



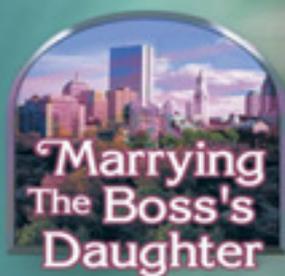
Silhouette®

1684  
September

# Love, Your Secret Admirer

SUSAN MEIER

SILHOUETTE  
*Romance*®



SUSAN MEIER

**Love, Your Secret Admirer**

«HarperCollins»

**MEIER S.**

Love, Your Secret Admirer / S. MEIER — «HarperCollins»,

FROM THE DESK OF EMILY WINTERS Bachelor #1: Matthew Burke Title: Senior VP of Accounting This Month's Scheme: Open Matt's eyes to his adoring assistant Let's see... There's got to be a way to get all-business Matt Burke to notice his lovestruck secretary, Sarah Morris. I think she needs a secret admirer to shower her with gifts and a sexy makeover from small-town farm girl to big-city bombshell. That should be enough to drive even the most pragmatic man wild with jealousy—and desire. I'll leave the falling in love part to Sarah....

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Wintersoft's CEO is on a husband hunt  
for his daughter. Trouble is, Emily  
has uncovered his scheme. But can she marry off  
the eligible executives before Dad sets his  
crazy plan in motion?

"Go home, Sarah."

"No. I think it's time we had this out."

"I don't," Matt said. He couldn't. Good bosses didn't romance their subordinates.

Completely catching him off guard, Sarah marched around his desk and trapped him in his seat by anchoring her hands on both arms of his chair. "I do."

In their entire work association, Matt didn't think they had ever been this close. He could smell the light floral scent of her perfume and see the flecks of gold in her green eyes.

"You should be thanking me, Sarah, for being a gentleman."

"What the heck is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that if we were in any other kind of circumstance, I would be doing this right now." Before she had a chance to react, Matt pulled her into his lap. Then he lowered his head for a kiss.

Dear Reader,

If you're like me, you can't get enough heartwarming love stories and real-life fairy tales that end happily ever after. You'll find what you need and so much more with Silhouette Romance each month.

This month you're in for an extra treat. Bestselling author Susan Meier kicks off **MARRYING THE BOSS'S DAUGHTER**—the brand-new six-book series written exclusively for Silhouette Romance. In this launch title, *Love, Your Secret Admirer* (#1684), our favorite matchmaking heiress helps a naive secretary snare her boss's attention with an eye-catching makeover.

A sexy rancher discovers love and the son he never knew, when he matches wits with a beautiful teacher, in *What a Woman Should Know* (#1685) by Cara Colter. And a not-so plain Jane captures a royal heart, in *To Kiss a Sheik* (#1686) by Teresa Southwick, the second of three titles in her sultry **DESERT BRIDES** miniseries.

Debrah Morris brings you a love story of two lifetimes, in *When Lightning Strikes Twice* (#1687), the newest paranormal love story in the **SOULMATES** series. And sparks sizzle between an innocent curator—with a big secret—and the town's new lawman, in *Ransom* (#1688) by Diane Pershing. Will a seamstress's new beau still love her when he learns she is an undercover heiress? Find out in *The Bridal Chronicles* (#1689) by Lissa Manley.

Be my guest and feed your need for tender and lighthearted romance with all six of this month's great new love stories from Silhouette Romance.

Enjoy!

Mavis C. Allen

Associate Senior Editor, Silhouette Romance

# Love, Your Secret Admirer

## Susan Meier



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## Books by Susan Meier

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\*In Care of the Sheriff #1283

