'm getting married to Elvis'? Those phrases don't sound remotely alike."**

**"We'll find her, sweetheart. Then we'll figure it all out."**

**They started the search at the MGM Grand, where Victoria and Betty Lee had been staying. When they got to the hotel room, Maggie almost fell over in**

surprise when her grandmother opened the door. She was relieved Gran didn't have orange hair, but her nice, gray hair stuck up in several places and her clothes looked slept in.

"I know I look like hell." She smoothed down her hair and straightened her clothes. "Hangover. Just a little one, though. Tequila was much stronger in the old days. Worms were tastier, too."

Maggie's lecture was silenced by the vision of Gran swilling tequila like a *vaquero* might in the days when the West was still being won. "Where's Betty Lee?" she managed to ask.

"With Howard. He dropped the charges after I called you."

"And Howard is...?" asked Maggie.

"Elvis," responded Gran in a gravelly get-a-clue tone. "C'mon in. I gotta take a shower before the wedding." Before Maggie could ask a few pertinent questions, like *Have you gone completely insane?* Gran disappeared into the bathroom. Alex shut the door, led Maggie to a chair, then opened the bottle of rum sitting on the television. He ripped the paper covers off two glasses and poured the liquid into them.

"My grandmother is a floozy and a drunk," Maggie said taking the proffered glass. "And she's getting hitched to Elvis."

"She's just..." began Alex. Maggie looked at him, waiting for the words of comfort that would make her feel better. He shrugged. "She's just...going through a stage."

Alex seemed pleased with his reasoning, but Maggie didn't feel better. She finished the rum, liking the nice warm feeling in her tummy, then sighed. "It's a little late for her to experience a mid-life crisis. Grandpa's probably rolling over in his grave."

"Johnny's laughing his ass off," interrupted Gran as she exited the bathroom, fully dressed, purse in hand. "And I'll thank you not to discuss my business, young lady." Alex received a glare, too, and he finished the rum in a guilty swallow.

Maggie and Alex were forced to follow Gran as she crossed the room. They stepped out from the hotel room and Gran shut the door, then marched to the elevators.

"So you hit Elvis Presley," ventured Maggie, shooting a she's-finally-gone-over-the-edge look at Alex. "Elvis Presley is dead. I punched an Elvis impersonator in the chops." The old woman stopped in at the elevators, pushed the down button, and waved her hand imperiously. "C'mon, you ninnies. We gotta get to a wedding."

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The limo cruised Las Vegas Boulevard as Maggie and Alex tried to figured out what had happened with Gran, Betty Lee, and Elvis.

"So Betty Lee wanted to marry Elvis, and you protested this by smacking him with his own toupee?" Maggie rubbed her temples as she tried to understand Gran's convoluted and strange story. Her only relief stemmed from the fact that Gran wasn't the one getting married.

"No, I smacked him with the *preacher's* toupee. It had fallen on the floor after he was knocked unconsciousness from the flying cherub statue."

"You struck a man of God with a stone cherub?"

"Of course not! Elvis' former fiancée did that. She stormed into the chapel, heaved the thing right off the stand, and threw it at Howard. He ducked...well, you can guess the rest."

"And Howard had you thrown in jail for hitting him with some fake hair?" Maggie turned and looked at Alex, who sat next to her. He was having a difficult time maintaining his composure. His cheeks kept puffing out as he held his laughter in check, then he'd choke it all down. Tears were trickling out of his eyes.

"Well, he sort of tripped over my foot," admitted Gran. "It was an accident, but he wailed like a newborn baby when he went down. Come up cussing because he broke a cap. Apparently Elvis impersonators are very picky about having perfect choppers."

Maggie closed her eyes, took a fortifying breath, then opened her eyes again. "Why would Betty Lee marry a man she barely knows?"

"Honey, when you get old, you never know how long you got. If she thinks this guy makes her heart go pitty-pat and she wants some happiness, who am I to burst her balloon?"

"You're the woman who hit her fiancé, remember?"

"I already told you that I didn't know Howard's perverted friend had pinched my behind. Howard was standing next to me and the other old coot had high-tailed to the end of the bench. Mind you, this was in the middle of Howard's ex-girlfriend's hissy fit." Gran sniffed. "It was a little mistake on my part."

"Where-- " Alex wiped his eyes. "Did they go?"

"Cupid's Wedding Chapel," said Gran.

Alex told the limo driver to go to Cupid's. Strip traffic was heavy, but the limo finally made it to the downtown chapel.

The wedding was almost anti-climatic, for which Maggie was grateful. She expected a fire-breathing ex-fiancé and flying cherub statues to burst out of the walls any moment, but nothing untoward happened, and the couple was pronounced man and wife. Betty Lee did seem happy, though Howard the Elvis impersonator was a withered old man in white bejeweled bell-bottoms and thick, diamond-studded glasses. He sang a warbly, if not heartfelt, Elvis tune after the ceremony.

"It's so late, we might as well get a hotel room," whispered Alex as they waited for Gran to say a tearful good-bye to her best friend.

"We can stay with Gran," said Maggie.

"No, you can't," said Gran as she joined them. "If anyone stays in my hotel room, he'll be a stud muffin I pick up at the blackjack table."

Irritation pricked Maggie. Elvis, tequila, and now blackjack. Was there no end to her grandmother's vices? "I flew 1200 miles on a borrowed plane to get your butt out of jail and ended up at a wedding. I'm not happy with you, Gran."

"I'm sorry," said Gran. "I really am. I didn't know Howard would drop the charges. He was pretty upset about the tooth." She smiled and chucked Maggie under the chin. "You're here now, dear, and you got a few hours to have some fun before you go back to the boring life you like so much. Go act like you're young instead of my age, okay?"

