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A Bride To Honor

ARLENE JAMES

Arlene James
A Bride To Honor

Аннотация

VIRGIN BRIDESCelebrate the joys of first love with unforgettable stories by your most beloved authors.HIS MOST HONORABLE VOWHe was a man of immense wealth and privilege, but no amount of money could release Paul Spencer from his impending loveless marriage. His grandfather's will had left Paul little choice: Marry a woman he despised or lose the family business. And with Paul, family always came first. Until he laid eyes on innocent beauty Cassidy Penno.The businessman knew their future was one he could never claim, though Cassidy swore she needed no promises to become his in every way. But this man of honor vowed never to possess his sweet virgin unless he could find a way to make her his one, his only bride!

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“It’s not enough just to be your first, Cass.”

Paul took a deep breath, ignored the thickening of his voice and made himself go on. “Honey, you’re the kind of woman who needs and deserves everything a man has to give—his name, his children, his forever after. That’s not me. I wish it was, but it’s not. Somewhere out there is a man who’ll be your one and only, and I won’t rob you of that just to be your first, not even if it kills me.”

“Why does it have to be like this?” she asked.

He steeled himself and said, “Because I messed up, honey. Now, let me go before this attack of decency passes.”

“Paul, please stay.”

But they both knew he couldn’t. He looked down at her one last time. “Goodbye, Cass. And thank you.”

At that moment Paul knew for once he’d done the right thing for someone else at his own expense, and that someone was Cassidy. No one mattered more....

Dear Reader,

You’ll find the heartwarming themes of love and family in our November Romance novels. First up, longtime reader favorite Arlene James portrays A Bride To Honor. In this VIRGIN

BRIDES title, a pretty party planner falls for a charming tycoon...whom another woman seeks to rope into a loveless marriage! But can honorable love prevail?

A little tyke takes a tumble, then awakes to ask a rough-hewn rancher, Are You My Daddy? So starts Leanna Wilson's poignant, emotional romance between a mom and a FABULOUS FATHER who "pretends" he's family. Karen Rose Smith finishes her enticing series DO YOU TAKE THIS STRANGER? with Promises, Pumpkins and Prince Charming. A wealthy bachelor lets a gun-shy single mom believe he's just a regular guy. Will their fairy-tale romance survive the truth?

FOLLOW THAT BABY, Silhouette's exciting cross-line continuity series, comes to Romance this month with The Daddy and the Baby Doctor by star author Kristin Morgan. An ex-soldier single dad butts heads with a beautiful pediatrician over a missing patient. Temperatures rise, pulses race—could marriage be the cure? It's said that opposites attract, and when The Cowboy and he Debutante cozy up on a rustic ranch...well, you'll just have to read this TWINS ON THE DOORSTEP title by Stella Bagwell to find out! A hairdresser dreams of becoming a Lone Star Bride when a handsome stranger passes through town. Don't miss the finale of Linda Varner's THREE WEDDINGS AND A FAMILY miniseries!

Beloved authors Lindsay Longford, Sandra Steffen, Susan Meier and Carolyn Zane return to our lineup next month, and in the new year we launch our brand-new promotion, FAMILY

MASTERS. So keep coming back to Romance!

Happy Thanksgiving!

Mary-Theresa Hussey

Senior Editor, Silhouette Romance

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A Bride To Honor
Arlene James

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ARLENE JAMES

grew up in Oklahoma and has lived all over the South. In 1976 she married “the most romantic man in the world.” The author enjoys traveling with her husband, but writing has always been her chief pastime.

Dear Reader,

I knew I was going to like Cassidy Jane Penno, the heroine of A Bride To Honor, from the moment she popped into my mind. Cassidy is pragmatic but charmingly quirky. She is a woman of firm conviction and unconditional love. What’s not to like?

Frankly, I wasn’t so sure about Paul Barclay Spencer. After all, Paul lets himself get into a tricky situation. But Paul turned

out to be the finest of men, one who recognizes real treasure, who properly appreciates the rare and the true, a modern man of genuine honor. For Paul, like Cassidy, love runs much deeper than its physical expression, though even he didn't understand that about himself until it was almost too late.

It is that very principle that stands at the heart of the VIRGIN BRIDES series. We romantics know that true romance is about the depth of reward to be found in the expression of true love, physically and otherwise. Without love, sex is empty and totally self-serving. Within the context of total love and heartfelt commitment, sex is one of God's greatest gifts to humankind. Cassidy's innate wisdom tells her this from early on. It's a truth that Paul has to learn the hard way, but learn it he does, and his reward is A Bride To Honor.

God bless all true romantics,

Chapter One

"I know it's important," Cassidy said, righting her red yam wig and dusting off her white, ruffled pinafore. "It's just that it's so close to Halloween, and you know this is the busiest time of the year for me."

William looked as though he wanted to pull his short, expensively styled, yellow blond hair. He took a deep breath, though, and merely straightened his gray silk tie, saying carefully, "That's why I need this favor."

Cassidy smiled and took pity on her too-serious brother. "I said I'd outfit him. I just hope he doesn't want anything too exotic, that's all."

William leaned across the glass display case, ignoring outrageous false eyelashes, rubber noses, skull caps and an impressive assortment of warts and moles, to seize his sister by the front of her Raggedy Ann costume. "I don't think I'm getting through the wig. This is my boss, Cass! He's desperate. I have personally recommended you. For pity's sake, don't let me down!"

Poor William, always in such turmoil, so fearful of being embarrassed by his family. All right, they were a tad...eccentric. But they meant well. Usually. She laid a mittened hand against his cheek and smiled reassuringly, completely forgetting that her own face was heavily painted with drawn-on eyelashes, red circle cheeks and a Cupid's bow mouth. "I promise, brother dear, Mr. Paul Barclay Spencer of Barclay Bakeries will receive star treatment from me. And we'll find him a costume that will impress this Betty person and make him feel comfortable at the same time. Upon my honor as your sister."

William was only slightly mollified. "It's Betina," he said pointedly, "Betina Lincoln, though if all goes well she will almost

certainly be Mrs. Paul Spencer by spring."

"And Mr. Spencer will have the family business safely back in family hands again," Cassidy said to prove that she had been paying attention after all, "and he'll owe it all to you." She patted William's cheek encouragingly. He caught her hand and pushed it down to her side.

"Yes, if you don't mess up everything. Now will you please, for heaven's sake, get out of that absurd costume before he gets here?"

Cassidy sighed and reached up to tug off her enormous, red yarn wig with one mittened hand while sketching a cross over her heart with the other. "I'll abandon Raggedy Ann for my own mousy persona and I'll come up with the perfect costume for your boss, I swear, something that will win him the heart—and the company shares—of the glamorous, elusive Miss Betina Lincoln. Satisfied?"

William straightened, smoothed his unwrinkled Italian suit and nodded tersely. "Just remember, I'm counting on you."

She smiled encouragingly, and he gave her his patented, big brother look of near approval. Then on his way out he ruined it by raking his clear green gaze over her costume-clad self and shaking his head as if to ask how such a promising young executive as himself had wound up being the sibling of such a pitiful goon as her. She honestly didn't know what the problem was. She was a costumer. Costumers by definition designed, sewed and—if they were lucky enough to own their own shops,

as she did—stored, displayed, rented, sold and, of course, wore costumes. Who on earth would wear a costumer's costume if she didn't wear one herself? Poor uptight William just didn't always see the correlations in life—except as they pertained to him. Still, she reminded herself, the Penno family was a cross for poor William to bear, and she did not want to add to his burden.

He didn't understand the divorce their parents had gone through last year, even though it was obvious to Cassidy that, despite thirty-five years of marriage—or perhaps because of it—Alvin and Anna Penno were completely incompatible. He didn't see that they were both happier on their own or that the failed marriage had nothing whatsoever to do with him or her. She supposed that his association with the Barclay Spencer clan was part of the problem.

That family more than any other of whom she was aware made family and family concerns supreme, especially when it came to the family business, Barclay Bakeries. What must it be like, she wondered, to be part of such a cohesive unit? She supposed it was wonderful, since William seemed to admire and envy them so.

