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# Vintage *Cherish*

I Do?  
I Don't?

CHRISTINE SCOTT

Christine Scott

**I Do? I Don't?**

«HarperCollins»

**Scott C.**

I Do? I Don't? / C. Scott — «HarperCollins»,

ONE BRIDE. TWO GROOMS. Niki Adams had finally gotten her life together. She was about to be married to a handsome doctor who treated her like gold. Everything was going great—until Jack Sinclair came home, declaring that he was the one she should be marrying. WHAT'S A GIRL TO DO? Niki had been in love with that rascal Jack her whole life, but he'd never seen her as a woman before. But now that she had a ring on her finger, he'd had a sudden change of heart! It was enough to make a person tie her bridal veil in knots. But Jack seemed determined to make this willful bride his own....

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***Niki caught a glance of her own desperate  
image in the dressing room mirror.***

Staring back at her was a bride with a riot of red hair mussed from ill treatment, freckles that stood out against too-pale skin. A glazed, terror-stricken glint graced her wide green eyes. The bride of Frankenstein couldn't have looked worse.

She sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm her strained nerves. "Everything will be fine," she whispered. "You've got the perfect groom, the perfect dress...you're going to have the perfect wedding."

Niki closed her eyes and tried to envision her perfect wedding. An evening service at the neighborhood church. Candlelight, flowers and satin ribbons. The groom in a black tuxedo, his white shirt nicely complementing his dark good looks...

Her eyes flew open. Dark good looks? Her groom-to-be was sandy-haired and fair. *Jack* was dark-haired and tan.

Good heavens, her perfect groom was Jack Sinclair!

Dear Reader;

From classic love stories to romantic comedies to emotional heart tuggers, Silhouette Romance offers six irresistible novels every month by some of your favorite authors-and some sure to become favorites. Just look at the lineup this month:

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Sincerely,

Melissa Senate,

Senior Editor

Please address questions and book requests to:

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## **I Do? I Don't?**

### **Christine Scott**



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For Pop, I love you. I miss you.

Save me a place under your angel's wings.

**CHRISTINE SCOTT** grew up in Illinois but currently lives in St. Louis, Missouri. A former teacher, she now writes full-time. When she isn't writing romances, she spends her time caring for her husband and three children. In between car pools, baseball games and dance lessons, Christine always finds time to pick up a good book and read about...love. She loves to hear from readers. Write to her at Box 283, Grover, MO 63040-0283.



## Things to do before the wedding:

1. Finalize seating plan.

Make sure to separate Mom and Mrs. Sinclair, or they'll spend the whole night yelling, "I object!"

2. *Have final* dress fitting. Ignore best *friend's* wise-guy comments that it's not too late to back out.

3. During bridal shower, break up fistfight between my straitlaced *future* husband and way-too-sexy Jack Sinclair.

4. Avoid treetop encounters with Jack. If he wants to talk, let him use the phone like everyone else

5. Figure out which groom to marry *before* it's time to say "I do!"

## *Chapter One*

His mother was up to something.

Jack Sinclair could see that by the twinkle in her brown eyes and the fervent glances she shot at the clock hanging over the kitchen sink. Her unexpected dinner invitation had been a surprise. Her insistent refusal to allow him a reprieve had been mildly irritating. Now he wondered exactly what she had up her motherly sleeve.

“Have some more roast beef,” Martha Sinclair, a slender, attractive woman, with salt-and-pepper gray hair, urged her son.

Jack sat back in his chair and rubbed a hand against his lean, flat stomach. “Mom, I can’t. I’m stuffed.”

“You’re too thin,” she scolded, eyeing him with concern. “When’s the last time you had a decent meal?”

He grinned. “The last time I came home for a visit.”

“See what I mean?” She picked up a bowl of vegetables. “Have some more potatoes. They’ll stick to your ribs.”

“Mom, dinner was great,” he said firmly. “But I couldn’t possible eat another bite.”

Her brown eyes widened in alarm. “Well, I hope you left some room for dessert. I made your favorite, apple pie.”

His father, a tall man with silvering hair and an easy smile, chuckled from his seat across the kitchen table.

Jack moaned. “Mom, all you’ve done is feed me since I walked through the door.”

“I can’t help it.” She stood, whisking away empty plates from the dinner table. “Mothers are supposed to nurture their young.” Narrowing an admonishing glance, she added, “Even their prodigal sons. Do you know that I see less of you now that you’ve moved back home, than I did when you lived in Chicago?”

Jack sighed. The lecture he’d been expecting since he’d walked in the door of his parent’s house had finally arrived. He was just surprised his mother had waited until after dinner to deliver it.

“Now, Martha, leave the boy alone.” His father shot him a commiserative look. “He’s only been back in town a few weeks. What with starting a new job and moving into a new apartment, I’m sure he’s been busy.”

Guiltily, Jack sank a bit lower in his chair. Having his father defend his neglectful behavior made him feel even worse. His dad was right, however. He was busy. As the newest partner in a downtown St. Louis law firm, he’d been working hard to acclimate himself to the position. But one of the reasons prompting his recent career move had been his desire to be closer to family and friends.

While working in Chicago, he’d been on the verge of burnout. When he’d left, he’d vowed to enjoy life more and to concentrate on work less. It would seem old habits were hard to break.

Four years ago, fresh out of law school, he’d joined a large firm in Chicago. He’d been idealistic, ready to take on the world. His idealism had been put to the test almost from the get go, when he’d stumbled upon a case that no one else seemed anxious to tackle.

The case had involved a family who’d been exposed to toxic waste as a result of runoff from a chemical plant located in their small, hometown outside of Chicago.

The owners of the company—in an effort to avoid bad publicity—had offered to settle out of court. Against the advisement of his firm’s senior law partners, but following the wishes of his client, Jack chose to take the chemical company to court—and had won. The damages awarded the family set new records in the Illinois court system.

But instead of feeling victorious, Jack had felt exhausted. The case had consumed the better part of four years of his life, during which time he’d spent excruciatingly long hours at the office. As

his law career blossomed his social life had become almost nonexistent. The physical and emotional stress of the case had taken its toll. He'd begun to feel isolated, alone, dissatisfied with the direction his personal life had taken.

The offer of a partnership in a small but prestigious firm in downtown St. Louis couldn't have come at a better time. As a partner, he could pick and choose cases he felt had merit. Moving back home, being close to family and friends, had sounded like a dream come true. He glanced at his parents. Only now, he was beginning to question the wisdom of his decision.

At twenty-eight, he'd been living on his own for nearly ten years. Ten years of not having to account for his comings and goings. And in just a few weeks of being home, he felt as if he were stuck in a time warp, being expected at family dinners, receiving daily phone calls. How could he explain to his mother that he had grown up? That he couldn't always be available, no matter how much he loved them?

The doorbell saved him from having to make an excuse.