\*\*\*

Alex had took Gran's advice on Maggie's behalf and she found herself

ensconced in a luxurious suite at the Mirage. The sweet smell of fresh-cut flowers infiltrated her senses as she admired the plush surroundings, marble floors, and--she walked into the bedroom--the mirrored ceiling above the king-sized bed.

"Zowie."

Alex came up behind her, trailing his fingers up her arms. "How about a warm bath." He kissed lifted her hair and kissed the nape of her neck. "A back rub." His hand coasted down to her thigh. "And...me."

She laughed, turned in his arms, and gave him a toe-curling kiss. She leaned back. "I can't believe we're in Las Vegas. I can't believe we're in this...beautiful room. And we're alone."

Maggie stepped back. Then, with her gaze on Alex's face, she unbuttoned the front of her dress. It fell open, revealing her black lace bra. Hunger licked her when she saw Alex's gaze darken and his hands clench into fists. She cupped her breasts, pinching her own nipples, watching Alex's reaction as she stroked her own body. The evidence of his desire strained against his jeans.

"Wait, Maggie." Alex licked his lips. "I have to tell you something. It's important."

"More important than this?" She slid her hands down her abdomen, to her center, pausing, stroking a little, savoring Alex's groans.

She slipped out of the dress. It pooled on the floor with a soft slish.

"Garters?" asked Alex in a tense voice.

She only smiled, then unclasped the garters, slowly rolling down the stockings. She felt so brazen and wild and free. The intensity of her desire, of her need for Alex, for this moment so long-awaited caused her to tremble. Wiggling out of her panties and removing the garters, she unhooked her bra, relishing Alex's harsh breath when her breasts were freed.

"Did you say something about a bath and a back rub?"

Alex growled, took one long stride, and pulled her into his embrace, rubbing his hardness against her throbbing sex. The roughness of his jeans sent off tiny sparks. "Later."

He cupped her breasts, bending to grasp a turgid nipple in his mouth. His warm tongue laved and suckled and Maggie felt an almost painful pleasure, then he gave the same treatment to the other nipple.

"God, you taste good," he said against her skin, licking the flesh between her breasts, trailing his eager tongue to her collarbone. He lifted her and walked until the wall stopped his progress. His hands supported her buttocks as she locked her legs around his waist. Maggie's lips found the shell of his ear, the strong column of his neck, the underside of his jaw. She practically ripped his shirt so she could feel his skin on hers.

In one swift motion, he pulled off the shirt and unzipped his jeans. Maggie tugged them down and grasped the hard length of him; Alex pressed against her, nestling inside her curls, moving against the nub hiding there. She gasped, grabbing his shoulders, and moving against Alex's hardness. The pressure built, her pleasure swirling and sparkling.

"Oh no you don't, Maggie, love," whispered Alex. "I want to feel you."

He slipped inside her and stroked until she went flying over the edge, crying out. Alex shuddered, then followed her into ecstasy.

\*\*\*

The next morning, they enjoyed a leisurely breakfast from room service. Alex insisted they stay in bed, and he served her from the loaded plates of food. As Maggie sipped her orange juice, she took in the opulent surroundings, no longer able to ignore the questions niggling her.

"Don't tell me your friend has his own suite here, and just happens to let you use it," she said in a teasing voice, although her gut had condensed into a tight ball.

"I paid for it," said Alex. "And I don't want to hear about splitting bills. You deserve the best, Maggie Lynn, and I want to give it to you."

"But I don't need fancy things or places."

Maggie watched Alex get raspberry jam from one of the jars on the serving table next to the bed. To her delighted shock, he spooned some onto her exposed breast, then proceeded to lick the sticky stuff off in a tortuously slow way that made her loose-limbed and tongue-tied.

She attempted to wiggle out of his embrace, but he took both her wrists in

one hand and place them above her head. He raised above her, his grin wicked.

"Don't just lay there," she said, pressing against the hardness between her thighs. "Do something."

And he did.

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## Chapter Ten

Alex tightened the bolt, then flipped over the metal part. He'd been working steadily since dawn because it'd been impossible to sleep. He hadn't seen Maggie much during the last week because of her new job. And their wild trip to Las Vegas seemed like a dream.

Alex had been unable to properly murder his brother and sister-in-law for their interference because Danielle had gone into labor and had produced his beautiful niece. And named her Alexandria. Probably out of sense of guilt. It was difficult to harbor bad feelings toward the parents of a little girl who shared his name.

What was a proud uncle to do?

He missed Maggie. Since it was Saturday, he'd hoped they'd be able to spend some time together. He still hadn't figured a way out of the fiasco created by his well-meaning brother.

Someone knocked on the door and his heart thumped in anticipation. Maggie! Alex yelled, "Come in." Maggie entered, looking scrumptious in a pair of pink sweats and a white half-top. When she moved forward, the top revealed an enticing view of smooth skin. Her feet were bare and her hair was pulled into a ponytail.

She hesitated in the doorway and looked at him. "Hi."

He scooted away from the worktable and walked to her. She looked cool and fresh, her face scrubbed of make-up, her eyes wide as she watched him. He leaned down and kissed her. Her arms crept around his neck and pulled him close.

Alex's body reacted immediately. He deepened the kiss, drinking in her essence, pouring out the emotions she invoked in him. She tasted like mint



toothpaste and vanilla coffee. He could not resist touching the skin of her midriff. She felt warm and soft. He stroked her stomach, then slid his hands around her back, and pressed her close. He wanted her to feel his desire, to know how much he wanted her.

She pulled away, gasping, and looked at him. He kept her in his embrace and grinned. "Hi."

He took satisfaction in her dazed look. Her eyes were glazed and her lips swollen. "Wh-what are you doing?"

"Kissing you."

Her gaze went to the table. "I meant what on you working on? What are all those machine parts?"

*Tell her now*, the stern voice of his conscience demanded. *Get it over with.* Alex reluctantly moved away and went to the table. "This stuff? It's just...you see, I'm an inventor."