It certainly seemed fitting that Paul Spencer, CEO and general manager of the family bakeries, should many his stepcousin, especially since she had inherited shares of the company from the late Mr. Chester Barclay, Paul's grandfather. A marriage between the two of them would tie everything up all neat and clean. She couldn't help wondering, though, why "the lovely and sophisticated Miss Lincoln," as described by William, was so

reluctant to marry Paul now, especially considering that he had broken off a torrid affair with the woman against her will some months ago. It looked to Cassidy as if Betina would be getting everything she wanted with this marriage. But then, perhaps she had misunderstood that portion of her brother's explanation.

Putting the Barclay bunch out of her mind, she started for the changing room, calling Tony away from the new Arabian Nights display that he was putting together out front. He stuck his head into the circus arena that now defined the second of four showrooms in the shop and waggled an eyebrow at her.

"You called, chérie?" he asked in an affected French accent. A jaunty straw boater was pushed onto the back of his head, revealing the black widow's peak of which he was so proud. He was Maurice Chevalier today. Yesterday he'd been Clark Gable. Tomorrow, he was sure, he'd be the next great superstar of screen and stage, just as soon as he graduated college and left Dallas behind for Los Angeles or New York. He wasn't quite certain yet which coast he was going to allow to discover him.

At twenty-five, her own dreams of acting success reshaped into a satisfying career as a costumer, Cassidy felt decades older and wiser than her twenty-year-old clerk/assistant Tony Abatto. She could even admit to a bit of impatience with his posturing and half-teasing passes, while at the same time chastising herself for raining, ever so lightly, on his parade. Let him believe in all-consuming passions and shooting-star careers while he could. He'd find out soon enough that it took more than mere talent

to get a break in the business. Meanwhile work awaited, and promises had to be kept.

"I'm going to change," she told him. "Watch the shop. I'm expecting a special customer."

"Oui, mademoiselle. With my life I shall guard the repository of your dreams, another dedicated expression of the amour I bear you."

"Better an expression of the amour you bear your job," she said through a stage smile, winding her way through the circus paraphernalia strewn about the floor.

"Raggedy Ann not suit the mood?" Tony asked, coming fully into the room.

"My brother's mood," she tossed over her shoulder, catching the grimace he meant for her back. Tony was of the opinion that William was a Philistine of the grossest order, and while she agreed with him on one level, she felt duty-bound to defend her brother on another. She settled, this time, for a cutting glance, unaware that painted-on eyelashes and bright red grease paint somewhat ruined the effect. "Start a rack for me, Tony," she called, slipping into the curtained alcove.

"Okay. What do you want on it?"

"Oh, the usual macho male themes."

"One Dracula/Fighter Pilot/Corsair coming up."

Cassidy sighed wistfully. She had a Peter Pumpkin Eater costume she'd like to palm off on somebody before Halloween, but she supposed it would not be wise to attempt it with William's

boss. On the other hand, every Dracula, pirate and military uniform in the building was reserved. Whatever Paul Spencer chose was bound to send her back to her sewing machine, and just when she'd thought she was through with the season rush. Oh, well, she could sleep the second week of November—if she lasted that long.

Cassidy first pulled off her mitts, then slipped out of the dress with its attached pinafore, hung it on a hook and divested herself of the calf-length bloomers, striped stockings and soft black shoes. Comfortable, snug-fitting jeans and a mustard yellow cardigan sweater worn buttoned to the top of the V-neck replaced the dress and pinafore. Heavy, plain white cotton socks and burgundy penny loafers, complete with the pennies, replaced the stripes and black shoes. Leaving her goldish brown hair pulled back with the aid of a rubber band, she took the costume and left the dressing room. From sheer habit she went directly to the permanent rack where the Raggedy Anns were kept and hung the costume in its proper place before heading to the mirrored makeup station in the far back of the shop.

She loved every inch of her store, but the makeup station was especially dear to her heart owing to the fact that it contained numerous components of her late grandfather's barbershop, from the pole to a lather brush, which she used for dusting on powder. Seating herself in the creaky, green leather chair, she whipped a short cape from a drawer and swirled it around her throat and shoulders before reaching for a tub of cold cream. With her

fingertips, she began working the white, red and black grease paint from her face. She had it converted nicely to a gooey, slimy, gray mass ready to be toweled off when a movement in the mirror alerted her that "Maurice" had walked up behind her. Before she could ask why he wasn't watching the front door as he'd been told, he depressed the foot pedal that released the back of the chair and she found herself prone, looking up at her irritating clerk and the front of a dark, pin-striped suit.

"Ewww," Tony said helpfully. Then he bent over and kissed her on the neck, saying huskily in his phony French accent, "This client asked to see you, chérie."

Cassidy took a swing at him with her towel, but he danced back out of reach, laughing, and informed the other man, "She adores me."

"So it would seem," was the acerbic reply.

Groaning, Cassidy dropped the towel over her face. A moment later, the back of her chair shot forward, nearly propelling her out of it, and she heard the rush of expelled air as someone took a seat on the leather upholstered rolling stool at her side. Expecting Tony, she snatched the towel off her head, only to encounter the grinning visage of a stranger. He was a handsome stranger, at least, with short, conservatively styled dark brown hair the color of cocoa powder and sparkling blue-gray eyes framed with thick, reddish brown lashes. His straight, slender brows seemed almost black, as did the hint of beard shadow that seemed to lurk beneath his pale golden skin. The breadth of his smile made hard

little apples of his cheeks and cut deep brackets between them and the flat of a rather prominent chin.

He offered her a long, slender hand. “Cassidy Penno, I presume.”

She slipped her hand into his mechanically. “Yes.”

“Paul Spencer.”

She closed her eyes, grimaced and snatched her hand back, using it to mop up the nasty gray grease covering her face. “I’m sorry, Mr. Spencer,” she said plaintively from behind the towel, her voice muffled accordingly. “I was dressed as Raggedy Ann earlier, and my brother told me you were coming, but I thought I’d have time to remove my makeup, and that rascal Tony probably wanted to embarrass me, blast him! He hates William, and he stays mad at me because I won’t take his passes seriously, and I ought to fire him, I know, but—”

Paul Spencer pulled the towel out of her hands, still grinning. “Uh-huh,” he said, wiping gunk from her face in long, sure strokes. Cassidy stared, mesmerized by the sparkle in his eyes. “You were telling me why you weren’t going to fire, ah, Tony, was it?”

Cassidy mumbled weakly, “It takes a certain kind of individual to work in a place like this.”

“Really?” he said, using the towel to wipe a glob of grease from beneath her eyebrow. “What kind of individual is that?”

She took the towel from his hands and turned to the mirror, leaning forward in order to avoid his gaze as much as to see her

own face. Clumps of gray gunk clung to her skin. Quickly she began wiping them away.

"You were telling me what sort of individual works in a place like this," he reminded her, folding his arms.

"Someone who loves the theater," she said tersely. "An actor usually. Someone who likes to dress up. Someone creative. Someone who'll work for minimum wage." A glance into the side mirror showed that he was grinning again. She rubbed furiously at her cheeks, hoping to disguise the color burning there. William would kill her if he found out about this! Poor William, forever foiled by his own family. Cassidy threw down the towel in disgust and ripped the rubber band from her hair, allowing it to swing about her shoulders in one sleek sheet as she plucked thin tendrils of bangs forward onto her forehead. "I'd appreciate it, Mr. Spencer if you wouldn't tell William that you caught me like this. William's a wonderful brother but he's... well, he's—"

"Uptight," Paul Spencer provided helpfully. "Humorless. Staid."

Cassidy gaped, horrified, at his reflection in the mirror.

Spencer laughed. "Relax, Miss Penno, I think very highly of your brother. He's a fine executive and an upstanding member of society. He also takes himself and life in general a bit too seriously." He used his thumb and forefinger to make a zipping motion across his mouth and added, "William won't hear a word from me about how you greeted me looking like some kind of

swamp monster."