\*Guess What? We're Married! #1338

Husband from 9 to 5 #1354

\*The Rancher and the Heiress #1374

†The Baby Bequest #1420

†Bringing up Babies #1427

†Oh, Babies! #1433

His Expectant Neighbor #1468

Hunter's Vow #1487

Cinderella and the CEO #1498

Marrying Money #1519

The Boss's Urgent Proposal #1566

Married Right Away #1579

Married in the Morning #1601

\*\*Baby on Board #1639

\*\*The Tycoon's Double Trouble #1650

\*\*The Nanny Solution #1662

Love, Your Secret Admirer #1684

Silhouette Desire

Take the Risk #567

## SUSAN MEIER

is one of eleven children, and though she has yet to write a book about a big family, many of her books explore the dynamics of “unusual” family situations, such as large work “families,” bosses who behave like overprotective fathers, or “sister” bonds created between friends. Because she has more than twenty nieces and nephews, children also are always popping up in her stories. Many of the funny scenes in her books are based on experiences raising her own children or interacting with her nieces and nephews.

She was born and raised in western Pennsylvania and continues to live in Pennsylvania.

FROM THE DESK OF EMILY WINTERS

Six Bachelor Executives To Go

Bachelor #1: Love, Your Secret Admirer

Matthew Burke—Hmm...his sweet assistant clearly has googly eyes for her workaholic boss. Maybe I can make some office magic happen....

Bachelor #2: Her Pregnant Agenda

Grant Lawson—The guy’s a dead ringer for Pierce Brosnan— who wouldn’t want to fall into his strong, protective arms!

Bachelor #3: Fill-In Fiancée

Brett Hamilton—The playboy from England has some aristocratic ways about him. Maybe he’s royalty and I can find him a princess!

Bachelor #4: Santa Brought a Son

Reed Connors—The ambitious VP seems to have a heavy heart. Who broke it, and where is she now?

Bachelor #5: Rules of Engagement

Nate Leeman—Definitely a lone wolf kind of guy. A bit hard around the edges, but I’ll bet there’s a tender heart inside.

Bachelor #6: One Bachelor To Go

Jack Devon—The man is so frustratingly elusive. Arrogant and implacable, too, darn it! I’ll put him last on my matchmaking list until I can figure out what kind of woman he likes.

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## Prologue

“We’ve got a problem.”

Carmella Lopez watched as Emily Winters looked up from the report she was reading. Emily’s desk was in front of a wall of windows, and the lights of the Boston skyline twinkled behind her, highlighting her brown hair and sapphire-blue eyes. The nighttime view also illustrated that it was long past the hour when most of the employees of Wintersoft, Inc., had gone home. Emily was as intelligent and dedicated as she was beautiful, and that was why Carmella was so annoyed by the conversation she’d overheard Emily’s dad having with his sister that afternoon. Emily didn’t need to have a man “help” her run her father’s company when he retired, any more than she needed help finding a husband.

Emily said, “Spill it.”

Carmella stepped into Emily’s office and closed the door behind her. She had been Lloyd Winters’ executive assistant for twenty-five years, first when he was an investment banker and now at his financial software company. But she also came from a family that had survived being chased out of Mexico several generations ago by Pancho Villa, and she knew that sometimes discretion wasn’t the better part of valor. Action was. Though she would never do anything disloyal to Lloyd, she felt a sense of responsibility to his daughter. In a way, acting on her loyalty to Emily protected Lloyd.

“Your dad is about to play matchmaker.”

Emily’s face lost its color. “Again?”

“I think he’s forgotten that he already tried this and failed. This morning, he took one look at our organizational chart and saw that most of our senior vice presidents are eligible bachelors and wheels started turning in his head. I overheard him telling your Aunt Anne in Florida that each of the guys on the chart makes a respectable salary. All of them have proven themselves. And all of them are acceptable son-in-law material.”

Emily looked as though she’d faint. “Dear God. Fixing me up with one Wintersoft employee was bad enough,” she said, speaking of the disastrous marriage that had resulted when Emily had tried to please her dad by marrying one of Wintersoft’s former executives, Todd Baxter. “Marrying me off to everybody who’s available will make me a laughingstock.”

Carmella softened her tone because, in spite of his sometimes overbearing, old-fashioned tactics, Lloyd’s heart was always in the right place. “He doesn’t mean it that way.”

“He didn’t mean it that way the last time, either. But that’s exactly what happened. The tension was so thick when my marriage to Todd collapsed that Todd had to leave the company, and I lost credibility with most of the staff. It’s taken me five years of working nearly nonstop to prove myself again.”