"I wonder who that could be," his mother mused as she headed for the back door. Her tone brightened. "Oh, it's Niki."

Niki? Jack sat up straighter in his chair. Niki Adams? A picture formed in his mind of the freckle-faced, chubbycheeked, pigtailed kid who lived next door. Slowly, a smile teased his lips. She was a carrot-topped redhead with a temper to match. She was the closest thing he'd ever had to a little sister.

His smile faltered as an unwanted memory crowded his mind. The last time he'd seen her had been almost a year ago, at her father's funeral. He'd been in the middle of the most important trial of his life and had been forced to cut the visit short. Leaving her looking so lost and vulnerable had been the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. He'd never forgiven himself for not being there when one of his best friends had needed him most.

The thought of her here alone in Webster Groves, while he was nearly three hundred miles away in Chicago, had haunted him. In truth, it was one of the reasons why he'd quit his job.

"I hope I'm not interrupting your dinner, Mrs. Sinclair. Mom wanted me to run this pie pan over. She said you wanted to do some baking?"

The deceptively sweet voice sounded familiar, like a whisper from the past, conjuring up memories of the pesky little kid who used to torment him in his youth.

Realization settled over Jack like a wet blanket. For as long as he could remember, Niki was the girl his mother dreamed he would marry. Now he understood the reason behind his mother's unexpected dinner invitation.

He'd been set up in yet another of his mother's matchmaking schemes.

"Of course, you're not interrupting, Niki. I'm glad you came. You saved me a trip. I finished with your mother's blender. You can bring it back home with you." His mother paused. In an encouraging voice, she added, "Jack's here. Come in and say hello."

Jack unfolded his six-foot-three frame and stood, anxious to greet his old friend. The sight of her stopped him dead in his tracks. The last time he'd seen her, their mutual grief had been all-consuming. He hadn't had the time or the inclination to notice the changes that had occurred in his childhood friend over the years.

He'd been expecting a kid with braces and skinned-up knees. What he saw was a young woman with long, shapely legs and a slender, yet gently curved body. The lacy cream-colored blouse and the slender green skirt that she wore did little to dispel the womanly image.

Still, there was a sprinkling of freckles dusting her heart-shaped face. And the mass of copper-colored hair curled about her shoulders with a mind of its own, reminding him of the young girl he used to know.

But he had to admit...the kid next door had grown up quite nicely.

An unease settled in his chest, making it hard to breathe, to think, to move. He stood there, staring at her for a long moment.

A bright welcoming smile lit her face, quickening his pulse. "Hello, Jack."

He nodded. "Niki."

"It's been a long time."

An understatement if he'd ever heard one. It felt as though he'd been gone an eternity. Long enough for a nymph to be transformed into an alluring woman.

"Too long," he admitted.

Aware of his parents' curious gazes, Jack forced himself to move. With feet that felt like lead, he closed the distance between them and enveloped Niki in a quick, brotherly hug.

During the brief encounter, however, his mind registered three important facts: the soft womanly curves were real, he'd indeed been gone too long, and his body was reacting in a most nonfraternal way.

Guiltily, he stepped back, ending the embrace.

"Well," she said, looking flushed and sounding somewhat breathless. "It's great to have you back home, Jack."

"Yes, well..."

Jack winced inwardly. He was acting like a tongue-tied teenager trying to impress the prom queen. This was Niki, for Pete's sake. The tomboy who used to play baseball with him and his friends. Though he had to admit, it felt as though he'd just been thrown one of those mean curve balls of hers.

He forced himself to assume a relaxed tone. "So, how have you been, Niki?"

"Busy...with school—teaching, that is," she said, looking as uncomfortable as he felt.

At that moment, Jack regretted the time he'd spent living in Chicago more than ever. He never thought he'd see the day when he and Niki Adams would feel discomfited in each other's company.

She continued, oblivious to his troubled thoughts, "I'm working at St. Agatha's now, teaching their fourth-grade class."

"School isn't the only thing keeping her busy. Niki's getting married," his mother informed him.

"Married?" Jack stared at Niki, not bothering to hide his surprise. He blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "You can't be getting married. You're too young."

A familiar flash of anger lit Niki's green eyes. He felt an odd sense of relief at the show of emotion. This was the girl he remembered. The one with the volatile temper that could explode with the least bit of provocation.

"I'm twenty-three, Jack." The sweet voice took on a frosty tone. "I'm certainly old enough."

Twenty-three? He felt a tiny jolt of surprise. Well, sure, she'd have to be that old. She was five years younger than him. He just didn't realize she'd grown up. In his mind, she'd always be that kid who'd made a pest of herself by tagging along everywhere he went.

She turned to his mother, her voice softening. "Nothing's official yet, Mrs. Sinclair."

His mother raised a speculative eyebrow. "Still thinking over Greg's proposal?"

"Greg?" Jack's shoulders stiffened. The hairs on the back of his neck lifted as he felt a premonition of impending doom.

"Greg Lawton." His mother narrowed a glance at him. "I'm sure you must remember *him*, Jack."

The tiny jolt of surprise turned into a lightning bolt of shock. Jack was stunned by the news. "Greg Lawton? From Webster High? The Greg Lawton who was in my class?"

"Yep, that's the one," his mother said, looking much too pleased by his shocked appearance.

Niki glanced at her watch. "Would you look at the time? I'm meeting Greg for dinner. And I'm already late."

"Niki—" he began.

"I've really got to go, Jack." She gave him a nervous smile. "Now that you're back in town, don't be such a stranger."

"The blender," his mother said, hurrying to collect the appliance. Her face softened into a smile as she handed Niki the blender. "Now you and Greg have a nice evening."

"Thank you, Mrs. Sinclair."

With that she was gone, leaving Jack standing in the kitchen openmouthed and feeling numbed. Seconds passed like hours before he collected his composure. He glared at his mother. "She can't be serious. She's really considering marrying Greg Lawton? That stuffed shirt who made my life miserable in high school?"

"That's right, Jack. While you've been busy filing lawsuits for your clients, *your* ex-classmate has been stealing *your* girl."

Jack moaned, running a frustrated hand through the thick tangle of his dark hair. It wasn't a secret that his mother and Mrs. Adams had been hoping for a match between him and Niki. The two of them had been scheming to get their children married since the day Niki was born. The whole idea was ridiculous, of course. A fantasy cooked up between the two women that neither he nor Niki had ever encouraged.

"Mom, Niki is not my girl," he said slowly, enunciating each word with care so there would be no misunderstanding. "We're friends. Just good friends."

"Well, if Greg Lawton has anything to say about it, that's all you and Niki ever will be," she said, giving a disgruntled snort. Raising her chin at a stubborn angle, she moved to the sink, leaving him to brood alone.

His father rose to his feet, his chair rasping against the tiled floor. "The Cardinals are on TV tonight, Jack. Ready to watch some baseball?"