Cassidy spun the chair around. "I did not!"

"No, you didn't," he agreed, lips quirking. "I was teasing."

"Oh."

The smile working its way across his lips widened to expose strong, white teeth. One on the right side had a tiny chip in it. Suddenly, something of his humor infected her, and she knew, not only that she could trust him, but that he trusted her enough to joke with her. Why did she sense that there were precious few others with whom he could laugh? It didn't really matter. What mattered was that it was going to be all right. Her spirits soared, and she laughed.

"I'm so sorry. I must have looked a fright."

He chuckled. "Let's just say that I'd never have guessed there was such a pretty face beneath all that gray slime."

She felt a flash of pleasure, then realized that he was teasing again. "Oh, you," she said, getting to her feet and waving him to his. "Actually, in my business it's very convenient to have such a plain, featureless face. It's like having a clean canvas with which to work. If you'll just come this way, I think—I hope—Tony has put together some possibilities for us." To her surprise, he hauled her up short with a hand clamped down on her forearm. Heat flashed up her arm to lodge somewhere in her chest, spreading warmth subtly.

"Who told you that you were plain?" he demanded, brows furrowed. "William?"

“What? Oh...no, of course not!”

“Yours is a very delicate, classical beauty,” he insisted, skimming a finger over her wispy brows, down the short—too short, in her opinion—bridge of her nose, across the subtle peaks of her upper lip and over the rounded tip of her chin.

Cassidy was hypnotized. No one had ever told her that she was beautiful before. She almost believed him, he was so good at it! Then he took his finger away, and reality snapped back into place.

She shook her head to clear it and pointed tentatively into the other room. “Shall we?”

He stepped back, dropped his gaze and lifted a hand to indicate that he would follow her. She turned and strode purposefully into the other room, trying not to think how tall he was, not as tall as she had first imagined, because when they had stood close, she had noticed that the top of her head came about to his eyebrows. That meant that he probably wasn’t much taller than six feet, as she stood just about five-nine in these shoes. A perverse little gremlin in the back of her mind whispered that he was just about the perfect height for her, when she knew perfectly well that there was no such thing.

To her relief, the rolling rack that they used for the “possibilities” that customers had not yet tried on, stood in the middle of the third showroom. Cassidy hoped that Tony had used better judgment in choosing costumes than he had used in bringing Paul Spencer back to the makeup station while she was

covered in gray glop. She indicated a small barrel, atop which a deep red cushion had been placed. “If you’ll just have a seat, Mr. Spencer, I’ll show you some of our more popular styles for men.”

“Paul,” he said, lowering himself onto the cushion.

Not a good idea, she told herself. He was simply too attractive a man to call by his given name, under the circumstances. She merely smiled and reached for the first hanger on the rack, displaying it for him with a flourish.

“This is our most popular costume at this time of year, for obvious reasons.”

Paul lifted a neat brow. “Dracula seems a bit trite to me.” “Right.” Cassidy moved the costume to the back of the rack and reached for the next one. “The corsair, or pirate, cuts a dashing figure, and it comes complete with earring, saber, and—if you tike—peg leg or parrot.”

His lips quirked. “I don’t think so. I’m not the earring type.”

“Okay.” To the back of the rack went the corsair, and out came the Red Baron. “This is a very romantic figure, the famous World War I fighter pilot. They have those commercials on television, you know, where the women swoon—”

He was shaking his head. “Swooning women embarrass me.”

“Ah.” She stowed the Red Baron. “How about Patton? We could silver your hair and pad your middle a bit and have you looking just like George C. Scott.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Dwight D. Eisenhower?”

“I’m not sure the military thing is for me.”

“Not even the Rebel soldier from the Civil War?”

He lifted both hands helplessly. “Especially not the Rebel soldier. We’re trying to expand beyond the Southern states at Barclay Bakeries, and there will be prospective clients at this party.”

“Politically incorrect, huh?”

“I wouldn’t want to chance it.”

“I guess the Yankee Blue is out of the question, too, then.”

“And the American Indian, I’m afraid.”

“Hmm.” She squinted at his very dark hair and reached for an idea. “I suppose we could try a Chinese emperor. A little makeup around the eyes and a pigtail...”

He merely folded his hands together, clearly underwhelmed.

“Rudolph Valentino as the sheikh?”

He considered that, then shook his head. “Not for this occasion.” He looked around him. “And no gypsies.”

“Prince Albert?”

“Wasn’t he bald?”

“Castro. No forget that.”

“And nix on Joseph Stalin just in case he’s your next inspiration.”

She made a face at him and was rewarded with that quick grin. “Stalin,” she murmured. “Russia. Hmm. Oh, my gosh,” she said, snapping her fingers. “Remember Tony Curtis in that marvelous old movie about the cossacks? Yul Brynner played his father, I

think, and they jumped their horses over wider and wider gorges in a test of bravery."

"Taras Bulba!" he said, coming to his feet. "Didn't he die at the end?"

She shrugged. "He still got the girl."

"Oh, yeah." He folded his arms, one finger tapping his chin. "Yeah. I think I can do that." The idea seemed to grow on him, and he nodded enthusiastically. "Well, let's see it."

Oops. Cassidy grimaced apologetically. "Uh, I don't exactly have one in stock, but I can make one up for you."

He stroked his chin. "I suppose it would be an original, just for me."

Cassidy relaxed and smiled, even though it meant research for which she didn't have time, not to mention designing, cutting and sewing—and fittings. She reminded herself that this was for William and said resignedly, "Exactly."

"Excellent!" He rubbed his hands together enthusiastically. "So, how do we begin?"

"With research, actually."

"Research! Very good. Where should I begin? I mean, what era historically?"

She blinked at him. "You don't have to do the research yourself. That's my job."

"Well, how will I know you're doing it correctly?" he asked.

She chewed the inside of her cheek. "Good point."

He laughed. "It's not that I don't trust you. I'm just something

of a purist, I guess. Anyway, I like to know things, and I don't want to look like an idiot if someone asks me about my costume."

"Very well," she said, oddly touched. "You might want to research the movie, too, then. In fact, it's more likely you'll be asked about that than the historical significance of the costume."

He considered this, nodding. "I see your point. It's a pity that people always seem to be more interested in the movie than the history. I think we diminish ourselves with our lack of interest in history."

"You know, I hadn't thought that," she said, impressed. He seemed oddly pleased. "Ah. Well. I, um, guess I'm off to do some research. Uh, what comes after that?"

"Oh!" Cassidy realized she hadn't thought about fitting appointments. "We'll have to have fittings, of course."

"But, um, isn't there something before that? I mean, I will get a chance to approve the overall design beforehand, won't I? Or is that too—"

"No! No, it's fine. Really. In fact, it'll probably save time... really."

He smiled at her. "Fine. So, um, when do I get to see the designs?"

Oh, jeepers, she had so much to do, deliveries to make, pickups at the dry cleaners, various mending, several alterations. She tried to think, then heard herself saying, "End of the week?"

"How about Thursday?" he suggested. "Friday's pretty sewed up for me."

Sewed up was an apt description for Cassidy's whole week, but she shrugged, anyway. "Thursday, then. How about late in the day, say, after five?"

He put a finger to one temple, thinking. "I wouldn't want to keep you late. When do you take lunch?"

"I beg your pardon?" Lunch? What was that?

"Before or after good old Tony?"

"Er, after."

"About one, then?"

She tried to reason out why this was not a good idea, but all she could think was that Tony had morning classes on Thursday. He wouldn't want to, but he could come in by one. She nodded dumbly.

"Great. Shall we go out, or it would be better if I brought something in?"

He was going to feed her? "Oh, you don't need to—"

"Nonsense. I have to eat even if you don't, and frankly, a good meal wouldn't hurt you any. Not that you're too thin! Heavens, no! I just meant..." His gaze traveled over her tall, slender form appreciatively. "Well," he said, absently straightening his tie, "you obviously don't have a problem with your weight. In fact, I'd bet you're one of those naturally slender females other women just hate."