Okay, good start. Now he needed to tell her the rest. He opened his mouth, but Maggie said, "Isn't that interesting? The president of Convenience Unlimited is an inventor, too. Simon McCormick is his brother." She looked at him. "He was the one who hired me, remember? He said his brother was doing research and would be back in the office in a few weeks. I'd like to meet him."

Nervousness knotted his stomach. "Why?"

"Because he got me the job. Mr. McCormick--Simon--made a big deal out of letting me know that the president had taken a personal interest in my well being. Apparently, he'd heard all kinds of good things from business associates, but something bothers me about the whole thing."

Alex resumed plans to kill his brother. "What bothers you?"

"I don't know how the man found out about me. I'm sure I never sent Convenience Unlimited a resume." She shrugged. "It doesn't really matter, though, because however it happened, I have a job."

Her words gave him pause. "I know you had a bad experience with Harrison. But would you...I mean what if you, um, what if your boss at your new job asked you out?"



She stared at him as if he'd just announced he was from the planet Jupiter. "Simon is married--very happily if the way he talks about his wife is any indication. And they just had a baby."

"I meant his brother. The president." God, he was botching this up.

"What are you talking about? Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"No!" He rubbed his jaw, noting he'd forgotten to shave this morning. It was becoming a habit. "It's just a hypothetical question."

"I would never put myself in another situation like that again."

A point he'd never before considered occurred to him. Harrison had fired Maggie after he'd left her at the altar. Which made the guy despicable. But was it possible she had wanted to marry the boss as a career move? Maybe she was only upset about Harrison's duplicity because it deprived her of money and prestige. The night of their picnic, she'd spoken of home and family and love with sincerity and hope...had she said the same things to Harrison?

Alex wanted to dismiss this line of reasoning as absurd because he knew Maggie wasn't that cold-blooded. But he'd known too many sweet, pliable women who turned from purring kittens into vicious tigers when they realized he wouldn't walk them down the aisle. What would Maggie do if she found out he was the president of Convenience Unlimited? Suddenly, he didn't want to know. What if, instead of rejecting him as he deserved, she cozied up to him? Forgave him without so much as a slap to the face?

"Have I dropped into an episode of the *Twilight Zone*?" asked Maggie.

Alex shook away his thoughts. "Sorry. I woke up too early. I think my brain's turned to mush."

"I brewed some coffee. Maybe that'll help." She studied the parts and picked up the flat piece of metal he'd been working on. "What's this?"

"I'm trying to make a conveyor belt."

"Why?"

He could, at least, be honest with her about this. "I was trying to figure out a way to build a moving shelf."

She put down the metal and picked up a bolt. "So if you flipped a switch, whatever was on the shelf would come to you?"

"Something like that. I'm not sure a conveyor belt would work though. Stuff falls off."

"Why don't you make clips or fitted holes?"

Alex looked at her in amazement. Why hadn't he thought of that? "Great idea."

"Gran doesn't like to admit it, but bending and stretching to get things hurts her. She likes to think she's invincible. It would be a big help if she had moving shelves."

He nodded. "Exactly. Think of the possibilities for people like Gran--or people who are physically challenged."

"What about the switch, though? Maybe a remote control...or voice commands."

Alex grinned. "You mean like--come here, sit, stay?"

"Yes. 'Bring me that plate, shelf,'" she intoned, then laughed. "It's almost sci-fi."

"It'd be sci-fi if the shelf talked back."

"Alex, is this what you've been trying to tell me? You're not really a handyman, are you? You just do odd jobs because you want to be an inventor?"

Alex didn't like the light in her eyes. It was as if this new comprehension melted the lingering doubts she had about him. She thought she understood his motives for being a handyman. She thought he was pursuing a dream and he knew pursuing a dream was something she understood very well.

Ah hell.

"Sort of. But the idea hasn't really gelled yet. I'm still working on it."

"I'll help you," she said. She hugged him. "I'm so glad you finally trusted me enough to share what you're doing."

**"Maggie--"**

**She withdrew, her gaze filled with excitement. "If you can make this work, I'll approach Simon with it. He's very nice and open to new ideas. Just think--you have a real chance at selling this!"**

**Misery invaded Alex. He felt like such a creep. But, once again, he couldn't form the words that would destroy Maggie's newfound trust in him.**

**"I'll go get the coffee. Then we can work on your project." She hesitated. "That is, if you want me to help."**

**He brushed a strand of hair away from her cheek. "Of course, I want your help."**

**"Great! I'll get my sketching pad and pencils, too." She kissed him. "I'll be right back."**

**Several hours later, Alex and Maggie looked at the sketches spread across the table. Wadded balls of paper littered the floor. A cardboard box held an assortment of machine parts.**

**"I think we have it!" said Alex.**

**"Yeah, it looks great on paper, doesn't it?"**

**"We need a test model. Then if it works as well as I hope, we can start production on an affordable model."**

**"You're confident," said Maggie. "But we need money, don't we? We'll have to prove that it works before we can take it to Simon. And that means building the test model ourselves."**

**"Uh, right." Alex cursed his quick tongue. "We'll worry about the money later. Let's celebrate."**

**"That sounds good." Maggie rose and stretched. Her top moved up, revealing more of her smooth skin. Alex wanted to taste every inch of her. He couldn't resist spreading his fingers across the flat belly. As he stood, he moved his hands up her sides, his palms grazing against the fullness of her breasts. Her rough gasp excited him, but he merely traced her spine downwards until he reached her hips. Then he cupped her buttocks.**

**"You're not wearing a bra," he whispered as he nuzzled her neck. He pulled**

her close, his grip tightening when she pressed against the hard evidence of his desire.

"I thought we were going to celebrate your success," she breathed, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"*Oursuccess*," he corrected. "Hmmmmmm. You smell good."

"Thanks. The celebration?"

"I'd rather celebrate how I feel about you."

"What about--"

"Maggie, shut up and kiss me."