“But you did it. And earned a senior vice presidency in the process. Plus, the five years it took you to be promoted proved you didn’t just get your job because you’re Lloyd Winters’ daughter. No one can say that you don’t deserve your position.”

“No, but they can lose respect for me. Who’s going to take seriously a woman whose dad is trying to auction her off to the highest-ranking corporate officer?” Emily raked her fingers through her thick, shoulder-length hair. “I’m going to have to quit.”

Carmella shook her head. “You can’t quit. That would mean explaining to your dad why you were leaving and it would kill him to think he pushed you away. He’s not trying to push you away; he’s trying to help you. It might be old-fashioned, but I’m guessing your dad believes marrying you off to one of the senior vice presidents—someone who could take over the company when he retires instead of you—is a way to give you options. If you don’t have to replace him, you would be free to be a wife and a mother—if that was what you wanted.”

“I don’t know what I want. Maybe I do want to be a wife and mother one day, but that’s my decision. I just need time.” Emily drew a frustrated breath. “Things would be so much easier if my dad and I could talk about this. But since the mess with Todd, it’s like we don’t even speak the same language anymore.”

“Talking won’t help. Once your dad gets an idea in his head, it’s impossible to get it out. He has hundreds of reasons to want to see you married and a mother. You would have to have a hundred arguments to change his mind.”

Emily groaned. “I’m doomed!”

“Not really. Not if we think of something to distract him before he starts hooking you up with his senior VPs, or if we come up with a way that makes it impossible for him to play matchmaker.”

“We could just marry off everybody who’s single before my dad gets to them,” Emily said flippantly.

Carmella laughed. “Now, that would be something,” she said, but she paused. “Actually, that would be something.”

“Oh, no!” Emily said. “Don’t you start! This isn’t like *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers!*!”

“You’re right. I don’t think we have that many matches to make.” Carmella rushed around Emily’s desk and reached into the top desk drawer for a copy of the organizational chart. The first block listed Emily’s dad, Lloyd Winters, as CEO and President of Wintersoft, Inc. Nine lines led from that box to the next row of blocks holding the names of the senior vice presidents. Listed below each of them were the names of their staff members.

For the present, Carmella concentrated on the senior vice presidents themselves. “Alan Richards and Chad Evers are already married.”

Carmella watched Emily’s eyes widen as she apparently considered being paired up with either of the fortyish, balding dads, and she laughed. “Dodged a bullet on those two, didn’t you?”

“Very funny.”

“Okay,” Carmella continued, once again pointing to the chart. “Melinda McIntosh, Senior Vice President of Human Resources, is female. So she, Chad and Alan are out. That leaves these five. Matt Burke, Grant Lawson, Brett Hamilton, Nate Leeman, and Jack Devon.” She pointed to one more block. “Reed Connors is only a vice president, but I’m pretty sure he’s about to be promoted to senior vice president, and he’s single. So I don’t think we should leave him out.”

Emily stared at the chart. “I can see why my dad’s striking now. The iron is definitely hot. Except for Jack Devon who’s so elusive even I wouldn’t know where to start with him, any one of these other guys is ripe for the picking.”

“Which means we have our work cut out for us.”

Emily peered at Carmella. “I can’t see how our marrying off six unsuspecting men is any different than my dad marrying me off.”

“It’s very different,” Carmella assured her. “Because we would be smart and careful. We wouldn’t just pair these men up with women willy-nilly. We would approach it like a business problem.”

Thinking that through, Emily sat back in her seat. “Okay. If we handled this the same way we would any business undertaking, we would have to work in earnest to find the right mates for these guys.”

Carmella smiled. “Yes, we would.”

“We would have to be fair, and look out for the best interests of all parties involved.”

“There’s no other way to do this.”

Emily tapped her pencil on her desk blotter. “The only problem is, a plan like this would take lots of time and we might not have lots of time.”

“We can buy a few weeks by having you pretend to be dating someone.”