Her mouth was hanging open. She couldn't help it. Unless she'd lost her mind, which was a distinct possibility, he was actually flirting with her. Her! Cassidy Jane Penno. "Uh, yab,

dun, er..."

He just laughed and chucked her under the chin, then abruptly checked his watch. "Gosh, I have to go." He pointed a finger at her. "Thursday. One o'clock. I'll take care of lunch. Right?"

"Ah, erp, sure!"

"Great!" He flashed her a wink and backed toward the door, turning, finally, to hurry from the room.

Astonished, Cassidy flung an arm over the rolling rack. Then slowly her face crumpled. "Such a brilliant conversationalist, Miss Penno," she mocked in a nasal voice. "No wonder your brother doesn't trust you further than he can throw you backward through a hoop. Holy cow." She smacked herself in the forehead with the heel of her hand. First the glop and then the ers and duhs. And she had to have designs by Thursday! Thursday lunch!

Lunch with Paul Spencer. Holy cow!

Absently Paul tapped in the code that unlocked the driver's door of his sleek black Jaguar and slid beneath the wheel. Whatever had possessed him to insist on a luncheon date with Cassidy Penno? She was an engaging young woman, quite lovely even if she didn't know it—and he rather liked that she didn't—and fun in a way he hadn't encountered in a very long time. Her creativity and her wholesomeness were refreshing. None of that changed the fact that he was practically engaged to Betina. Practically but not quite, damn her.

Now, now, he chided himself, as he started up the engine and put the sleek auto in motion, that's no way to think about your

future wife.

He was resolved, as his grandfather must have known he would eventually be, to making his stepcousin his wife. It was the only thing to do, really, considering that the scheming old man had left her thirty percent of Barclay Bakeries, the very same as he'd left Paul himself. Paul, of course, had another ten percent to go with his thirty, leaving thirty percent to be divided among other family members. His uncle Carl and his wife, Jewel, who was Betina's mother had ten. And so did his uncle John, who had never married, ten percent had gone to his deceased uncle's wife, Mary, and her daughter Joyce, who was now Joyce Spencer Thomas.

No nonfamily member had ever owned a share of the business, not since Paul's great-grandfather had founded it. Customarily, the spouses and children of family members shared in that member's legacy. However, both Paul's great-grandfather and grandfather had reserved huge majorities for themselves. The majority of the family had declined involvement in the business, content to pull in their financial rewards without bothering with the nasty details of enterprise.

Paul was the exception. He had a fine mind for business and a great desire to use it, and when he had ascended to the position of CEO upon his grandfather's retirement, he had foolishly assumed that eventually his grandfather's sixty percent majority would be added to the ten percent he had inherited from his own parents. Family tradition demanded it. The family themselves expected

it, knowing that Paul could be trusted to guide the business with the same skill and dedication as his predecessors. Then the old man had thrown him a curve.

In truth, Paul partly blamed himself. He'd known for some time that his grandfather was concerned about his unmarried status. At thirty-eight, Paul was well past the age when most men married for the first time, but it wasn't for lack of interest. He just hadn't found the right woman. Perhaps she didn't really exist, this woman of his dreams—not that he could even assign her specific characteristics. He only knew that none of the many women with whom he'd involved himself had inspired in him the desire to be joined with her for life. Not even Betina.

He should never have allowed himself to be seduced by her. On the other hand, how many healthy, unattached men could resist a beautiful woman who walked into his office unannounced wearing nothing more than a hot pink raincoat belted at the waist, thigh-high stockings and three-inch heels? No, he couldn't be blamed for submitting to temptation, even if temptation's body had been surgically enhanced by the best plastic surgeons available. His true mistake had been in assuming that it was all in fun, and that the family at large would not assign significant expectations to what ought to have been private fun and games.

He couldn't prove that Betina had let the family in on what she had promised would be their secret, but he wouldn't put it past her. When he had realized that the family was ignoring his often-repeated assertion that his relationship with Betina was

"casual," he had taken steps to put an end to the fun and games as well as the expectations. Privately Betina had expressed her perfect understanding of the situation. Publicly she had spent months dabbing unseen tears from her eyes every time he entered the room where she was or, apparently, his name was even mentioned. Paul found himself in the unpleasant position of having to reveal how the affair had started or enduring and hoping it would all eventually blow over. He'd thought it had blown over.

Oh, he was aware that much discussion had been devoted to the "suitability" of the pairing by the family at large, and on the surface it did seem perfect. Betina had been twelve when her mother had married Uncle Carl. Sixteen years later she was very much a part of the family fabric without actually being a member of the family, especially as Carl and Jewel had had no children of their own. Having her married to a bona fide member of the family must have seemed somehow poetic and his own lack of enthusiasm foolish if not downright mean-spirited. On the surface Betina was the perfect woman—lovely, accomplished, graceful, sophisticated, warm—but only on the surface. Beneath the polished exterior, so far as Paul could tell, was only a vast amount of ambition and a cold sort of intelligence. Unfortunately he could not say as much to anyone else in the family, except perhaps Joyce. But what good would that do? Joyce was happily married to the plant manager of the business, the bakery itself, and busy trying to conceive a much-wanted first child.

If only he had explained in detail to his grandfather the reasons

for and extent of the affair, as well as his objections to Betina herself as a wife, he might have spared himself and the whole family their concerns. But he had played the gentleman—after playing the stud—and now he would pay for the privilege. He had no choice. The family depended on him, and Betina had revealed an alarming desire to meddle in business affairs. Worse, when thwarted, she had threatened to involve the family in the fight, and that Paul could not allow. He had pledged, literally, to protect the family from any unwanted involvement in the affairs of the company when he had ascended to the position of CEO, and this sort of drama was just what they feared most. And Betina had to know it. So, despite months of looking for a way out, he was now resigned to what he had to do. The problem was that he had to do it before Betina's new marketing scheme could be put into effect.

Disaster loomed on the horizon, especially as Betina had chosen this particular moment, when Barclay Bakeries was poised to expand into a national market, to bully him into adopting the most ludicrous marketing gambit ever devised. She wanted every slice of Barclay bread to be "embossed" with the image of Barclay's logo, the portrait of the fictional Mrs. Barclay stamped in bread dough. The expense would be exorbitant and the result ridiculous, but he had agreed, while throwing up every roadblock to implementation imaginable, to keep the family from being drawn into the fight. And he had, reluctantly, proposed marriage.

But Betina wanted her pound of flesh. She seemed

determined to lead him a merry chase, to make him appear the besotted fool in front of the family. That was what this stupid costume party was really about. It had nothing to do, as she claimed, with keeping the business in the news. It was all an exercise in bringing him to heel. Well, he had a few tricks up his sleeve himself. And that was where Cassidy Penno came into the picture.

Which in no way explained why he'd felt compelled to make a date out of what should have been a bothersome business appointment. Now was not the time to be taking interest in another female. Nothing whatsoever could come of it. On the other hand, why shouldn't he enjoy himself if he could? Why should he give Betina the power to make him miserable? He would just make sure that Cassidy understood the situation. They were business associates who had the potential to become casual friends. That being the case, they were allowed to enjoy each other's company as long as they didn't get too personal. He could use a friend, and something told him that Cassidy could, too. But then, who couldn't?

So lunch was going to be a fun thing, nothing more, and he'd come up with a fun menu for it. He was enjoying himself just considering the possibilities. Almost-engaged men deserved to enjoy themselves. Even married men were allowed a bit of fun. Even men married to Betina Lincoln. Especially men married to Betina Lincoln, unless he missed his guess. And he was very much afraid that he didn't. Very much afraid.

Chapter Two

Cassidy chewed the inside of her cheek as she watched the caterers descend on her shop. They busily arranged a portable table covered by a sparkling white Damask tablecloth. She felt worried, thrilled and nervous all at once. Lunch, he'd said. It looked like a feast: fruit salad, an incredibly delicious-smelling beef Bourguignonne, crusty French bread; brie; wine; and for later, a chocolate gateau and whipped cream; all served by a uniformed waiter with a secretive smile. Cassidy smiled nervously in reply.