"In a minute, Dad." Scowling, Jack strode to the window, which had a view overlooking the Adamses' house. Lifting the ruffled curtain, he peered outside just in time to see Niki disappear into the house next door. He couldn't believe it. He'd left town for a few years. And in the short time he was gone, all hell seemed to have broken loose.

Niki Adams all grown up and getting married. Who'd have thought it possible?

*Getting married?*

His scowl deepened. She was twenty-three years old, barely starting her life as an adult. What was her rush?

*And why in the hell would she pick Greg Lawton as a husband?*

Greg Lawton was the last man Niki should marry. He was a self-centered, egotistical, arrogant jerk with a chip on his shoulder the size of the state of Missouri. A poor kid who'd made good, Greg had beaten the odds. He'd worked his way through school to become a doctor. But for as long as Jack had known him, Greg had never let an opportunity pass to extoll on his own virtues.

Jack refused to believe his objections had anything to do with the fact that throughout their school years he'd been forced to play second fiddle to Greg Lawton. Greg had bested him in nearly everything they had tried. In football, Greg had been lead quarterback. Jack had been his relief man. In the race for student council, Greg had beat him out of the presidency by two lousy votes. Even graduation had been a disappointment. Greg had been valedictorian. Jack had been salutatorian. He'd lost the top honor by a mere hundredth of a point.

Greg Lawton had made his school years a living hell. After high school, they'd gratefully parted ways. Jack to law school, Greg to medical school. And that was the last he'd heard of him.

Until now.

Now the man he'd considered the nemesis of his youth wanted to marry the girl—correction, the woman—he'd always considered to be a sister.

He'd always known Niki's impulsiveness would get her into trouble some day. He couldn't count the number of times he'd had to rescue her from one mishap or another when she was growing up... just because that stubborn head of hers was always stuck somewhere in the clouds, looking ten feet above reality.

When she was five, she'd nearly drowned in the neighborhood pool, all because she'd wanted to prove to him that she could swim. Jack felt a familiar twinge of aggravation at the memory. If he hadn't pulled her out of the deep end, she'd have been a goner.

He dropped the curtain and shoved fisted hands into his jeans pockets. Beneath Niki's reckless demeanor, there lay a certain naivete, a trusting innocence that could easily be taken advantage of by the wrong man.

Greg Lawton was that wrong man.

Greg was all show and no substance. Life with him would be bland and predictable. He'd have Niki wrapped up like a china doll and tucked away in the suburbs faster than she could say, *I do*. Niki's uniqueness would wither up and die from boredom.

She needed someone who could tame her fiery personality, not break it. Someone who would appreciate her individuality.

Someone like himself.

The thought came out of nowhere, unbidden and unwelcomed, taking his breath away. A shiver of trepidation traveled down his spine. Slowly, he shook off the disconcerting thought. He'd been listening to his mother for too long. Her crazy matchmaking machinations were beginning to rub off on him.

Marriage—to any woman—was the last thing he needed to consider. He had more important things to concentrate on...like remedying his stagnant social life. It was time for him to enjoy life, not tie himself down to an eternity of commitment and responsibility.

Niki was a big girl now. If she wanted to ruin her life and marry Greg Lawton, so be it.

He frowned. The advice sounded reasonable. So why did it feel as though he were making the biggest mistake of his life?

Seeing Jack Sinclair again had been the biggest mistake of her life!

Late-day sunlight dappled her arms as Niki stepped out of her mother's house and strode to her car. Her heels clicked an agitated beat against the concrete driveway. A soft breeze lifted her hair, but did nothing to cool the hot spill of anger that coursed through her veins.

Niki climbed into her red compact car and inserted the key into the ignition. Yet she didn't start the motor. Instead, she glared at Jack Sinclair's house, fuming over what had happened.

Just when her life seemed to be gliding along on an even keel, Jack had to drop back into it. Forcing her, once again, to bump across choppy waters. All it took was a single look into those big brown eyes of his and she felt as though the years apart had never happened.

He'd made her feel like a kid again.

With an angry flick of her wrist, the car roared to life. Shifting gears into reverse, she peeled out of the driveway, leaving Jack and her troubling memories behind. Slowing to a safer pace, she drove through the quiet, treelined streets of Webster Groves.

For as long as she could remember she'd had a crush on Jack Sinclair. A silly schoolgirl crush that had become a lifelong obsession. Jack was all the cliches come to life: The boy next door. Tall, dark and handsome. A dream come true. A young girl's fantasy beau.

He'd been her fantasy.

But to Jack, she would always be the pesky little girl who lived next door. Her face warmed at the memory of all the crazy stunts she'd pulled just to get his attention. It wasn't any wonder that Jack was unable to see her as a grown, desirable woman. That he would never share the passion she'd secretly harbored for him all these years.

Absently, Niki touched the gold, heart-shaped locket that fell lightly between her breasts. The necklace had been a present to her from Jack. He'd given it to her the Christmas she'd turned eighteen.

Now it served as a constant reminder of the folly of loving Jack Sinclair.

Beneath the glittering lights of her parent's Christmas tree, he'd looked at her with those big brown eyes and had told her, "I wanted to be the first man to give you the gift of jewelry. Now that you're all grown up, I'm sure I won't be the last."

Her heart had done a series of flip-flops in her chest at his tender words. Finally, she'd thought, her dream had come true. Jack had noticed her as a woman.

Then the inconsiderate lout had ruffled her hair, told her to behave, and had abandoned her to spend the rest of his Christmas vacation with Patsy Stillwell, who was a junior in college and who'd been much more endowed than Niki ever hoped to be.

Niki coasted to stop as a signal light turned red, and she sighed at the memory. In one fell swoop, Jack had lifted her hopes, only to crush them soundly. It wasn't the first time he'd disappointed her. And she was sure it wouldn't be the last.

Tonight was just another example of how easily he could get under her skin. His reaction to her marriage plans had hurt more than she would ever admit to anyone. She'd seen the incredulity in Jack's eye. What was it he'd said?

*You can't be getting married. You're. too young.*

Unwanted tears stung her eyes. She blinked hard, refusing to allow him to upset her further. Jack was her past. Greg was her future. The sooner she accepted that fact the better.

She couldn't spend the rest of her life longing for something that would never happen. Niki released a slow resigned breath. It was time she gave Greg her much awaited answer to his marriage proposal.

A car honked its horn behind her, alerting her to the fact she'd been daydreaming through the better part of a green light. Niki pressed her foot on the accelerator, barely making it through the intersection before the light changed to yellow. She glanced in her rearview mirror, wincing as she caught the inventive hand signals of the driver she'd left behind.

Her thoughts drifted back to more pressing matters, like Greg's marriage proposal. She didn't understand why she'd had such a hard time arriving at a decision. Perhaps it was because she and Greg hadn't been dating all that long. Only six months, though steadily for the last three. Greg's proposal had come out of the blue, taking her breath away with its unexpectedness.