“If I could just pick a boyfriend off a boyfriend tree, I wouldn’t be in this predicament right now.”

“You could ask Steven Hansen to help us out.”

“Steven? But he’s...”

“From New York City,” Carmella said, stopping Emily before she said what she was about to say because in this case it was irrelevant. Getting them back to the real matter at hand, she added, “I can find most of the background on our guys on the Internet, so we wouldn’t even have to leave the building to do what we need to do.”

Carmella paused and frowned thoughtfully before adding, “But convincing your dad you’re dating Steven probably won’t last beyond the charity ball at the end of the month, so I suggest we go for the obvious one first.” She pointed at a name on the organizational chart.

Emily smiled broadly. “Oh, my gosh! That’s perfect.”

## Chapter One

Timing is everything.

Sarah Morris, the executive assistant to the Senior Vice President of Accounting for Wintersoft, looked up from her work when Penny Rutledge, Wintersoft's petite blond receptionist, set a huge crystal vase containing one dozen long-stemmed white roses on her desk.

"Oh, my! They're beautiful!"

"Open the card," Penny said shifting from foot to foot, dancing with excitement.

Sarah pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose, then fingered the practical braid she'd woven her waist-length red hair into as she peered down at her ordinary gray suit. "They're for me?"

"Of course they're for you, silly! Open the card."

The scent of roses filled the air as Sarah fumbled with the envelope. The seal finally gave and she pulled out the brightly colored rectangle and read out loud, "Your Secret Admirer."

Penny all but swooned. "Ohh!"

"I have a secret admirer?" Sarah said, her voice confused and uncertain. She had moved from North Dakota to Boston a year ago, but didn't get out much. The only man she knew more than casually was...

An amazing thought occurred to her and she glanced over her shoulder to the office behind her. Her boss, Matt Burke, sat at his desk, making his to-do list for the next workday because that's what he did every day at five minutes till five. Fridays were no exception.

He diligently scribbled in his calendar, oblivious to her scrutiny, but Sarah drank in every detail of his short, spiky brown hair and handsome face. Because he was writing, she couldn't see his eyes but knew they were a soft blue, trimmed with unusually long black lashes. More than once she had dreamily gazed into them when he was focused on something else.

It couldn't be...

Matt wouldn't...

"So who do you think it is?" Penny asked as she happily rearranged the flowers to make the bouquet perfect.

"I don't know," Sarah said, trying not to look behind her again. Working one-on-one the way she and Matt did, they knew enough intimate details of each other's lives to throw them into the category of friends. But Matt had never shown one ounce of interest in her as a woman.

"No idea at all?" Penny said, smiling as she leaned a hip against Sarah's desk and got comfortable. "No guy you met at a bar or museum or church on Sunday morning?"

"I don't go to bars. People don't usually strike up conversations with me at museums and they are even quieter in church." Which made it highly unlikely that she would have a secret admirer. And that took her back to Matt. He was the only man who could have sent her these flowers. The question was...why?

"I heard you got roses!" Carmella Lopez said as she walked down the open corridor to Sarah's workstation. Lloyd Winters' executive assistant was a beautiful Hispanic woman with short, graying black hair and warm brown eyes. A fifty-something widow with no children, Carmella was also a sweet and sincere office mother hen who read romance novels. It didn't surprise Sarah that she would be one of the first people in the office to congratulate a woman who got flowers. "Who are they from?"

Sarah glanced at Carmella. "A secret admirer."

Matt stepped out of his office, and, as always, Sarah's attention was immediately consumed by him. Tall and broad-shouldered, ruggedly attractive even in his dress shirt and tie, he looked more like one of the employees on Sarah's dad's ranch than a quiet, focused senior vice president for a software company. Sarah suspected that was why she had such a crush on him. In her mind, he combined the

best of both worlds. He had the masculinity of a cowboy and the brains and conceptualizing ability of a Forbes, Ford or Gates.

His gaze flitted to the roses then swung to hers. “Well, look at this,” he said, his voice filled with that odd tone men used when they tried to be happy about something girly, but didn’t quite know how to pull it off. Or, when they were in some way faking their response. “Somebody sent you flowers.”