She did.

He almost melted under the onslaught of her mouth. Men were not supposed to turn into big, gooey puddles when woman kissed them. But this was not a tender assault. Maggie's lips spoke of need and the flickering of her tongue shot darts of desire through him. He could take her now. Pour out his desire in a single moment of selfishness. He broke the kiss and moved his hands to her shoulders. "Whoa. Let's wait."

"Why?"

His mind struggled to come up with a good excuse. "I want it to be right, Maggie. Perfect for you."

"Las Vegas was right. And this is right."

"Just let me give you some romance, okay? Especially since I didn't get to finish what I started at the pond."

She kissed him. "I don't need pretty things. Or right moments. Every moment with you is perfect."

He cleared his throat. "Stop or you'll make me blush."

She blushed instead. "I'm being silly, huh?"

"No, you're being Maggie." He tapped her nose. "I like that about you."

**"How about if meet you in about an hour?"**

**"All right."**

**Alex watched her leave, unable to keep his gaze from the graceful curves of her legs. When the door shut, he turned his attention to the sketches. He'd been exhilarated and energized as he worked with Maggie. He hadn't felt this way since his macaroni-and-cheese days when getting the money to build his inventions had been part of the challenge. Maggie was smart, hard working, and creative. She'd inspired him.**

**She deserved the truth.**

**He studied the sketches some more. He'd start work on the test model tomorrow. If it worked--and he knew it would, Convenience Unlimited would have a new direction. He owed Maggie big-time. Suddenly, he grinned. He knew the perfect way to re-pay her and Victoria, and reveal his identity in one, neatly wrapped package.**

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## **Chapter Eleven**

**Maggie watched the black wrought iron gates open. Alex eased the truck through the gap. He grinned at her. "I'm taking you back to the pond. We didn't finish our date."**

**"After Las Vegas, I think we're past the first date," she said, even though anticipation licked her spine and she shivered. She knew what Alex wanted to finish--and she wanted it, too. Her derailed life was finally on track. Getting the job at Convenience Unlimited had given back her confidence and with it, she allowed herself to acknowledge the feelings she had for Alex. She knew, now, that a relationship with him had possibilities.**

**Alex stopped the truck at the same area. They got out of the truck. Alex took Maggie's hand and led her to the willow tree near the pond.**

**Moonlight glittered on the water, slivers of light playing with the shadows. Maggie saw the red-and-white checkered picnic blanket and the wicker basket. "Deja vu," she said. Suddenly, she felt shy; she hugged herself and looked at the drooping, thin limbs of the willow tree. Nervousness balled in her stomach and made her legs tremble. It was as their lovemaking in Las Vegas had been a fantasy she concocted.**

Then Alex was there, brushing away the strands of hair tickling her collarbone, cupping her cheek, and bending low to kiss her. She sighed at the soft, warm feeling of his mouth and he captured that small breath, flickering a tongue along her lower lip, brushing her face with his calloused thumb. Her arms crept around his neck and her fingers threaded into his hair. Alex continued to tease her with his tongue, tasting the corners of her mouth, tracing the seam, nibbling on the fullness of her lips. Light and heat danced through her. Need was a throbbing, living thing that devoured her senses. She opened her mouth to accept his full kiss, mating her mouth to his, teasing him as he had teased her.

Maggie pulled Alex closer. Her nipples hardened as they made contact with his chest; they became pinpoints of sensation as Alex's hands found them, and tortured her with strokes and tugs. Little flames of desire flickered, ignited, exploded. Before she could utter the question, Alex had already answered it. He lowered her to the blanket and unbuttoned the shirt that barred him from Maggie's skin. The shirt opened. Alex paused.

"Wow." He fingered the black lace bra, cupped a breast, then suckled her nipple through the thin material. He raised his head. "And what's this?" He tapped the front clasp.

"Convenient?"

He laughed, then unsnapped the bra. With his forefinger, he eased the material from one breast, paying homage to it with his mouth. Maggie arched, drawing him closer, reaching for his shirt. Alex turned his attention to the other breast and Maggie shuddered as desire rippled over her. She wanted to rip off his shirt, but settled for hurriedly unbuttoning it and pushing it from his shoulders. He discarded it, then covered Maggie. As Alex kissed her, Maggie's restless hands eagerly sought sensitive skin, smoothed over hard muscles, reached for the zipper of Alex's pants. He stilled when she found his erect member, groaned against her mouth when she stroked him.

Alex's desire flamed. He discarded the rest of his clothes, and Maggie's. He brushed the inner skin of her thighs; his hand slid up, up, up until he reached the most sensitive part of her. She gasped, moving against his palm, her nails digging into his back as she moved with the rhythm of his stroking fingers. Maggie's low moans and clutching hands were aphrodisiacs. Alex was hard and ready, but he wanted Maggie's gratification more than his own. Leaning on his free arm, he bent his head and suckled her breast, laving it with his tongue.

"C'mon, sweetheart," he murmured. "Let go."

She did, arching, grasping, shuddering. Before she had time to recover, he slid inside, and re-built the fire.

Maggie's scent wrapped around him. He cried out as his pleasure shattered. Maggie followed, her cries mingling with his as her release throbbed around him.

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Alex couldn't wipe the silly grin off his face. He knew his sister-in-law and brother thought he was crazy; they'd been casting him concerned glances since he had arrived at their house.

Diapers, bottles, toys, and clothes covered nearly everything in the living room. The faint scent of baby powder lingered. Alex sat in the rocker and Alexandria's exhausted but happy parents sprawled on the couch. As he held his tiny niece, her serious blue eyes searching his face, Alex wondered what it would be like to hold his own child. His and Maggie's child. He wanted to make lots of babies with Maggie Conrad.

He grinned again.

"I recognize that dopey look," Danielle said. "You're in love."

"I'm in love with Maggie," he admitted.

Simon whistled. "My big brother's finally fallen for someone. About time."