A blush crept across her face as she recalled how she'd stared at him, unable to speak when he'd first popped the question. He'd looked so hurt when she told him she needed time to consider her answer.

She pushed the disconcerting memory from her mind. Greg was a wonderful man. She owed him so much. He'd been a godsend this past year, helping her through one of the most difficult times of her life. He'd offered her a strong shoulder to lean on after her father had died, and she'd gratefully done the leaning. She had never met a more confident, more self-assured man. With Greg-unlike another man whom she didn't care to mention-she always knew exactly where she stood. She knew she could depend upon him.

Niki frowned. Not that he was perfect, mind you. He was a bit old-fashioned when it came to a woman's place in a marriage. In fact, he wanted her to quit teaching once they were married. He'd told her a doctor's wife didn't need to work.

Her lips eased into a confident smile. The disagreement was minor. Something that easily could be resolved. What mattered was that they shared the same dreams and had the same wants. A happy marriage, a family, and a chance to grow old living in their hometown of Webster Groves. What more could she ask for in a prospective husband?

Except, perhaps, passion and romance?

Her confidence floundered as an unwanted picture of Jack Sinclair cropped up in her mind. Jack with his dark, wavy hair and soft brown eyes. Jack with the broad shoulders and the breath-stealing smile. Jack, the man who'd had more influence on her life than any one person had a right.

Niki sighed. Her mind might be telling her marrying Greg was the best thing to do. But why wasn't her heart listening?



## *Chapter Two*

At ten o'clock that evening, Jack paced the flagstone patio in the backyard of his parent's home, waiting for Niki to return home from her *date*.

The night was quiet. The neighborhood at peace, bringing back memories of an idyllic past. Webster Groves was still a small town, a town whose older homes were as unique as the people living in them. A place where the people were still friendly, and where kids could still be kids.

Jack gave a wry smile. Even Beaver Cleaver couldn't have had a more perfect childhood. As an only child, he'd had the singular attention of doting parents. He'd never wanted for a thing, except perhaps a brother or two. The house had always been too quiet to suit his taste. But then again, with Niki living next door, life never was too tranquil.

Niki.

His smile faded as once again he was reminded of the task that lay ahead. He was waiting for Niki for a specific reason. To talk her out of a wedding.

He assured himself his decision to take matters into his own hands had nothing to do with his mother or her matchmaking tactics. Niki's marrying Greg Lawton would be a catastrophic mistake. It wasn't in his nature to allow any wrong to go unrighted.

He'd been watching out for Niki for the better part of twenty-three years. They might have spent the last few years in separate cities, but that hadn't lessened his sense of obligation toward her. She needed a firm hand to guide her to a happy future.

He had that firm hand.

The purr of an approaching engine drew his attention. He watched as Niki pulled her car into the Adamses' garage. He caught up with her as soon as she opened her door.

She turned, gasping. "You scared me half to death! What are you still doing here, Jack?"

Jack frowned. It wasn't exactly the welcome he'd hoped for, but he wasn't going to let her show of bad humor discourage him. "I wanted to talk to you." He raised a questioning brow. "You got a minute?"

She bit her lip, looking uncertain. "Sure, come on inside."

He hesitated, knowing Niki's mother was bound to be underfoot. The conversation he intended to broach with Niki was of a private nature, one that promised to be difficult. He didn't need an audience. "It's too nice of an evening. What do you say we stay outside?"

She shrugged. "How about the gazebo?"

The gazebo had been a favorite meeting place of theirs when they were kids. Resting in a corner of Niki's backyard, it was far enough away from the prying ears of overly protective parents, yet close enough for them to feel secure if the need arose for a little extra attention. Its white, Victorian-styled trim gave it a whimsical feel, making it a perfect playhouse.

Moonlight and a few strategically placed outdoor lights marked their way through the night-darkened yard. Jack followed her at a discreet distance, feeling unsettled by the fact that he was noticing the curving length of her legs and the saucy swing of her hips. He forced his thoughts to safer ground, remembering Niki as a kid.

His earliest memory of Niki was when he was five. It had been Christmas and the Adamses had brought home this crying, fidgeting little bundle. He'd peered at the baby everyone was cooing over and saw a bright, pink face and fluffy tufts of hair that were the color of a ripe pumpkin. One look at the kid and he knew she would be trouble. His parents had told him her name was Nicole, and that she was a very special Christmas present. Jack had liked the Adamses. He thought they'd deserved something better.

From that day onward their lives had become entwined. Niki was the little sister he'd never had. Now he couldn't help but feel guilty, as though there were something illicit in the fact he was noticing her as a beautiful, sexy woman.

"How's the new job?" she asked, drawing him out of his pensive mood.

"The job's fine," he said, wincing at the strained sound of his voice. "It's keeping me busy."

"So I've heard."

He moaned. "Now, don't you start lecturing me, too."

For the first time that evening, she laughed as she settled herself in the white wicker love seat. He watched as she kicked off her pumps and tucked her long legs beneath her. She looked relaxed, comfortable and—yes, dammit—irresistible. "I wouldn't think of it. I know better than to try to give advice to anyone. Besides, I've got enough to think about on my own."

He resisted the urge to join her on the love seat. Instead, he leaned a shoulder against one of the ornately decorated poles, deciding it best to keep a safe distance between him and Niki. Roses vined upward over the trellised porch, teasing the air with their sweet scent. A gentle breeze felt soft and warm, as though fall were just a distant promise. For a moment he wished they were kids again. That they were young and carefree, without the encumbrances of adulthood.

But he wasn't a kid. Neither was Niki, as he was shocked to learn. They had an adult-size problem to deal with and the sooner he brought it up, the better.

He cleared his throat. "Niki, the last thing I want to do is to be a wet blanket and give you a lecture...but I feel I've got to say this." He took a deep breath, then blurted out, "What's all this nonsense about you marrying Greg Lawton?"

"Nonsense?" The smile faded. A frown marred her beautiful face. "What do you mean, 'nonsense'?"

"I mean, this whole idea—your marrying Greg—it's crazy."

"Crazy?" The single word echoed across the gazebo, like a warning shot fired across an open field. She stared at him. Even in the muted light of the moon, he saw the agitation sparkling in her green eyes. Her shoulders were tensed and ready for an argument. "Now look, Jack. Just because you don't like Greg—"

"My personal feelings toward Greg Lawton have nothing to do with this," he lied.

"Ha! You've never liked Greg. As a matter of fact, you've never liked any man I've ever dated."

"That's not true." He searched his mind for someone, anyone to support his denial. "What about that guy who used to hang around here all the time during your senior year in high school? You know the one—tall kid, glasses, on the thin side?"

"Martin Skinner?" she asked, giving a disgusted look. "I never dated Martin. He was my lab partner in chemistry. He was tutoring me. If it wasn't for him, I'd never have gotten through the class."