It was him! Sarah thought, tamping down the unrealistic hope that he’d sent her flowers because he was interested in her. The tone of his voice was too patronizing and too brotherly. If he’d sent them, it was to cheer her up. Or—she squeezed her eyes shut then quickly opened them again before anyone noticed—because he felt sorry for her. He knew she didn’t go out on weekends. He knew she hadn’t had a date since she’d arrived in Boston.

“Yes, and aren’t they beautiful?” Carmella fingered a pristine petal. “White is for what?”

“Purity,” Sarah replied, her eyes narrowing. Purity? Purity!

“So some man thinks you’re very sweet,” Matt said, smiling his warm, wonderful, I’m-a-friendly-guy smile and Sarah wanted to deck him. The man she was crazy about thought she was pure. While she daydreamed about his kisses, he saw her as someone inexperienced and naive.

For fifty cents she’d take him to her dad’s ranch where she played poker with the hands and held her own during cattle drives when the cursing was thick and biting. She would show him firsthand that she wasn’t naive, she wasn’t inexperienced and she sure as hell wasn’t pure.

“Well, you can’t leave them here,” Carmella was saying as Sarah forced herself out of her reverie. “They’ll die over the weekend.” She smiled at Sarah. “Besides don’t you want to enjoy them?”

“No,” Sarah said, surprising herself as much as everybody else around her. “I don’t want to enjoy them, because I don’t want them at all. Penny, you can have them.”

“No!”

“No!”

“No!”

Matt, Penny and Carmella said the word simultaneously. Penny said it like a woman who didn’t want the flowers of another woman, no matter how lovely.

Carmella sounded shocked that Sarah would give away such beauty. Matt said it as if she had suggested prematurely withdrawing money from her IRA.

The red numbers on Sarah’s digital clock blinked and 4:59 became 5:00. Sarah opened her bottom desk drawer, withdrew her backpack and rose from her seat. “Then leave them for the cleaning people,” she said as she left her office.

Tears stung her eyes. Her gray skirt shifted across her calves. Her fat braid bounced along her back. Damn it! She was pure. Well, not exactly pure, more like conservative. Well, not even conservative, more like comfortable. She had thick unruly hair that fell to the bottom of her back, so it wasn’t just convenient to wear it in a braid. It was comfortable. Her glasses were less effort than her contacts. And long skirts were all-covering, easy to match and the most logical thing to wear when she was constantly bending and stretching to reach files.

She was dowdy, and conservative by virtue of the fact that she dressed for comfort, and there was no way she would have a secret admirer. She hadn’t even had a date since she’d set foot in this city! Combining her lack of dates with her dowdy clothes, Matt probably saw her as some kind of charity case. Did he know she was still a virgin, too?

Purity flowers took on a whole new meaning, sending anger careening through Sarah’s veins. The probability that Matt had sent those flowers because he felt sorry for her became more and more obvious by the second. By the time she reached the elevator, she just wanted to die.

Matt Burke stood with Carmella and Penny, watching Sarah as she marched, head high, to the elevator. His thoughts were in such turmoil and the situation was so unusual—not to mention uncomfortable—that he wasn’t sure what to do.

“Go after her.”

Matt faced Carmella. “What?”

“Go after her. She can’t leave these beautiful flowers.”

Matt almost said, “Yes, she can,” but he changed his mind. He wasn’t sure why seeing Sarah get flowers caused a tightening in his chest, he only knew it did. Now that he’d gotten over the shock that Sarah would waste perfectly good roses, he wasn’t upset to see her leave them behind. In fact, he had an ungodly urge to toss them out his office window.

“I’ll take them to her,” Penny said, grabbing the flowers and pivoting toward the door.

“No!” Carmella yelled as she caught Penny’s hand, but she lowered her voice and said, “Matt will take them to her.” She paused to lift the vase from Penny’s grasp, and her smile reappeared as she offered the roses to Matt. “You drive by her apartment complex on your way home. You can take them right to her door.”