What could Paul Spencer be thinking? She was his costumer, sister to one of his employees, and nothing more. Yet he was treating her like a date, like someone in whom he was interested romantically. She wondered guiltily if William knew, and if not, should she tell him. Before she could come to any conclusion about that, Paul Spencer rushed into the room, speaking into a small cell phone.

"Yes, Gladys, I understand. Nevertheless, I am turning off the phone now, and I will not turn it on again until—" he checked his wristwatch "—two-oh-five." With that he punched a button, folded the phone into a palm-sized rectangle and dropped it into his jacket pocket, his gaze searching out Cassidy. When he spotted her, standing across the room beneath an artificial tree outlined with tiny white lights next to a gypsy caravan wagon and a campfire created with colored lights and fake logs, he smiled brightly.

Cassidy stepped forward, dismayed by the thrill she felt at seeing him again. She was making much too much of this, she told herself sternly. Paul Spencer was just a businessman doing what he deemed necessary to secure the service he needed. After all, it was the busy season for her, and she was doing him a favor because of his connection with William. He probably wined and dined all his business associates this way. She was probably the only one who fervently wished that he didn't. That in mind, she blurted, "You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble."

"No trouble," he said lightly. Then his gaze fell over the small, portable table carried in by the caterer, and he approached, rubbing his hands together with a smack of approval. "Looks good, and it isn't just because I'm starved."

Obviously pleased, the waiter immediately hurried around the table and pulled out a chair, waving Cassidy toward it. Selfconsciously, she stepped over the artificial campfire, knocking only one log out of place. Then she slid into the chair, with only a small bump against the corner of the table, resulting in shaking to the floor only a single salad fork, which the waiter snatched up and polished to cleanliness with a white cloth before carefully and reverently placing it once more next to its neighbor. Cassidy sat red-faced while the waiter performed the same courtesy with the chair for Paul Spencer, but without the slightest mishap. Paul settled himself and smiled across the table at her.

"I half expected to find you outfitted in green guacamole or

some such."

The color of her face intensified. "Oh, no, I wouldn't wear a costume to lunch."

"Not even a costume lunch?"

His teasing relaxed her a bit, and she said, "I've never heard of a costume lunch."

"Well, we'll have to introduce it, make it the next big fad. Ought to be quite a boon for business." A grin quirked around the corners of his mouth, and Cassidy found herself laughing. "That's better," he said, leaning both elbows upon the table while the waiter fluttered about, lifting covers and spooning out portions.

Cassidy felt an acute shyness. No matter what she told herself, it felt as if she was being courted. But what would be the point in that? She had already agreed to help him with his costume. More important, the man was almost engaged to be married. Even if he wasn't, she couldn't quite imagine why he'd be interested in her. She was just a costumer and William Penno's younger, rather plain, sister. That in mind, she fixed her thoughts on business.

"Would you like to see my designs now?" she asked uncertainly, leaning back in her chair to allow the waiter to spread her napkin.

Paul waved a hand. "I'm too hungry to do anything just now but eat—and look at you."

"Oh." She resisted the urge to smooth her hair, knowing that it hung straight as a board right to the ends. After a moment she picked up her fork and began to eat her colorful fruit salad.

“Did you have a difficult time with it?” Paul asked, halfway through his salad already. “The design, I mean.”

She put down her fork and dabbed her mouth with her napkin. “No, actually, I didn’t. You’re quite easy to imagine in costume.”

“Is that good?” he asked, sounding hopeful.

She tried to find the words to explain, seeing in her mind’s eye the way she’d pictured him during the course of her research. “Yes. You see, usually I picture characters in my costumes, and then somehow they don’t look quite right on real people. Not to me, anyway.”

“And you think I’ll look the part?”

“Somehow I do.” It was odd, really, but she’d been picturing him in quite a lot of costumes lately, and he’d looked splendid in them all—at least in her mind’s eye. She shook her head.

“I imagine I will, then,” he said, and she was aware of a tingling sense of pleasure at the soft words. He trusted her judgment. It shouldn’t have pleased her so. It should have pleased William, though. The thought of anything she might do actually pleasing her rather uptight brother made her laugh, and Paul Spencer put down his fork, smiling as if he enjoyed the sound. “Why is it you lift my spirits?” he asked, parking his chin on his upraised palm.

“Me?” she heard herself say flirtatiously, and he smiled at her a long moment before picking up his fork again.

It was the most wonderful lunch of her life, and she told him so afterward.

“I wanted to do something special,” he confessed, looking deeply into her eyes. She had the feeling that if Tony hadn’t popped in just then, dressed as Charlie Chaplin, Paul would have kissed her, but then she was probably imagining things. They had a table between them, after all, even if it was a small table. The waiter had disappeared with the remains of their meal. Tony didn’t bother with ceremony.

“Phone call for Mr. Spencer.”

The intent look disappeared from Paul’s face, replaced in swift sequence by irritation, disappointment and, finally, resignation. “I don’t suppose you got a name?”

Tony’s smile was somehow galling. “I didn’t ask. It’s a woman, though, if that helps.”

A muscle ticked in the hollow of Paul’s cheek. He rose to his feet, speaking apologetically to Cassidy. “I’m sorry, but I’d better take it.”

“Take your time,” she said, getting to her own feet as the waiter returned, ostensibly for the table and folding chairs. “I’ll be in the sewing room. Show him in, please, Tony, when he’s ready.”

Tony twitched his glued-on mustache and quickly doffed his bowler. Turning on his heel, he waddled away, feet aimed in opposite directions. Paul followed, the stiffness of his manner implying anger. Cassidy wondered at that, but then it really wasn’t any of her business. Her business was costumes, and she’d best remember it. Sighing, she went off to the sewing room and began

pinning her designs onto the bulletin board there for that purpose. Paul joined her in a surprisingly brief time, apparently unruffled.

He made no explanation about the call, but then she expected none. Instead, he looked around thoroughly and then approached the bulletin board, his hands clasped behind his back. He studied the drawings intently, his head turning this way and that. Once in a while he made an inquisitive sound. Otherwise, he betrayed nothing of his thoughts. After some time, he stepped back and looked at her.

"Do you have a favorite?"

The question surprised her. "Er, yes, actually I do. This one." She pointed to the center design. He stepped forward once more and studied that particular drawing. Then he nodded and stepped back again.

"When can we begin?"

"Begin?"

"Yes, I, um, assume fittings will be required."

"Of course, but—"

She had been about to say only one or two. He interrupted with an upraised hand. "Will Saturday work for you then, or would you rather not do it on the weekend? I'll understand, of course. I simply thought... That is, Saturday would be good for me."

She usually worked half days in the shop Saturdays—mornings. For some reason she said, "Saturday afternoon?"

He smiled, beamed, actually. "Excellent. Would you like to do lunch again?"

“Oh, no!” she said quickly, thinking of the expense he’d gone to. “I mean, that won’t be necessary.” He seemed a bit crestfallen, so she added, “We could have coffee here, though, if you like.”

He smiled again. “All right, I’ll see to it.”

“No, no, let me,” she insisted. “I-it’s just coffee, after all.”

“All right,” he said. “Will three be suitable?”

“Three is fine,” she told him, completely forgetting that she’d promised her mother a visit.

“Three then.” He pointed at the design upon which they’d settled. “Good work. Thank you. I know it’s an imposition for you at this busy time.”

She shook her head. “I’m happy to do it.”

He stepped close, one eyebrow arching, gaze intent on hers, saying conspiratorially, “Perhaps you ought to inform young Charlie then. He seems to think you’re much too busy to be indulging in luncheons and extra work just now.”

Cassidy gasped. Oh, that scamp! She closed her eyes in embarrassment and said shakily, “Young Charlie should learn to mind his own business.” She would have to talk to Tony, again, not that it would do much good.

Paul chuckled. “I’d say he has a crush on you.”

Cassidy rolled her eyes, muttering, “I should crush him.”

“Now, now,” Paul chided gently, his hand curled beneath her chin, tilting it slightly. “A boy’s ego is a tender thing.”