"He seemed nice enough to me." Jack shrugged. "So what was wrong with good ol' Martin?"

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Nothing...that is, if you wanted to date a nerd."

Which was probably why he'd trusted him so much, Jack acknowledged silently. No wonder it hadn't bothered him to see the gangly kid hanging around the Adamses' house. Martin Skinner couldn't have hurt a flea, much less been a threat to Niki's well-being.

Jack pushed the troubling thought from his mind. He had more important things to consider than the pros and cons of dating Martin Skinner...things like Niki's future. "Niki, all I'm trying to say is that you should slow down, give yourself time to get to know Greg before you start considering something as important as marriage."

"I do know Greg. I've known him almost as long as I've known you," she stated, an edge to her deceptively calm voice. He had no doubt Niki's temper was on a short fuse. "We've been dating for over six months."

Six months? Jack felt stunned. Even to his own ears, six months sounded like a long time. Had he really let that much time pass without knowing what was happening in her life?

He ignored the tiny fists of guilt jabbing away at his conscience. “Okay, so you *think* you know Greg. But you’re still young. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you. What’s your rush? Why tie yourself down to marriage?”

“You’re wrong, Jack. The one thing I do know is that life’s too short,” she said. Her smile was bittersweet. “My father’s death taught me that much.”

“Niki, I—”

He stared at her, uncertain what to say. He wanted to disagree with her. But in his heart, he knew she was right. Her father’s fatal heart attack at the age of fifty-eight had been a shock to everyone, including Jack.

At the mention of her father’s death, he found himself wrestling with his own personal demons of guilt. It was just one more reminder that he’d been remiss. That he hadn’t been there at a time when she needed him most.

Niki continued, drawing him out of his guilty musings, “My mother thought she and Dad had a lifetime to share. Only sometimes a lifetime isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Time is too precious. I’m not going to waste a moment of it watching life pass me by.” Softly, she added, “I want a family, Jack. A home of my own before it’s too late.”

His chest tightened at the tremulous sound of her voice, making it hard to breathe. They’d been friends for too long. He felt her pain as though it were his own.

But just because he understood her hurry to be wed, it didn’t mean he condoned her reasoning. If anything, it made him all the more certain she was making a mistake. A mistake she might spend the rest of her life regretting.

“And you’re sure Greg Lawton is the man you want to spend the rest of your life with?”

She hesitated. “Greg’s the man who’s asked me.”

He released a frustrated breath. “That’s not love, Niki. That’s desperation.”

“Since when are you such an expert on love, Jack?” Emotion flashed in her eyes. “I don’t see you taking any steps toward the altar. If you ask me, I’d say you’re the last person who should be giving me marital advice.”

“Somebody has to give you advice, Niki,” he hollered, as an irrational anger welled up inside him. “It’s obvious you’re not capable of making a rational decision on your own.”

Jack regretted the words almost as soon as he spoke them. The last thing he’d intended was to lose his temper. He was in big trouble now.

She didn’t answer. In fact, she didn’t even look at him. Her seemingly quiet acceptance of his angry outburst unnerved him more than if she’d stood up and spit in his eye. Niki never did anything quietly.

She untucked her legs, slid her feet back into the discarded pumps, then stood. Pulling herself to her full fivefoot-seven height, she faced him. “I want to thank you, Jack.”

“Thank me?” He winced as his voice broke. He swallowed hard. His throat felt dry, as though it were about to close up on him.

“Yes, I’m very grateful to you.” She crossed her arms at her waist and hugged herself tightly. Emotion—anger mixed with pain?—glimmered in her eyes. “You’ve cleared up a lot of my doubts.”

“I have?”

“Yes, you have,” she said, chuckling softly as though remembering a private joke. The hollow-sounding laughter left him feeling cold inside. “You’ve opened my eyes to a lot of things. Things that should have been obvious years ago.”

Jack frowned, his discomfort growing. He didn’t understand what was going on here. But he had no doubt she was talking about more than his giving a little friendly advice. “Niki—”

She held up a quieting hand. “Let me finish. I want you to understand something, Jack. I am not a child. I am a clear-thinking, *rational* woman who is more than capable of making life’s important decisions.”

“Niki, listen. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply you were immature—”

“Of course, you did,” she snapped, her temper finally kicking in. “You’ve been implying it since you walked onto this gazebo.”

He couldn’t help himself. He pointed a finger at her nose. “You know, Niki, losing your temper isn’t a sign of maturity. It’s just one more example to support of my theory that you aren’t ready for marriage.”

She growled her frustration. “Get this through your thick head, Jack. Butt out of my life. I’m not the little kid who used to follow you around. I’ve got a life of my own. A life that doesn’t involve you anymore.”

The words had a stinging affect. The thought of her not needing him hurt more than any physical blow possibly could.

“You don’t mean, that,” he said slowly.

“Yes, I do.” Tears filled her eyes. Niki looked as upset as he felt. She blinked hard, then held up her left hand. A diamond the size of a small boulder glittered in the moonlight. “For your information, this entire conversation has been pointless. I’ve, already accepted Greg’s marriage proposal. Now, if I can’t count on your support, then I suggest you stay the hell out of my way.”

With that she stormed off the gazebo, leaving him reeling in the wake of her unfounded anger. His intentions had been good. He’d never expected her to be so upset. Didn’t she understand? He cared about her. He wanted to protect her. But all he seemed to have done was to offend her.

A dull pain throbbed in his chest. Niki had walked away from him. She said to stay out of her life. Thanks to him and his big mouth he might have destroyed their friendship.

The dull pain grew into a pounding ache. Losing Niki, he felt as though he’d lost a part of himself.

The next morning, the phone rang.

Martha Sinclair hurried to answer the insistent peal. “Hello,” she trilled in a pleasant singsong voice.

“Martha, what in the Sam Hill is the matter with that boy of yours?”

Martha recognized the caller. It was her good friend and next-door neighbor, Helen Adams. All traces of Helen’s usual friendly demeanor were gone. Her obvious agitation proved contagious. Martha drew in a sharp breath. “What’s wrong, Helen?”

“Niki just told me she’s decided to marry Greg Lawton!”

“What?” Martha gasped, though the news didn’t surprise her. When Jack had stayed late last night to talk to Niki, she’d taken it as a good sign. But it didn’t take a genius to figure out the meeting hadn’t gone as she and Helen had hoped. The conversation had lasted only a few minutes, ending with Niki storming into her house and slamming the door behind her, and Jack slinging himself into his car and careening out of the driveway. The scowl he wore on his face could have stopped a bear in his tracks.

Martha sighed. “Oh, Helen, this is terrible.”