“Oh, no!” Matt said, backing away from the flowers as if they were poisonous. “She doesn’t want these.”

Carmella chuckled. “So what? If she refuses to take them from you, the worst that could happen is that you’d get stuck with a dozen long-stemmed roses and a beautiful vase.”

Penny said, “Maybe he’s afraid someone will mistake him for a delivery man.”

Matt sighed heavily. “I’m not afraid of anything! I just know she doesn’t want them. I’ll feel like an idiot going to her door with flowers that she doesn’t want.”

Carmella sauntered around Sarah’s desk and picked up the card. “I don’t think she ran because she didn’t want the flowers.”

Matt said, “Huh?”

“I think she ran because she did want the flowers.”

“Ohhhh!” Penny said. “I get it. When I set the roses on her desk she was excited. When she saw the card, she got mad. It’s like she wants flowers from somebody, but she doesn’t know who sent these.”

Carmella nodded. “So she doesn’t know if her secret admirer is the man she wants it to be. And if it is the man she wants it to be, she’s probably angry that he wasn’t mature enough to sign his name.”

“You guys are nuts,” Matt said, though their rationale did make an odd kind of sense. Sarah might be too calm and pragmatic to behave like a swooning female. But if there was somebody she liked, somebody she really, really liked and she wanted to get flowers from him, Matt could see Sarah getting angry that the guy was too chicken to sign his name.

In Matt’s opinion, Sarah was much too good for this coward.

Penny reverently whispered, “She must really like him.”

Carmella only smiled.

Matt felt as though somebody had punched him in the stomach. He couldn’t believe that Sarah had fallen for somebody and that he hadn’t noticed. He couldn’t believe the man she’d fallen for was a spineless idiot who didn’t know how to make a decent move. A move that involved admitting who he was. He couldn’t believe Sarah falling for someone bothered him more than the fact that the guy was a spineless idiot. But he did know it probably wasn’t wise for him to be the person going to her apartment right now.

“A woman should do this.”

“I have a salon appointment,” Carmella said. “Penny lives across town. Besides, she has kids to go home to.”

“I can’t take these to her!”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not that sensitive. I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how to get her to accept these flowers.” And he wasn’t even sure he wanted to. That was the tricky part.

Carmella sighed. “Matt, what day is it?”

“August 29.”

“What’s Monday?”

“September 1.”

“What happens on September 1?”

“It’s Labor Day, but on Tuesday my staff goes to work on the quarterly report.”

Carmella handed him the vase of roses. “A wise man who had a quarterly report due would want his executive assistant at her desk on Tuesday morning. Sarah looked pretty mad when she left. You don’t want her to spend her long weekend brooding and be too tired or too upset to come in.”

Matt groaned.

“Take these flowers to her, make her understand that it doesn’t matter who sent them. What matters is that somebody cares about her.”

Matt shook his head, as affronted as Sarah. “Then why couldn’t he sign his name?”

Carmella shrugged. “Haven’t you ever been so tongue-tied with someone that you watched from a distance because you couldn’t go up to her and talk?”

Matt swallowed. He did know what it was like to be so tongue-tied with someone that he watched her from a distance rather than make real contact. It wasn’t a lover or potential lover. It was his mother. And he had been ten at the time.

“Think of this guy like that. Somebody who is inexperienced or somebody who likes Sarah so much that he’s afraid to make a mistake.”

Matt stared at the flowers. His situation wasn’t anything like the situation Carmella was describing, but she had struck the right nerve. The feeling was the same. He’d never approached his mother back then because the fear of rejection was stronger than the hope that she’d welcome him with open arms. He knew this flower-sender’s emotions like the back of his hand.

“When you give the flowers to Sarah explain that somebody who doesn’t know how to admit it likes her and she should be flattered.”

“And you think that will cheer her up?”

Carmella and Penny simultaneously said, “Yes.”

“Fine,” Matt said, turning to go into his office for his briefcase. “Get me her address.”

Forty minutes later Sarah opened her apartment door and there stood her boss, holding the purity flowers he had sent her because he felt sorry for her. Heat scalded her cheeks as her blood pressure and anger rose.