Cassidy burst out laughing. Only a man such as Paul Spencer could so adeptly put the matter into perspective. A boy, indeed,

especially when compared with the man standing before her. "Maybe a good spanking, then."

Those blue-gray eyes darkened to the color of smoke. "Let's not encourage him," he said huskily, and again Cassidy sensed that he wanted to kiss her. For a moment she could neither breathe nor move, but then it passed, and he stepped away, his smile gone wry and tight, his hand falling to his side. "I have to go," he said.

She smiled to cover her disappointment. "You'll have to press the buzzer on Saturday. I lock the doors at noon."

"We'll be alone then?"

She had to swallow before she could answer. "Yes, alone." To her relief, her voice sounded nearly normal.

He smiled, softly this time, privately. "Saturday, then."

"Saturday."

She found herself smiling when he'd gone. She might be just a costumer, but he liked her, William Penno's sister or no, and it was terribly mutual. All too mutual. And it could come to nothing. He was as good as engaged to be married. Her smile faded to wistfulness. Then it occurred to her that she should have something ready for him to try on when Saturday came around—and she hadn't taken a single measurement! Well, she'd just have to do it on Saturday, which meant this thing was going to require a bit longer than it might have—and she didn't really mind, despite her full schedule. It was foolish, she knew. But when, she thought with a sigh, had she ever done the sensible thing? She should

start, she knew, and she would...as soon as Paul Spencer was out of her life, which he would be all too soon.

The blustery, wet day was enough reason to stay indoors and cancel previous commitments, but Paul reminded himself that this was important. He told himself sternly it wasn't just that he wanted to see her. All right, she was interesting—a costumer, for heaven's sake!—and possessed of a quirky sense of humor. She was gentle, as well, and shy, almost painfully so at times, and pretty, in an unconscious, wholesome way that intrigued him. She seemed utterly without artifice, in itself a good joke, considering her occupation, which was what brought him out on a day like this—her occupation, that was.

Doggedly determined to keep this meeting brief, to the point and all business, he shook his hands free of his coat pockets and reached toward the buzzer. As if with a will of their own, however, his hands detoured to his head and smoothed back his dark hair. It had a tendency to wave and stick out in wet weather, and he was suddenly aware of an intense desire to look his best. When he realized what he was thinking, he burst out laughing. So much for "business"! He shook his head, wondering what it was about Cassidy Penno that made him feel like a boy with his first crush? His finger at last moved to ring the doorbell.

Several long moments went by before the shade in the window lifted and Cassidy Penno smiled out at him. The door opened, and she stepped back to let him in, quickly closing and locking the door again behind him.

. “Hello,” she said, reaching for the coat he was shrugging out of.

“Hi.” He handed it over and watched as she carried it to the coat tree, standing between the counter and the door. The overhead lights were off, and the cloudy illumination let in by the big front windows was soft and misty, picking up the golden highlights in her thick hair, which she wore twisted up in back with long tendrils left to frame her face. She looked warm and welcoming in a pale yellow sweater set worn with black, slim-fitting jeans and brown half boots. Paul felt a lurch in his chest, and at the sight of her pale pink lipstick, his mouth went dry. Who was he kidding? This woman drew him like a magnet.

The old rage filled him, useless, impotent, and she sensed it at once, her sweet face going slack and troubled. “Is something wrong?”

He forced a grim smile and shook his head. “No.” His hands were shaking and cold. Rubbing them together, he thought of the coffee she’d promised him, and his mood lightened slightly. “I could use a hot drink.”

She stepped back and swept him an elegant bow, one arm swinging out in invitation. “This way, good sir.”

He laughed at her antics, feeling warmed just by her manner. He followed her through the darkened shop into the sewing room, smiling at the fanciful decorations along the way. Her mind seemed to teem with ideas and visions, which she obviously translated into actuality. He realized suddenly that he envied her

that.

She had set up a table for them in one corner of the room. It was draped with what looked like an old paisley shawl trimmed with gold fringe and accented with a bouquet of decoratively folded lace handkerchiefs and old, silver teaspoons. In addition to a ceramic pot suspended over the flame of a tiny candle, she had placed on the table a pair of antique-looking cups and saucers, mismatched dessert plates, a creamer, sugar bowl and an intricately cut-crystal platter with a selection of mouth-watering pastries. Not a thing on the table matched another, and yet it all worked together with charming originality. Obviously she had gone to some trouble to indulge her creative bent in his honor, and he felt unaccountably touched.

"This is lovely," he said, lightly stroking the rim of one cup.

She had the grace to blush. "Thank you. The, um, coffee's flavored. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," he said, surprised to find that it was so. Normally he hated the pretentiousness of flavored coffees, but nothing about this particular woman was pretentious in the least, just the opposite, in fact. He indicated the pot. "May I?"

"Of course. Help yourself."

The aroma of amaretto seemed to fill the small room as he poured a steady stream of hot black coffee into one of the cups on the table. He moved the spout over the second cup and looked up in question. Smiling, she nodded, and he poured a cup for her.

"Take anything with that?"

"Just a touch of milk."

He tilted the tiny milk pitcher over the cup and let a few drops trickle in, then stirred the brew to a rich brown before passing cup and saucer to her.

Reaching for a puffy chocolate muffin, he looked around for a chair. She had placed one at a slight angle, facing away from the drawing board to which it obviously belonged. She herself was hovering over a stool on rollers next to her sewing machine. He placed the muffin on a plate and handed it to her. She flashed him a smile of surprise. "Thanks."

"My pleasure." Choosing a sticky bun for himself, he pulled the chair close and sat down. The coffee tasted surprisingly rich and only faintly flavored. "Excellent," he said, placing the cup on the saucer and picking up the sticky bun. To his surprise he was ravenous, and he ate half the bun in one bite, polishing it off with the next. Swigging coffee, he looked over the serving platter again, torn between a strawberry tart and a little cake frosted with smooth white icing and decorated with a plump raspberry. He went for the tart, laughing when strawberry filling oozed out as he set his teeth into it. Cassidy laughed, too, and set aside her own goodies to come to his rescue with one of those absurdly delicate handkerchiefs. He wouldn't let her touch him with it, shaking his head and twisting aside as he licked the fingers that held the tart.

"You're going to get it all over you," she scolded playfully.

He grinned at her. "I'm a big boy. I can play with strawberry goo if I want to, one of the privileges of adulthood."

She laughed at that, too. “You may be grown-up, but you look like a little boy caught with his fingers in the jam jar.”

He couldn’t help himself. Dropping the tart to his plate, he reached out with his sticky hand and wiped strawberry “goo” onto the tip of her nose, chin, and cheek. Her mouth dropped open, and she danced back out of his reach before suddenly doubling over with laughter. Setting aside both plate and saucer, he went after her, catching her easily in one arm as she squealed and tried to defend herself with the handkerchief.

“This, Miss Penno,” he teased, “is how little boys play with jam!”

Laughing and struggling, she twisted her body against him. Playfulness fled before a very adult surge of lightning-hot desire, and he found himself looking down into her upturned face, marveling, as she grew still, at how attuned she seemed to be to his every thought and mood. He pushed away the knowledge that he had no right to secure this young woman’s affections and very deliberately wiped his sticky fingers across her mouth before lowering his head for surely the sweetest kiss he’d ever known. Her arms slid around his waist, holding him lightly as he forced her head back, licking and tasting and finally swirling his tongue around the inside of her mouth.

Gradually she pulled away and cleaned her face with the handkerchief. He saw in the bleakness of her moss green eyes that she knew what a foolish, pointless thing he had just done. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, retreating to his chair.

"It's all right," she said softly, offering him another hanky.

He took it this time, smiling wryly. "No, it isn't."

She sighed. "Whatever you say."

He retrieved the cup and saucer, but had lost his appetite for the pastry. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I usually have better sense—and manners."

"You're probably just feeling trapped," she said offhandedly, wavering between her own disappointment and compassion for his obvious misery.