Danielle elbowed him. "It has to be the right person. It's not like you can go to the store and pick out your soul mate."

Alex laughed. The baby startled; her rosebud lips puckered and her tiny face scrunched. He tickled her under the chin and cooed. Her eyes opened and her mouth closed. She waved her fists at him.

"So when's the wedding?" asked Simon

"Whenever Maggie wants."

"If she wants," said Danielle. "Have you mentioned who you are?"

"No. But she won't care. She loves me for who I am."

"She loves you for who she *thinks* you are," insisted Danielle. "You need to tell her you're a multi-millionaire inventor before you ask her to marry you."

"I know. And I'm going to tell her. In a big way."

Alexandria's wail interrupted the conversation. Alex was grateful for his niece's timing, he didn't want to discuss the matter of his identity. He knew Maggie wouldn't care if he was poor or if he was rich.

Danielle extracted her daughter from Alex's reluctant grasp and took her into the bedroom to nurse.

"You're a lucky man, Simon."

"I know, bro. And I hope you are, too."

"Everything will work out," said Alex. He was confident Maggie would understand his reasons for not admitting he who was. He loved her. When she realized how much, she'd forgive him anything.

\*\*\*

"Mags, darling, you're glowing," said Brian as Maggie sat down at the table. The outdoor café, located in Brookside, faced Peoria Street. Maggie looked across the street at a used bookstore, a biker bar, and a breakfast-only café. Everything around her seemed to look different, new. Better. Her heart was like a round, shiny penny that was suddenly worth a million dollars instead of just one cent.

God, she was being goofy.

"I swear there's a cloud under your feet, Mags. This is my last day in town, so give me the details. Spill, darling, spill it all!"

Maggie sipped her iced tea and told Brian about her new job and about Alex.

"Is he as good as he looks?"

"Brian!"

He laughed, then patted her hand. "I hope he doesn't break your heart, love."

"He won't. I trust him." Maggie bit into the Monte Cristo, savoring the bite



like it was one of Alex's kisses. She glanced at Brian and saw a secretive smile playing around his lips. "It looks like I'm not the only one who needs to tell a tale."

"It's nothing, Mags. I think my unrequited love is turning into requited love."

"That's not nothing. That's something." She grabbed his hand and squeezed it. "Tell me!"

\*\*\*

After lunch, Brian drove Maggie home. "Good-bye, Mags. I'll see you again soon."

"Don't let that big lug hurt you," she said.

Brian kissed her cheek. "Ditto."

Maggie practically danced into the house. She put on a half-shirt and some shorts, then bounded downstairs, and into the kitchen.

She wondered what Alex was doing. She grabbed a can of soda from the refrigerator, then went out the back door. The sight in the driveway took away her breath. She stumbled on the steps and the can flew out of her hand and rolled into the grass, but she didn't bother to retrieve it. She felt gut-punched.

Alex was packing up the truck.

He was leaving her.

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## Chapter Twelve

"Where will you go?" asked Maggie. She watched Alex put his duffel bag into the battered truck.

"I told you, sweetheart, I have another job. I've done everything I can do around this house. Your grandmother doesn't need me."

"I need you." Maggie swallowed the lump in her throat. She had the odd feeling he was going away and wouldn't return--ever. She folded her arms

and stepped back, afraid she would launch into Alex's arms and insist that he take her along.

Alex grasped her waist and pulled her in for a mind-numbing kiss. She felt her bones melt, leaving her rubbery and unable to stand on her own. She threaded her fingers through his long, soft hair, and poured her heart into the kiss.

"You left something upstairs," she whispered.

"I did?"

"Yes."

She grabbed his hand, led him up the now sturdy stairs, and entered the garage apartment.

Alex looked at the very empty apartment. "What did I leave?"

"This."

Maggie got on her knees, unzipped Alex's jeans, and pulled them down. His member was already hard. Gratified a mere kiss could turn him on, Maggie surrounded him with her mouth and used her tongue to show him a new meaning of pleasure.

After a few minutes, Alex dragged her up by the shoulders. His body trembled; his gaze was liquid heat. He slid his hands under her half-shirt and unsnapped the bra. His warm hands and eager fingers made her desire flare.

Maggie took off her shorts and panties. Alex's groan barely warned her; he picked her up and put her against the wall.

"I want you so much," he said as he entered her. She welcomed him by wrapping her legs around his hips. His thrusts matched her eagerness and the pleasure surrounding her centralized, building with each stroke, until she shattered, crying out Alex's name. He gave a final, hard thrust and came, throbbing inside her, his head dropping to her neck.

"I love you, Maggie."

Her heart lurched. "What?"

He stilled, then released her, holding her steady. "I said 'I'll move you.'"

"Oh." Maggie's heart stuttered into an erratic beat. How could she have misheard him? Because her own stupid self wanted to hear those words. Because she'd fallen in love with Alex. And she wanted him to be in love with her.

Damn it.

"When will I see you again?"

He smiled. "Very soon."

They put their clothes back on, and Maggie felt awkward. Was Alex intentionally being vague? Did he have any intention of seeing her again?

"I...there's this dinner my company's hosting on Saturday night. Do you...that is...shoot. Would you go with me? It's okay if I bring someone."

His gaze suddenly found the floor an interesting place to look. "You should take Gran--she's family.

"Right." Dread blossomed in her stomach. She couldn't believe Alex would just...just drop her. Desperation overrode her common sense. "Well, I don't have to go to the dinner. We could go somewhere else."

"I can't go with you, honey. I'm busy Saturday. But you should go to the dinner. It'll make a good impression with your boss."

"Why do I feel like I'm never going to see you again?"

He cupped her face and kissed her. "You'll see me again, Maggie. I'll be busy with this new job for the rest of the week, but don't worry. I'll call you."

"How many times have women heard that line?"