“Now, don’t get me wrong. Greg is a nice enough boy. I’m sure he’ll make some girl a wonderful husband. But he’s not the right man for Niki.” Helen’s voice grew wistful. “When I see them together there’s no spark, no passion...Niki just isn’t acting like someone who’s truly in love.” Her tone changed abruptly, becoming sharp, almost accusing. “I thought you were going to light a firecracker under that boy of yours. Get him to talk her out of this wedding.”

Martha gave her head a miserable shake. “I tried, Helen. I really did try.”

A strained silence filled the phone line.

“Well, I’m not giving up,” Helen said finally.

“Neither am I,” Martha agreed.

“Looks like these children of ours are going to need a little push to get them headed in the right direction.”

Martha smiled for the first time. "Being pushy is a mother's God-given right."

Helen chuckled. "Between the two of us, they won't know what hit them."

"At least, not until they're married and have given us a couple of grandchildren."

"Amen," Martha seconded.

"Niki, the caterer's looking for you," Cassie Andrews, a tall, leggy blonde, informed her. "Something about cheese puffs that won't puff."

Her friend's announcement sounded like a death knell for a party that was headed for a certain demise. Niki closed her eyes and counted to ten, trying to shut out the din made by fifty guests. The party, like her engagement, seemed ill-fated from the start.

Nothing was going right.

First, the caterers arrived an hour late, swearing they'd been given the wrong time. Niki didn't understand the mix-up. Her mother had been in charge of ordering the food. It wasn't like her to allow such a mistake. Then, moments before the party was to begin, the heavens opened up and let loose with a torrent of rain. Guests were arriving soaked to the skin, shaking off the raindrops like puppies emerging from an unwanted bath. To add to the chaos, Greg was called out on an emergency, making him late for his own engagement party.

But that wasn't the worst of her troubles.

Her biggest problem stood not two feet away, looking smug and irritatingly cheerful. Niki opened her eyes and gave a silent growl of frustration. Life wasn't fair. Her fiancé was pulling a no-show, but Jack Sinclair had the nerve to show up for her engagement party.

"Something wrong, Niki?" Cassie, her best friend and soon-to-be maid of honor, shot her a concerned look.

"Nothing a good housecleaning wouldn't solve," Niki muttered to herself. She stole a glance in Jack's direction. His thick, chestnut brown hair was neatly combed. His dark good looks stood out against a crisp white shirt, contrasting nicely with his navy jacket and charcoal gray pants. He was cool, confident and a *fraud*. Tonight, he stood in her living room, along with dozens of her closest family and friends, waiting to toast the formal announcement of her and Greg's engagement. Knowing full well that less than two weeks ago he'd tried to talk her out of this very marriage.

The man had no shame. He feigned support on one hand while back-stabbing a friend with the other. Niki chewed on her lower lip. Not that she could really consider Jack and Greg to be friends.

The feud between the two men seemed to have gone on forever, its roots stretching back into childhood. For some reason, they brought out the worst in each other. They were two grown, intelligent men who acted like children whenever the other was near.

A new wave of anger washed over her. Because of this silly feud, Jack had ruined what should have been the happiest day of her life. He'd objected to her choice of husband solely on the basis of an adolescent rivalry.

Did he stop and consider her feelings? Her wants? No. He'd expected her to drop all of her wedding plans, simply because he didn't like the groom.

He'd treated her like a child.

He'd wounded her pride...and her heart.

He'd also opened her eyes to some hard, but long overdue truths. The schoolgirl crush she'd had on Jack was a sweet but impossible dream. She understood that now. But the hardest truth, the one that held the most sting, was that they'd seemed to have outgrown their childhood friendship. A friendship she thought they'd never lose.

"Niki?"

Niki blinked, forcing her attention back to Cassie. "Hmm?"

"Are you all right?" Worry shadowed the blonde's face. "You were a million miles away."

Niki grimaced. "I swear, Cassie. If one more thing goes wrong tonight, I'm going to scream."

Cassie's face relaxed around a smile. Mischievous danced in her blue eyes. "Believe me. If I were marrying Greg Lawton, I'd be screaming, also."

"Not you, too," Niki moaned.

"Me too, what?"

Niki shook her head. "Cassie, you're my maid of honor. You're supposed to support me during my engagement."

"I am supporting you. I just can't help it if I think you're crazy."

"Crazy?" The single word rang out loud and clear. Remembering her guests, she lowered her voice. "What do you mean crazy?"

Cassie struggled with a sober expression. "I mean...jeez, Niki, Greg Lawton of all people."

Niki felt her temper kick in. "What's the matter with Greg?" she demanded, struggling for control.

"Nothing, really." Cassie bit her lip to hide a smile. "It's just...being around Greg is like watching a rerun of Dr. Kildare. He's so cool, so collected—so perfect. Whenever I see him, I want to run up to him and muss his hair or something."

Niki sighed. Her maid of honor, it appeared, appreciated Greg almost as much as Jack did. She attributed the animosity between Cassie and Greg to their being opposites.

Perfection wasn't something she could pin on her friend. At twenty-four, Cassie was still trying to find herself. Smart and savvy, she just couldn't seem to settle down to any one man or occupation. Greg, on the other hand, was born responsible. He simply didn't understand Cassie's lack of commitment.

Cassie shrugged. "Look, I'm sorry, Niki. I'm not the one who's marrying Greg—thank God. As long as you're happy, that's all that counts." She glanced at Niki sharply. "You are madly in love with him, aren't you?"

The question took her aback. Of course, she loved Greg. She wouldn't be marrying him if she didn't. But *madly* in love? The term conjured up emotions that were unpredictable, out of control. Her feelings for Greg were more of a steady nature.

"What a silly question," Niki said, laughing to hide her uncertainty. She ignored her friend's curious gaze. "I think it's time I talked to the caterer."

Cassie draped an arm around Niki's shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "I'll join you. Thanks to my mother and her socializing ways, if there's one thing I know, it's how to throw a good party. I'll show you how to handle a temperamental caterer."

As they fought their way through the crowded living room, Niki felt the weight of Jack's gaze. She resisted the urge to glance back at him. No need to flirt with danger, she told herself. She was in no mood for another confrontation.

Guests were everywhere. They stood huddled in groups, scattered about the Oriental rug in tight knots of human congestion. Her mother's card party had taken up a boisterous residence in the middle of the room. They were comfortably settled on the couch and wing back chairs. She caught her mother's eye and conveyed a silent message of *Help!* Relief poured through her as she watched her mother rise to her feet to follow.

The party spilled out into the entranceway. A group of Greg and Jack's classmates from high school were balancing plates of food on their knees and sipping champagne as they sat on the foyer's gracefully curved staircase. Niki flashed them a smile and a wave as she and Cassie strode down the hall and ducked into the kitchen.

Compared to the blare of the party, the bustling noises of the catering staff seemed like heaven. Cassie took a seat on a bar stool at the kitchen's center island. Niki leaned against the door and gave herself a moment to calm her frazzled nerves.