“Hi.”

She drew a long breath, not sure what to say that wouldn’t contain a curse word. Pure. Ha! If he pushed her she would show him pure.

“Carmella was right. You can’t just leave these at the office over the weekend.”

“Sure I can.”

“Well, it’s physically possible,” Matt agreed, “but it’s not right.”

“Sure it is.”

“No, it’s not. Let me in so I can explain these flowers to you.”

For three seconds Sarah only stared at him, blown away by his very casual admission that he had sent the roses. How else would he be able to explain them?

Too curious to hear what he had to say to reject him out of hand, she said, “All right. Come in.”

Sarah saw him glance around as if trying to waste some time before delving into the explanation he probably suspected would get him punched. As he looked at the solid khaki sofa and chair, accented by fat floral pillows and thick wood end tables with brass lamps, she didn’t say a word.

He set the roses on her coffee table. “I figured out why you’re mad about these.”

She tossed her head and crossed her arms beneath her breasts, shifting her braid over her shoulder and bunching the bulky material of her skirt at her waist. She felt like Mother Hubbard. “Did you?”

“Yes. You’re upset that someone can like you but be too cowardly to sign his name to a card when he sends you flowers.”

Though that wasn’t it at all, Sarah considered his explanation. At the core of it was an admission that he liked her. Of course, he could be saying that he liked her as a friend, but if that was all it was, he could have signed his name.

“What else?”

Matt shook his head. “What do you mean? What else?”

“You’re the expert here. I’m just the person who got the flowers.”

“I’m not sure I’m an expert, but I do understand this guy’s feelings.” He caught her gaze. “Haven’t you ever liked somebody enough that you stood across the street and stared at their house, too afraid to approach them?”

“I grew up on a ranch.”

“Okay, have you ever called somebody and then hung up when they answered?”

“Not since caller I.D.”

“You’re not helping, Sarah!”

“I don’t want to help you. I want to understand.”

Matt sighed. “I’m not sure I understand it myself.”

“Well, if you don’t understand,” Sarah shouted, angry again. “How the hell am I supposed to understand?”

Matt’s face lit with enthusiasm. “Now, see, there’s one thing right there. Saying hell isn’t such a big deal, but it reminds me that you grew up with a bunch of men, and when you get angry you can curse better than most of my friends.”

“And that’s a reason to send me purity flowers?”

“Maybe the person who sent the flowers sees there’s another side to you?”

Because Matt was still talking about the flower sender as if he were a third party, Sarah realized that there had to be an explanation for why he couldn’t talk about this directly. She fell to her sofa in exhaustion, and decided that for now, going along would be the easiest thing to do.

“I’m confused. He doesn’t like my cursing so he sent me flowers to let me know he thinks I’m pure?”

“No, he sent you flowers because he’s telling you that he sees something about you that nobody else sees.”

“Why not just tell me with words?”

“Maybe he’s shy.”

Sarah narrowed her eyes at Matt. “Shy?”

“All right, you don’t like shy,” Matt said, clearly exasperated, further confirming that he hated talking about this directly. “How about this? To have your name and business address, this guy has to be somebody you know. Probably somebody you work with.” He caught her gaze. “That means there’s a relationship of some sort already in place that he doesn’t want to lose. So, he’s not going to make a move until he sees how you and everybody at Wintersoft react to these flowers.”

Dumbfounded, Sarah only stared at Matt, realizing she should have thought of this herself. Cautious Matt would never get involved with a woman he feared might reject him. Especially not someone he worked with. There was no way he’d jeopardize their good boss/assistant relationship, particularly since he would also be risking the embarrassment of being snubbed in front of the entire staff of Wintersoft.

“So, what am I supposed to do?”

“You can’t control the reactions of everybody at Wintersoft, but you could at least send this guy the message that you’re interested in him too.”

“I can’t just tell him?”

“You don’t know who he is, remember?” Sarah squeezed her eyes shut, focusing herself on the project as he wanted it because he was calling the shots. “Right. So what do I do?”