"You know don't you? I suppose William told you everything."

She shrugged. "He told me that your grandfather set up his will so that you have to marry a certain woman."

"Betina," he said bitterly.

"Betina of the Halloween costume party," Cassidy reminded him gently.

He smiled in spite of everything. She had such a way about her, this tall, slender, angelic woman. Meeting her had been the bright spot in the dark sky of his future, the oasis in the desert that had become his life, but that's all she could be, momentary, transitory, just a short stop along his way. She was right, of course, about him feeling trapped, and no doubt that had colored and intensified his every response to this woman. It wasn't fair, not to her and not to him and not to the marriage that he was obligated to try to build with Betina, but he'd be damned if he wouldn't enjoy his moments with Cassidy Penno. He had a right to that much, didn't he? So long as he didn't step over the line

again. Mentally he drew that line boldly for himself: They could laugh together, talk together, work together, but there it stopped. He would not kiss her or touch her in a "romantic" fashion again. That gave him something to look forward to in the coming weeks but at the same time protected them both. His smile broadened. He drank his coffee and watched her drink hers.

Finally she set her cup aside. "We'd better get to work," she said, reaching for a blue plastic measuring tape, which she draped about her neck. Next she found a sheet of paper with a silhouette of the human body and lined brackets representing different measurements printed on it. She fixed the paper to a clip board and slid a pencil behind one ear, then positioned her stool in the center of the floor and motioned for him to stand before her. He did as she indicated, spreading his blue-jeaned legs slightly.

She wrapped the tape around his waist and snapped it apart again instantly before snatching the pencil from behind her ear and scribbling a notation on the paper. She measured his hips, legs, arms and shoulders in the same manner. "Man, you're good at this," he said, chuckling.

"Part of the job," she replied, then clamped the pencil between her teeth. "Wif oo ahms."

He laughed. "What?"

She took the pencil out of her mouth. "Lift your arms."

"Ah." He lifted his arms, and she wrapped the tape around his upper chest, pulling it tight in the center, her body moving close to his. The tape parted and slid free, but before she stepped back,

he let his arms drop around her. She froze, and then she simply dropped down to the floor.

"Almost through," she said, as if he had not just tried to hold her.

Disappointment, relief, embarrassment and frustration percolated through him all at the same time. He ground his teeth. Obviously she had more sense and wisdom that he did. Just as obviously he couldn't trust himself with her. He waited for her to finish, but seconds ticked by and she made no move. When finally he looked down, it was to find her head bowed, her hands and the tape on the floor. Before he could say anything, she squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, and brought up the tape. As her hands rose slowly toward his groin, he realized in a flash that she had yet to take his inseam. In an instant he was hard as stone.

Catching her hands in his, he sank down with her on the floor. Placing her hands on his shoulders, he took her into his arms. Unresisting, she leaned forward awkwardly and laid her head on his shoulder. He placed his cheek against the top of her head and closed his eyes.

For a long while, he simply held her. The sudden rush of desire gradually faded, leaving in its place an odd sort of contentment tinged with sadness. He sighed and kissed the top of her head, saying, "I have no right to this. I can't change anything. The business is at stake, and my whole family's depending on me."

"I know," she whispered.

He ran his hands over her back, feeling the sharp little bumps that defined her delicate spine. Her breasts felt surprisingly heavy against his chest, given her small frame. He closed his eyes again, imagining her long, slender body lying alongside his. He could almost feel the jut of her hipbones, the softness of her flat belly, the firmness of the little mound at the apex of her thighs, her long legs tangling with his. "I wish I'd met you a long time ago," he said.

She lifted her head. "Before the affair, you mean."

He winced, loosening his embrace. "Will didn't leave anything out, did he?" He smiled at himself, at the irony of this whole thing, and teased gently, "I'll have to speak to him about that mouth of his."

She gasped and pulled away. "Oh, no, don't! He'll never understand. Please, Paul, don't—"

"Hey! It was a joke. I'm actually glad that he told you everything." His smile twisted wryly. "I'm not sure I could have. I think the temptation not to would have been too great."

He saw a spark of pleasure in her soft green eyes before she bowed her head again. Her fingers picked at the tape. "You just think that now. Probably if you didn't have this thing hanging over your head, you wouldn't even notice me."

"That's not true."

"Yes, it is," she insisted quietly. "It's all right. I'm used to it. I'm just not the sort men notice."

He laid his hand against the side of her throat and neck, feeling

her pulse quicken. “What about Charlie Chaplin?”

She made a face. “Tony’s not interested in me,” she said firmly. “He just thinks that because I’m a virgin I must be frustrated enough to eventually give in if he keeps at me.”

A virgin. Paul gulped. Heaven help him. When had he last met one of those? When had he even wanted to? What an utter fool he’d been, what a complete and total ninny to waste his time on experienced, sophisticated women when all this sweetness languished here. He’d played games when he might have had honesty and simplicity. He deserved just what he was getting. He deserved manipulative, scheming Betina. And Cassidy Penno deserved someone free to love and treasure her as the prize she was. He said, “Promise me you won’t throw yourself away on the likes of that little imposter.”

Her eyes grew round and then she burst out laughing. “On Tony Abatto?” she said. “I’d rather join an order of nuns!”

He chuckled. “Don’t do that, either.”

She sobered and told him solemnly, “Can’t. I’m not Catholic.”

They both erupted at that, laughing until their sides ached. Finally he got to his feet. When she started to do likewise, he pointed a finger at her. “You stay right there. Give me that measuring tape.” Her gaze questioning but trusting, she did as he said. He pulled the tape through his fingers to the end, then placed the end at the place where his groin met his thigh. Pointing at the floor, he asked, “What does that say?”

She read the number, reached for the clip board and scribbled

on it, muttering, “It says that you have very long legs.”

“So do you,” he said, imagining those legs wrapping around him. He cleared his throat, turning off the vision and said, “Okay, what’s next?”

She took the tape from him and got up from the floor. “Fabric. We have to pick out fabric.”

“All right,” he said, caught up again in forbidden fantasies. He shook his head and belatedly added, “But, uh, not today. I, um, I have to get out of here. Go, I mean. I have to go.” He glanced at his watch, trying to make it sound reasonable. “How about, um, Monday?”

She nodded, then said, “Listen, we don’t have to drag this out if you don’t want to. I can pick out the fabric and sew everything up, and we’ll just do a single fitting, if you want.”

He didn’t want. He wanted every moment with her, but maybe she was too smart to let him have it. He shrugged, surprised by how much it cost him. “Whatever you think best.”

She looked away, pretending to be busy with the clipboard and pencil. “Oh, well, I usually prefer for the client to pick out the fabrics.”

“Is that what you want,” he asked carefully, “for me to pick out the fabrics?”

She turned her head one way and then another, looking at the figure on the paper, and then she dropped the clipboard and lifted her gaze to his. “Yes.”

A giddy smile split his face. “Monday, then?”

She smiled, too. “Monday.”

“What time?”

She bit her lip. “I close about six.”

“Six,” he repeated. They should have dinner. He wanted to have dinner with her, but he knew it would be stupid, beyond stupid, even risky, potentially devastating. He took a deep breath. “Would you like to have dinner with me afterward?” So much for being sensible. “I’ll behave myself, I promise. Well, I’ll try.”

She gave him a slow, shy smile. “It would have to be someplace public, and maybe you wouldn’t want to be seen—”

“I know just the place,” he interrupted quickly. “It’s nothing fancy, but the barbecue is great. You like barbecue?”

“I love it.”

“Great! Okay, it’s settled then. Monday at six; fabric first, then barbecue. I’ll look forward to it.”

“Me, too.” They stood a moment, sharing the anticipation, before she said, “I’ll walk you out.”

He was careful not to touch her as they wound their way through the darkened shop again. At the front door she took his coat down and handed it to him. He slung it on and waited, telling himself that he simply could not give in to the impulse to kiss her goodbye. She slid open the dead bolt and turned the lock, depressed the thumb tab at the top of the curved handle and pulled open the door. The rain had ceased, but a chilly breeze gusted, blowing discarded paper and crisp leaves along the curb. He stepped out into dreary afternoon and turned back to face her.