"You're such a cynic." He laughed, then brushed away a strand of hair from her cheek. "Trust me."

Maggie walked Alex to the truck and kissed him good-bye. As she watched him drive away, she couldn't get rid of the funny feeling something wasn't right. A detail niggled at her brain, a bit of important information had escaped her, and she couldn't quite nail it down.

Turning to walk into the house, she shook away the weird feelings. Alex wouldn't do anything to hurt her. He'd proven himself reliable and honest. Nothing was wrong. Everything was right. Alex deserved her trust--he wouldn't disappoint her.

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Alex tugged on the lapel of his tuxedo. His fingers

trembled. The low voices of people conversing and the clink of silverware reminded him he hadn't eaten yet. He stood on stage, behind the curtain that separated him from Maggie. She was out there. Waiting. He blew out a breath. Had arranging a company dinner been the right way to introduce himself? He wanted Maggie to see the moving shelves she'd helped him create. He wanted her to get the credit she deserved.

He wanted to marry her.

"Hey, bro. Nervous?" Simon walked across the stage and eyed the cloth-covered contraption. "Can I see it?"

"No."

Simon shoved his hands into his pockets. "Everyone's about finished with dinner. You ready?"

"Yep." Alex withdrew two thick envelopes from inside his tuxedo. "Give one to Maggie and one to Victoria after I reveal ShelveMaster, okay?"

Simon took the envelopes, but shook his head. "I hope you know what you're doing, Alex."

"Me, too."

\*\*\*

"Chicken's dry."

"Gran." Maggie tapped her spoon against the plate, unaccountably nervous, and somewhat annoyed with Gran's commentary about the food.

"Might as well have served us sawdust. Least I'd get some fiber that way."

Maggie rolled her eyes. "It's a company dinner for more than 200

employees. What did you expect? Steak?"

"Red meat gives me gas."

"Gran!"

Gran crossed her arms. "You brought it up."

"I did not--oh, never mind." Maggie sighed. She missed Alex and wished he'd been able to come. At least she wouldn't be so bored. Alex made the mundane fun. The only interesting thing about the whole affair was the opportunity to finally meet the president of the company. Her mysterious boss of a whole two weeks had never come into the office. She was just slightly curious about him, though. She'd been too preoccupied with Alex's weird behavior to worry about much else.

"Hello, Ms. Conrad." Simon McCormick's dimpled smile reminded her of Alex's. Maggie shook away the ache in her gut. Everything reminded her of Alex. She was behaving worse than a lovesick teenager enduring her first crush.

"Could I impose on you for a moment?"

"Of course."

He sat down next to her and they made small talk until the blare of music halted all conversations. Maggie settled into her seat and looked at the front of the room.

The music lowered and deep voice said, "Welcome Convenience Unlimited employees to the introduction of the latest product in kitchen convenience."

Slowly, the curtains parted.

A table with a large, cloth-covered object dominated the stage. Next to it, stood a man in a tuxedo. Maggie blinked. Wow. That guy looked like—he flashed a dimpled smile in her direction and she almost fainted. Alex!

"What the heck is Alex doing on stage?" muttered Gran.

"Good question," said Maggie.

Mr. McCormick cleared his throat and shifted in his chair. His hand went to top of his jacket, then fluttered down to the table. Maggie returned her

attention to Alex.

He looked gorgeous in a tuxedo. She longed to see him in jeans and a T-shirt, though. That was the Alex she knew.

Maybe he had a twin.

"And please welcome," boomed the narrator's voice, "Alex Ross McCormick, founder and president of Convenience Unlimited."

Maggie's breath hitched. Maybe Alex had a twin with the same first name. Because if he didn't, then that meant he'd been lying to her. But why?

"Thank you ladies and gentleman for giving up a Saturday night." Alex's gaze sought hers. He seemed to be asking for her to wait, to understand. She clutched the table, suddenly feeling dizzy.

"So, without further ado, I'd like to introduce our newest product... ShelfMaster!" Alex whipped off the cloth. The gleaming white shelves nearly blinded her; she blinked and realized tears had crowded into her eyes. As Alex's strong voice outlined the shelves' possibilities, the conversation they'd had in his apartment echoed in her mind. He demonstrated the shelves. They moved forward and back. Up and down.

And they followed voice commands.

Images flashed in her mind.

*The pond.*

*The limo.*

*The machine parts scattered on the scarred desk.*

*The restaurant.*

*The pond.*

*The jet plane.*

*The luxury suite.*

*The damned pond.*

**"How stupid can I be?" she whispered.**

**"Here, Maggie." Simon thrust a napkin into her hand and she blotted her eyes. "He meant well."**

**"He lied."**

**"He loves you."**

**She shook her head, unable to respond.**

**"I'm supposed to give you these," Simon said.**

**He gave her a thick white envelope and gave one to Gran, too. "It's a repayment of the salary you gave him, Ms. Simms. And both you get paid for the research and the ideas generated from my brother's stay at your home."**

**"Keep it," said Gran. "He did the work and earned the money. Don't need payment for ideas. Ideas are free."**

**Maggie shoved her envelope toward Simon. "I don't want anything from Mr. McCormick. Least of all money."**

**She and Gran stood up. Maggie couldn't even look at the stage. She wanted to throw up.**

**"Maggie, wait. Alex didn't want to hurt you. He thought this was the best way to tell you the truth." Simon's apologetic tone did nothing to assuage the lead butterflies in her stomach.**

**She dropped the napkin on the table. "He was wrong."**

**Maggie turned and followed Gran out of the ballroom and away from Alex--the man she thought she loved.**

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## **Chapter Thirteen**

**Alex couldn't see much from the stage, the lights were too bright to see the faces of his employees. His heart thumped in his chest as he turned to where he thought Maggie had been sitting.**

**"And finally, ladies and gentleman, the ShelfMaster would not have been**

created without the help of Maggie Conrad. Please give her a round of applause."