Her moment of peace, however, was short-lived.

"Miss Adams?"

The caterer appeared before her. He was big man with dark hair and the build of a former football player going slowly to seed. He wore a look of concern. “You okay, Miss Adams?”

She forced a smile. “I’m fine. Were you looking for me?”

His thick brows knitted into a frown. “There’s too much humidity tonight. What with the rain and the heat from the crowd, the miniature cheese soufflés are falling flat as soon as they hit the air.”

Niki sighed. “There’s so much food out there already—”

She didn’t have a chance to finish. The kitchen door swung open, whacking Niki on her backside. Her mother had arrived. Worry shadowed her green eyes. She looked as frazzled as Niki felt.

“Niki, what in the world has happened to Greg?” she demanded.

Cassie chuckled from her perch at the island.

The caterer didn’t appreciate the interruption. “Miss Adams, about the cheese souffles—”

Her mother glanced sharply at the caterer. “Soufflés? Who cares about the souffles? There’s enough food out there to feed an army. I’m worried about the champagne.”

“The champagne?” Niki and Cassie chorused.

Her mother thumbed their attention toward the party. “The waiters are serving glasses of champagne as though they were sparkling water. At twenty bucks a pop, let’s slow down the flow, okay?”

“But Mrs. Adams, how can I...”

The voices faded as the dizziness grew. Too many voices. Too many demands. Niki felt as though she were on a merry-go-round, only the sound was distorted and the action slowed. She rubbed her throbbing temples. The room felt uncomfortably warm. Just as she felt as though she might scream or faint, the door opened, once again whacking her on the backside.

This time Jack stood before her.

One look into his eyes and Niki wanted to scream. She could see the big-brotherly concern etched across his face. She struggled to gather her scattered aplomb. The last thing she wanted was for Jack to see her ruffled. He’d never let her live it down if she fell apart now.

“Niki, are you okay?” His deep voice brought her senses back into sharp focus.

“Why does everyone keep asking me if I’m okay?” Niki snapped.

“Probably because you look like death warmed over,” Cassie offered.

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” she lied, as she fought a new wave of dizziness. “It’s just warm in here, that’s all.”

“Warm, my eye,” her mother said. “It’s all this rushing about you’ve been doing.” She shook her head, sending the corkscrew curls bouncing. “Why you and Greg decided on such a short engagement is beyond me. Three months isn’t long enough to make plans for a wedding. No wonder you’re feeling peaked.” Determination crossed her plump face. “Jack, take her outside. Get her some fresh air.”

“No, Mom,” Niki said quickly. “I’ll be fine—”

“Niki, I think you’d better listen to your mother,” Cassie said, slipping off the bar stool. “You really do look pale. Helen and I will take care of the food. You go on outside for few minutes.”

Before she could make another protest, a strong hand was pressed against the small of her back, pushing her gently toward the door. Trepidation shimmied along her spine. A cool, damp breeze caressed her flushed skin as she stepped outside. She lifted her face to the heavens and a fat drop of rain plopped onto her nose.

“It’s raining,” she said, turning back, glad for an excuse to go inside.

Jack didn’t give her a chance to escape.

“Come on.” He grabbed her hand and started running. His skin felt warm against hers, his grip firm. She had no choice but to follow. Deftly skirting the raindrops and puddles, he led her to the gazebo.

Niki gave a silent moan. Being alone with Jack was bad enough. But returning to the gazebo felt as though she were returning to the scene of the crime. For this was where he'd stolen her youthful fantasies.

As soon as their footsteps thudded against the wooden floor, Niki snatched her hand away from Jack's grasp. She strode to the far end of the gazebo, as far away from him as possible. He lingered at the gazebo's arched entranceway, blocking the exit. Short of hopping over the railing in her green silk dress, there would be no escaping him.

Neither of them spoke. An eternity passed as they listened to the rain drum against the gazebo's roof. A damp chill turned their ragged breaths into foggy plumes. The night pressed against them, dark and forboding.

Jack shattered the silence. "Do you plan to stay mad at me forever?"

She heard a shade of the old Jack in his tone. The teasing, confident boy who could sweet-talk his way out of any argument. Steeling herself against his charm, she refused to look at him. "Mad doesn't even begin to describe the way I feel."

"Niki, I didn't come out here to argue with you—"

"Then why did you come?"

"To reason with you." A hint of exasperation edged his voice. "Obviously, that was a mistake."

She glanced at him. Beyond the reaches of the light, he looked dark and elusive, like a shadow in the night. "Why? Because you can't reason with a *child*?"

He released a slow, impatient breath. "I never said you were a child."

"No, but you implied it."

"All I said was that you were too young—"

"I'm old enough," she insisted.

He continued, undaunted. "That you were too young and too impulsive—"

"I am not impulsive."

"Right. That's why you're marrying Greg in three months." He stepped closer, emerging from the shadows. His voice came like a whisper out of the dark. "What's your hurry, Niki? Afraid you might change your mind?"

Niki flinched, as his taunt struck a hidden nerve. She stared at him. Even in the rain-darkened light, he looked handsome, sexy and irresistible. Noticing his physical attributes only stoked her anger. "I'd rather be impulsive than be a hypocrite. How dare you come to my engagement party, when you don't even approve of my marriage?"

He shrugged. "Greg and I were classmates. I'm a friend of the family. I may not approve of the wedding, but I have no choice but to accept it."

A new surge of anger rose up inside her. "I never asked for your approval." She held her arms out at her sides. "Look at me, Jack. I'm a big girl now. I'm all grown up. I can make my own decisions."

Impatience lined his face. "For the last time, I don't think of you as a child."

"No, you just treat me like one."

"If you want to be treated like an adult, then start acting like one."

She threw her hands up in defeat. "I give up. Talking to you is impossible." With a determined step, she moved to slip past him.

Jack stopped her. Placing both hands upon her shoulders, he spun her around to face her. "This conversation isn't finished."

"Yes, it is. Let go of me, Jack."

He didn't listen. He held her firm.

She felt the warmth of his hands through the silky fabric of her dress. She saw the rise and fall of his chest with each breath he drew. She inhaled the scent of his cologne, the same brand of cologne she'd given him three years ago for Christmas. Anger still pumped through her veins, but with it came a new emotion. Awareness prickled her senses.



He was too close...too tempting. She had to leave. Now.

Only, she couldn't move.

She couldn't say a word.

"Niki, I..." he began, his voice thick, as though he were having a difficult time forming the words. He stopped. Stared at her. Then, releasing a harsh breath, he pulled her close.

Before she could protest, he kissed her.

### *Chapter Three*

Lightning, which had nothing to do with the stormy weather raging beyond the gazebo, struck the moment their lips met.

Jack was stunned. Their first kiss should have been gentle, playful...a reflection of their friendship. Gentle wasn't an apt description. The kiss started rough, and grew even more demanding. And yet, Niki didn't resist.