“Thank you,” he said simply.

She merely smiled and slowly closed the door. He turned and poked his hands into his pockets, inhaling deeply, breathing in and holding these last moments of freedom. He knew what he had to do and what it would cost him, but he also had Monday and perhaps a time or two after that. It would be difficult, even dangerous, and no doubt in the end he’d wind up with a broken heart, but he’d be damned if he wouldn’t take every moment she’d give him. She deserved better, he knew, but he was cad enough to let her settle, in this case, for just what he could give back: some smiles, laughter, a little careful flirtation, the bittersweet knowledge that someone wanted her even if he couldn’t have her. He wouldn’t let it go beyond that. He would protect her from more, knowing that one day a man more deserving than he would gratefully receive all the treasure she had to give. He hated that unknown man already, but at the same time he wanted him for her.

God, who’d have thought straitlaced, uptight old Will could have a kid sister like Cassidy? He shook his head and strolled away in the direction of his car, content for that moment just to be amazed at the small ironies of life.

Chapter Three

They didn’t waste any time with the fabric selection. Cassidy had put together several color-coordinated options, detailing how each fabric in each set would be used. She had them laid out on a table in the sewing room, alongside pencil-colored pictures

showing how the costume would look. Paul glanced over them all and asked, “What’s your favorite?”

She pointed to a particular combination of earth tones, blues and reds. He studied it about five seconds.

“Oh, yeah. That’s definitely it. Let’s go eat. I’m starved.”

She laughed. “You’re always starved.”

“Lately,” he said, realizing that his appetite had shown significant improvement during the past week. “Where’s your coat?”

She went to a small door in one corner, opened it, and took out a man’s navy blue wool, military-style, double-breasted coat. He hurried across the room to take it and hold it open for her to slip her arms into the sleeves. A name had been written on the inside label in red ink.

“C. Marmat,” he read. “Who on earth is that?”

She shrugged. “Don’t know. Some sailor who owned this coat before it went to the Army-Navy Store.”

She buys her clothes secondhand at the Army-Navy Store, he marveled. Betina wouldn’t touch even designer clothes on consignment. When he realized that he had actually compared the two of them, he shut down ruthlessly on the impulse. He had determined early that morning after a night of restless tossing to keep the two separate in his mind. Betina was his future, however dreaded. Cassidy was... his friend. He caught her by the hand and dragged her toward the showroom. Laughing, she tugged away, ran back to the closet and retrieved a minuscule purse on a long,

thin strap. She slung the strap over her shoulder and ran back to him, placing her hand in his once more. Together they hurried through the store and out the front, which Cassidy locked with two separate keys.

Paul's car was waiting at the curb. He unlocked the passenger door and ushered her inside, then hurried around to slide beneath the wheel. The night was clear and pleasantly cool. As he drove them toward the barbecue place, Cassidy settled back into her corner and looked at him, one jeaned knee drawn up slightly so that the ankle of her burgundy boot lay against the edge of her seat.

"So, how was your day?"

He chuckled because it was the kind of thing long-term couples said to one another. "Okay. How was yours?"

"Oh, mine was fine," she said with a smug little smile. "I was Goldilocks today, and I made Tony be the baby bear. He was a very pouty baby bear."

Laughter spurted out of Paul's mouth. "Just how does a baby bear dress?" he wanted to know.

Cassidy's smile was sublime. "Well, he wears a bear suit, of course, and a pacifier on a ribbon around his neck and a diaper and a great big baby bonnet."

She painted a lovely picture, lovely enough to keep Paul laughing all the way to the restaurant, if restaurant was the correct word. The place where Paul took her on lower Greenville Avenue was more of a supper club. The building was slightly

dilapidated with a neon sign out front that flashed and buzzed, "Hoot Man's BBQ & Music Club." Even at six-fifteen in the evening, a scratchy recording of jazz blared over the loudspeaker by the door and a line of people snaked around the side of the building. Paul parked at the side of the building and pulled Cassidy by the hand around to the back by the hand, where he pounded on a door labeled, Deliveries.

After several seconds the door opened, and a black man wearing a spotless white apron greeted them. "Spence!" He grabbed Paul's hand and pumped it energetically. "Hey, man, why didn't you let me know you were coming?"

Paul grinned broadly. "Well, I thought I'd take my chances for a change, but I see that the place is as popular as ever."

"We're hanging in there, man. We're hanging in." He switched his gaze abruptly to Cassidy. "Who's this?"

Paul placed an arm around Cassidy's shoulders. "This is my good friend, Cassidy Penno. Cass, this old scoundrel is Hoot."

"Good friend, eh?" Hoot commented, nodding thoughtfully. "Like the coat."

Cassidy smiled. "Thanks."

Hoot spread out his arms. "Well, come on in!" He turned and led the way down a long, narrow hall past a bustling kitchen and a variety of other rooms to a small, dusty office, where he put them in chairs and offered them drinks from a small refrigerator in one corner.

"No, thanks, I'm driving," Paul said.

Cassidy smiled and shook her head, saying, “I don’t drink much.”

Hoot sent Paul a significant look and sat down behind his desk. Paul knew exactly what he was thinking. Paul didn’t drink much, either. Betina believed the “skill” of social drinking was a very important one and that he looked rude when he repeatedly turned down offers of alcohol. He stopped short of pointing out to himself that Cassidy’s feelings on the matter were much closer to his own.

Hoot templed his fingers over the top of his desk and asked, “How did you two meet?”

They both spoke at once. Cassidy said, “My brother works for Paul.” Paul said, “Cassidy’s my costumer.”

Hoot latched onto that last. “Costumer! Costumer? As in Betina’s infamous costume party?”

Paul made a face. “What else?”

Hoot clapped his hands together and boomed laughter. “You poor sucker!”

“I recall seeing your name on the guest list,” Paul reminded him sourly.

“And do you have a costume, Mr. Hoot?” Cassidy asked brightly.

Hoot looked surprised, then his face split in that huge white grin of his. “It’s just Hoot, no ‘Mister,’ and honey, I have the best costume. I plan to wear this big white apron here...”

“That he never gets dirty,” Paul quipped drily.

“And a chef’s hat,” Hoot went on.

“Clever,” Paul said.

“Cheap,” Cassidy added. “Oh, and you should get one of those big oven mitts, too.”

“Hey, good idea!” Hoot said.

“Do you have a chef’s hat?” Paul asked, his brow furrowed in thought.

“No,” Hoot admitted, “but I figure I can find one.”

“Actually I’ll be glad to rent you one,” Cassidy said. “Five dollars.”

His thick, woolly brows shot up. “That is cheap.”

“I’ll even throw in the oven mitt free. Now is that a bargain or what?”

Hoot looked at Paul. “She’s sweet,” he said. “Why don’t you latch on to her and forget Betina the bi—”

“I don’t think we want to go there,” Paul said quickly, frowning.

Hoot linked his hands over a slightly protruding belly. “Hmph!” He looked at Cassidy. “It’s that family of his. Bunch of leeches, if you ask me.”

“Hoot.”

He waved a hand to indicate that he considered Paul’s protest so much spent air. “Long time ago there was a fight in the family over how to run the business, so they decided to pick a goat.”

“Goat?”

“He means a scapegoat,” Paul explained, “and he’s way off

base."

"The 'goat,'" Hoot said, "runs the business, and the rest of them go on their merry way, trusting him to take care of them all. He gets all the headaches, and they get nice fat checks dropped into their pockets at regular intervals."

"It gives me a free hand in running the business," Paul said.

"Is that the way you see it? Seems to me they tie your hands." He said to Cassidy, "They leave him out on a limb and pretend not to notice when someone else comes along with a saw. He can't vote their shares, and he can't ask them to vote with him. If he could, he could tell Hydra to take her marriage scheme and stick it—"

"Hoot!"

"All right, all right, I get it." He pointed at Cassidy. "This one's a lady. The other one is a she-devil."

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