He squinted and saw Simon alone at Maggie's table. A vise squeezed his chest. Maybe she'd only gone to the bathroom. Yes. That was it. She had to powder her nose. Or something.

She wouldn't have left.

Music blared, signaling the end to the presentation and the curtains closed. Alex wiped the sweat from his brow as he hurried off the stage. Getting through the crowd of people was an exercise in frustration, but he finally reached Simon. "She went to the restroom, right? She'll be back in just a minute."

Simon stood and handed Alex the envelopes of money. "She's gone, bro. She turned pale as a ghost after you unveiled the ShelveMaster. Then she and her grandmother left."

Alex stared at the envelopes. "Okay, she's mad. No big deal. I'll make it up to her."

Simon clapped him on the shoulder. "Sure, Alex. Whatever you say."

\*\*\*

"Hi, you've reached Maggie Conrad and Victoria Simms. Leave a message and we'll get back to you as soon as possible."

Alex's tired voice filled the kitchen. At the table, Gran kept eating her eggs, but Maggie clutched her cup of coffee. "Maggie, it's been four days, six hours, and fifty-three minutes. This is my thirty-sixth message. Why won't you let me explain? What do I have to do? Please, please call me."

The machine clicked off.

"Gotta answer the phone some time," said Gran.

"No, I don't." Maggie got up from the table and walked to the answering machine. She clicked the Record Message button. "You've reached Maggie Conrad and Victoria Simms. Please leave a message—unless you're Alex Ross McCormick. I never want to speak to you again."

She turned it off, then burst into tears.



Gran put down her fork, wiped her mouth, then scooted away from the table. She folded her arms across her chest. "Maggie Lynn Conrad, plant your butt in the chair. It's time for some plain talk."

Sniffing, Maggie dutifully pulled out a chair and sat down. She played with the sleeve of her nightgown and refused to look at her grandmother. She didn't really want to hear Gran tell her what she already knew. She was behaving like a child. But Alex had lied to her. And worse than taking her trust, he'd taken her heart.

And kept it.

"Alex is a good man."

Maggie opened her mouth to protest, but Gran put out her hands in a stop motion. "I've heard my fill about what a liar he is. And how he's no better than Harrison. And how you'd rather eat broken glass than ever say his name again. And how pissed you are that he gave you a job."

"I quit."

"I know. That's always been your problem." Gran stood up. "And aside from that, you're too stubborn for your own good."

"I wonder where I get that from," muttered Maggie.

Gran snorted. "When Harrison left you at the altar, you cried--a little. You never went through this kind of angst, not since you lost your parents. The eleven-year-old girl that came to live with Gramps and me did everything she could to protect herself from pain. Then Alex came along and reached that little girl who walled up her emotions. He made you feel again. And that's why you hate him."

"I don't hate him. Much."

Gran brushed Maggie's cheek, her gaze both stern and loving. "That's all I'm saying on the matter. Now you can go back to sitting on your duff and feeling sorry for yourself." She turned and left the kitchen.

Maggie sniffled. Scratched her nose. Coughed. Hiccapped. Drew faces in her runny eggs. Maggie shifted in her chair. She was deeply annoyed with her grandmother for calling a spade a spade—or rather a scared Maggie a scared Maggie.

**It was time to take some action. Some serious action.**

**She went for ice cream.**

**And ended up at the grocery store nearly getting bowled over by the last person she ever wanted to see—second only to Alex McCormick.**

**"Harrison?"**

**He looked at the ice cream carton in her hand with a forlorn gaze she recognized. She'd seen it on her face this morning when she'd looked into the mirror.**

**"I like Funky Chunky with almonds," he said. "But the Brownie Blues is a good choice."**

**He looked pitiful somehow. Different from the dapper, slick businessman she had dated.**

**"What the heck's wrong with you?"**

**"Sheila left me for the plumber." He sighed--a long, billowing sound she suspected could only be made by someone miserable from a broken heart. Such as herself.**

**"So you really loved her, huh?"**

**He stopped staring the Brownie Blues in her hand, then blinked as if he'd just become aware he was speaking to the woman he'd left at the altar.**

**"Oh hi, Maggie." Harrison found the sign announcing a sale on frozen vegetables suddenly very interesting. "How are you?"**

**"Very glad I didn't marry you," she said.**

**He had the decency to flinch. "I'm sorry about that. I really thought you and I would make a good match. But Sheila...well, you understand, don't you?"**

**Pity overwhelmed her anger. Hadn't Harrison done her a big favor by being a selfish jerk? And better that they'd had no marriage at all than a quick divorce. It was clear, now, how wrong they'd been for each other.**

**And it sharpened the knowledge that she and Alex fit exactly right.**

She handed Harrison the carton of ice cream. "I'm billing you for the ads you took from me."

"The company owned those," he said without much force.

"Not after you fired me. And it's the least you can do for making me wear that ugly engagement ring."

"Okay, Maggie. And thanks for the ice cream."

She smiled. "Thanks for the wake-up call."

As she drove home, Maggie faced the facts. She hadn't waited after the banquet to hear Alex's explanation. Actually, she hadn't wanted to hear his excuses. It was easier to be hurt and make him the bad guy than it was to face her own faults. She didn't trust easily. And even though Harrison had hurt her by leaving her at the altar, she'd seen enough signs before she stuffed herself into that ridiculous wedding gown and waddled down the aisle. She'd used her failed attempt at a mediocre relationship as an excuse to not open herself up to real love.

And she was ashamed.

Maggie gripped the steering wheel. But would Alex give her a chance? Or would he treat her the way she'd been treating him? There was only one way to find out.

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## Chapter Fourteen

Afternoon sunlight filtered across Alex's office. He grabbed his coffee, took a sip, and grimaced. Cold. He glanced at the phone, then buzzed his secretary. "Do I have any messages, Melissa?"