Need took the place of his common sense. Experimentally, he swept his tongue across her lips, sampling them. They were sweet and tender like a forbidden fruit. Once tasted, he knew he was lost.

Somewhere deep in the recesses of his mind, the voice of reason struggled to be heard. Niki was his friend. She was like a sister to him. She was engaged to another man.

Kissing her was wrong.

Then her lips parted. Her tongue met his, tentatively at first, then bolder. And Jack knew reason didn't have a chance. The temptation was too great. The kiss deepened, as though of its own volition.

Being bad, he told himself, never felt so good.

He slid his hands down her back, marking a silky trail. She shivered in his arms. Cupping her slender waist, he pulled her close. Her supple curves molded themselves to him. Soft and warm, her body felt as though it had been made to be held by him.

She felt so damned good.

He couldn't believe it. Niki, the sweet, trusting girl next door, had a kiss that packed a sledgehammer wallop. Jack struggled to maintain a modicum of restraint. He wasn't a strong man, he warned himself. He had to put a stop to this before he lost total control.

But Niki just wouldn't cooperate. She moved restlessly in his arms, twining her fingers through his hair, brushing her hips against his, pressing those supple curves against his hard, aching body.

Jack growled his frustration, then gave up the fight. The kiss took on a life force of its own, sustaining a desire in him he never knew existed. Hungrily, he delved his tongue into the sweetness of her mouth. She met his demands with a lusty appetite of her own.

Then she gave a soft moan. A breathy whisper of delight. Not a loud noise, just enough to break the trance that held them both spellbound.

His conscience made one final rally to be heard. Niki was his best friend. Since the day she was born, he'd assumed the role of her guardian. It had been his job to watch out for her, to take care of her.

Well, who was looking out for her now?

The thought chilled him, putting a damper on his overheated libido. He knew, without a doubt, it was time to end the embrace. Before he lost the courage, he pushed himself away. Regretfully, he stepped out of the circle of her arms.

Niki stared at him, a confused, dazed look on her face. Her hair was mussed. Her lips were pink and slightly swollen. Her eyes sparkled like emeralds in the moonlight. He'd never seen her looking more beautiful, or more desirable.

Heaven help him, he wanted to kiss her again.

It took all his strength to resist the urge.

For what seemed like an eternity, neither of them spoke. They stared at each other, their gazes wary, their breaths choppy, making puffs of smoke in the cool, damp air. Both of them were acting as though they'd just run the most important race of their lives...and had lost.

Moments ago, he'd been unable to hear anything over the pounding of his own heart and the hot rush of passion pumping through his veins. Now he realized it was still raining. The lights still blazed in the Adamses' house. The sound of the party going at full blast drifted over the rain-soaked night.

Nothing had changed.

And yet, he had a feeling nothing would ever be the same. He looked at her. She stood before him, clutching a hand to her breast. No, she was clutching a chain, a golden locket that hung from her neck. Clutching it tightly, with a horrified, glazed look in her eyes.

And she was mumbling something to herself.

Jack frowned.

Mumbling something that sounded like...*not again?*

Guilt hit him squarely in the gut. The poor kid was in shock. He swore softly beneath his breath.

"Niki—" he began, as he carefully moved toward her.

Her eyes widened. She clutched the necklace tighter. "Don't touch me."

He stopped, stared at her. It was worse than he first thought. The poor kid had gone off the deep end. She looked panic-stricken. "Niki, honey. It's me, Jack. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Ha!" Fool that he was, he'd misread the emotion. Anger—not fear—flashed in her eyes. Her gaze narrowed. "And don't you dare call me honey."

When Niki had been in eighth grade, she'd become the object of a young boy's desire, much to her consternation. Tommy Brogan was a smart-alec punk who'd thought he was God's gift to the female population. When Tommy's advances became more insistent, Jack thought he'd have to step in and have a talk with the young lothario. But his assistance had proved unnecessary.

Young Tommy made the fatal mistake of kissing Niki without permission. Jack, watching the scene from afar, had nearly fallen out of his bedroom window in surprise. His protective instincts kicking in, he'd been prepared to come to Niki's rescue and toss the little punk out of her yard.

Niki beat him to the punch, literally. With a sharp right hook, she'd made her position clear. She wasn't a helpless lass who would stand still for an unwanted pass.

Recalling Tommy and the shiner Niki had awarded him, Jack now took a wary stance. "Can we talk about this?"

"No."

"Niki, be reasonable—"

"I am being reasonable, *finally*."

"Niki, we have to discuss this." Impatience edged his tone. "The kiss—"

"Should never have happened."

"But it did," he persisted. Despite warning signs to the contrary, Jack raised a gentle hand, cupping her chin and forcing her to look at him. "Niki, don't you see? This changes everything."

"It changes nothing."

She stepped out of his embrace.

He shook his head slowly. "If that's what you want to believe—"

"It's what I know. I'm engaged to Greg."

"Greg?" His jaw clenched reflexively. His patience vanished in a haze of jealous heat. "You can't seriously be considering marrying him. Not after what just happened—"

"Nothing happened, Jack. It was just a kiss."

"Just a kiss?" The kiss had been special. He knew she'd felt it, too. Anger overrode his common sense. "Tell me, Niki. Do you kiss all of your old friends this way or did I just get lucky tonight?"

He wished he could take back the hurtful words as soon as he spoke them. He was being deliberately crude, lashing out against a wounded pride. Simply because he'd wanted her to feel as bad as he did.

He saw her hand rising. Shared the anger spurring her actions. But felt an air of unreality surround him. For just a moment, he wondered if this was how Tommy Brogan had felt before Niki had knocked him for a loop.

She slapped him.

His face stung from the impact of the blow. But he didn't move. He simply looked at her, regret washing over him.

Niki turned on her heel, spinning away from him. This time he didn't try to stop her.

Jack stared after her, feeling stunned and unbalanced. Not by the smack on the cheek. He'd probably deserved the blow.

He brought a hand to his face and rubbed a knuckle over the throbbing spot. No, it wasn't a physical pain that had thrown him off kilter. It was an emotional one.

He'd enjoyed the kiss, pure and simple.

Hell, he'd more than enjoyed it. He wanted to risk another reprimand, just to sample her sweet lips again.

Jack released a low growl of frustration. Until tonight, Niki had been like a sister to him. She was also engaged to another man. But neither of those things had deterred him. He'd sought and found a pleasure with her that he'd never felt with any other woman.

Niki was the impulsive one.

He thrived on caution and reason.

The last thing he needed to do was to make any snap decisions. The stakes were too high. He had too much to lose if he made a mistake in judgment. He needed to keep his head on straight, and not let his hormones rule his actions.

But it wasn't going to be easy.

His body still thrummed with an unresolved tension. A sensual tension that Niki had created. Jack raked his hand through his hair.

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