"No, sir. Oh wait. The line's buzzing." Alex gripped the receiver. Then Melissa came back on the line. "It's her, sir. It's Maggie Conrad."

Alex almost swallowed his tongue. Apprehension bloomed in his stomach. He'd wanted to talk to her, to hear her voice, but now he was afraid of what she might say.

"Sir?"

**"I'll take the call. Thank you." He punched the blinking button on his phone. "Maggie?"**

**"I liked the shelves. You did a lot of work in just a week."**

**"Who needs sleep." He gave a half-hearted laugh. "I wanted to get them on-line so you could see how your idea worked."**

**"It was your idea."**

**"Maggie...I'm sorry. About everything. I wish I hadn't lied. I wish...just let me explain, okay?"**

**"You'll have to do it in person, Alex."**

**"Okay. I'll leave right now."**

**"Good-bye, Alex."**

**God he hated those words. "Maggie?"**

**The line went dead. Alex rose from his desk, straightening his tie and combing through his hair with trembling fingers. He opened the door, glancing at his secretary's desk. The back of her big black leather chair faced him. He saw the top of her head. "Melissa? I'll be gone for the rest of the day."**

**The chair whirled and Alex found himself staring at Maggie. "She took a break."**

**Alex refrained from throwing himself on his knees and begging for another chance. But he loved this woman more than...than..."I'll sell Convenience Unlimited. I'll become a handyman. I'll live in a shack. Anything you want. Anywhere you want. Anything for you, Maggie."**

**She blinked. Shifted in her chair. Pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "I should've trusted you. I shouldn't have assumed you used me."**

**Alex's heart hammered in his chest as Maggie rose from the chair, walked around the desk, and stood in front of him. "Can you forgive me?"**

**He touched her cheek. "I asked first."**

**"I love you, Alex."**

The ache in his heart melted away and joy filled him as her arms crept around his neck. He embraced her and inhaled her fragrance. Maggie. In his arms.

"I want to make babies with you."

"Okay."

"Want to get married?"

"Yes."

"We can honeymoon in Tahiti."

"Mmmmm."

"How about we--"

Maggie pulled his head down and looked into his eyes. His breath hitched at the love he saw in her gaze. "Alex, shut up and kiss me."

And he did.

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## Epilogue

*Eighteen months later.*

"Give Howard back his toupee, Alexandria," admonished Gran, taking the black hair away from the toddler and handing it to Betty Lee's husband. He curled his lower lip. "Why, thank ya, thank ya very much."

Maggie exchanged a grin with Alex. It was dusk on the Fourth of July and everyone was picnicking on the banks of the pond. The lights of their home blazed just beyond the slight rise of the road, reminding Maggie of the light and love she'd found with Alex.

Sitting under the willow tree, Maggie snuggled against Alex as well as she could with a watermelon-shaped stomach.

Simon and Danielle happily chased their daughter around a grassy area, their laughter echoing that of Gran's as she told Alex's great-uncle Morris

dirty jokes. Betty Lee and Howard sat at the edge of the pond, dipping their toes in the water and holding hands.

Moments like this made life worth living.

Alex rubbed her tummy and received a kick for his efforts. "Football player, definitely."

"Ballerina," Maggie countered. A warm gush of water soaked her legs. She struggled to sit up.

Alex helped her, alarm flickered in his eyes. "What's wrong, honey? Is it a cramp?"

"I think we're about to find out if the baby's a football player or a ballerina."

She gave him credit for trying not to panic, but he shot up so suddenly, he lost his balance, and stumbled backwards into the pond.

Alex came up sputtering and muddy, and Maggie had to laugh, despite the band of pain squeezing her womb. "This looks vaguely familiar."

He climbed out, grabbed her, and kissed her solidly. "Just don't sit on me this time. You might crush me."

Her outrage faded under another contraction, and concern replaced the teasing glint in Alex's eyes. Gran appeared, took one look at the situation, and smacked Alex on the arm. "Get a move on it, son, or you'll be delivering your own baby."

Alex paled considerably, then helped Maggie up the slight incline. Gran followed, smiling through her tears. "Told you left knee ache meant true love," she whispered.

Hours later, Alex cradled his sleeping daughter. He stood next to his wife's hospital bed and watched Maggie count the fingers of their son.

"Ten toes and ten fingers," said Maggie.

"Twenty digits all together then," he said, still reeling from the surprise delivery of twins.

Maggie kissed the top of her son's fuzzy head. "Do you think we can get a

patent?"

Alex laughed, so filled with joy, he wanted to dance with his future ballerina. His daughter's eyes drifted open. She yawned, waved her tiny wrinkled fist, then stared at the man holding her.

"Hello, Vicky," he said, touching her smooth, soft cheek. "I'm your daddy."

He leaned close to Maggie. "This is your mommy. And this little guy," he continued, showing Vicky her blanket-wrapped sibling, "is your brother...Elvis."

The End

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## About the Author

### Michele R. Bardsley

In-between potty training her toddler son, venturing into her daughter's Room of the Unknown, answering questions like "Honey, why are my socks glued to the floor?" and committing plant homicide (you mean you have to water those green thingies?), Michele R. Bardsley writes novels. She also finds time for eating chocolate and drawing smiley faces in the accumulated dust on her furniture.

Michele has been published in short fiction and nonfiction, and has received numerous awards for her writing from magazines, colleges, writer's groups, and others--including Byline Magazine, Writer's Digest, Silhouette Books, Oklahoma State University, Oklahoma Writers' Federation, Inc., Scribe & Quill, Tulsa Community College, and Writer's Bloc.

Despite living in Las Vegas for three whole years, she's never hit a Megabucks jackpot, so she earns a living as a freelance writer and editor. She lives with her husband, two adorable children, and two blind cats. Visit her webpage at <http://www.michelebardsley.addr.com/myindex.html> or e-mail her at [michelebardsley@addr.com](mailto:michelebardsley@addr.com)

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