“Well, he sent you flowers to let you know he’s interested. You have to send him a signal that you’re interested.”

“Send him a signal?”

“Yeah, you know,” Matt said, motioning with his hand. “Dress up or something.”

Sarah frowned. “Dress up? Are you saying I don’t dress right?”

Matt shook his head. “No. You dress fine for the office. But what you wear to the office isn’t going to tell a guy you’re interested.”

“So I need to dress prettier?”

“More like feminine. You’re an attractive girl, Sarah. But you hide that. In the office, that’s not a big deal because you’re supposed to be focused on work not the way you look. But if you want to show a guy you’re interested, the short route would be to bring out your feminine side.”

“My feminine side,” Sarah repeated, staring into Matt’s beautiful blue eyes. She was flooded with something soft and warm, yet also exciting. He wanted her to bring out her feminine side—which meant he saw she had a feminine side and might even have daydreamed about that part of her the way she’d daydreamed about his kisses.

Suddenly feeling female and desirable, she removed her glasses and smiled demurely at Matt.

And Matt’s heart flip-flopped. He had always seen the pretty face behind the glasses, and, just like her secret admirer, Matt knew there was another side to her, a more feminine side. But unlike her secret admirer, he couldn’t do a darned thing about it.

He rose from her sofa. “So, you understand about the flowers then?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I get it.”

“Good,” Matt said, walking to her door. He tried to tell himself that he wasn’t upset that she was about to get involved with someone, but he was. Unfortunately, he also knew that as her immediate supervisor, he wasn’t allowed to be attracted to her, so he would have to get over it. And he would. With a quarterly statement that had to be done before October fifteenth, he couldn’t let disappointment over a woman divert his attention.

He grabbed the doorknob, but didn’t open the door. Instead, he faced her. “And I’ll see you Tuesday?”

“Yes,” she said, smiling again.

Looking at her beautiful smile and her pretty green eyes, Matt’s heart jerked to double time. He had an almost irresistible urge to kiss her, or at the very least ask her out. After an entire year of being good friends, suddenly he felt entitled to be the guy who got to know the other woman he knew she was hiding in there.

But he couldn’t. She was his assistant. And if that wasn’t enough to keep him in line, he also had a life plan. It didn’t exactly prevent him from dating, but it did preclude him from doing anything that messed up his source of income and his career. He needed his salary and bonuses to fund the investments he had chosen to reach his goal of being a multimillionaire before he was forty. Forty was young enough that he would still have plenty of time to get married and have children. Plus, that gave him nine more years to fund his investments, which—because he was a savvy speculator—were earning interest and dividends and growing on their own. Everything was going according to plan, so now was not the time to turn into a risk taker. Dating his executive assistant was definitely a risk.

Besides, after she sent the message to her secret admirer that she was interested, she would be dating somebody else.

Matt left Sarah’s apartment and she all but danced for joy. She couldn’t believe it! He liked her! He’d sent her flowers, explained why when she misinterpreted them and then told her how to respond. She paused in her dancing.

Dear God. All Matt had really told her was that he wanted her to be more feminine.

Though Sarah knew she cleaned up well and also knew she could easily never swear again, she had to admit she wasn't in touch with that other side of herself Matt claimed to see. And that was the part he liked. If she wanted to prove to him that their office romance could work, she not only had to uncover the part of her that he liked, she really had to become that woman.

Realizing this was beyond her, she fell to her sofa trying to think of someone who could help her. Two of her Wintersoft coworkers, Ariana Fitzpatrick and Sunny Robbins, immediately came to mind, but she discounted both because Ariana was pregnant and Sunny was busy with law school. Sarah didn't want to impose on either of them. Especially not on a Friday night when both were probably up to their ears in well-deserved bubble baths!

Besides, what she needed was the help of someone who truly understood men and woman and romance.

Men, women and romance?

A thought struck her and she reached for her portable phone and the little book of telephone numbers on her end table.

No one knew more about romance than Carmella Lopez.

## Chapter Two

After a long Labor Day weekend of visiting salons, shopping and long discussions over choices at the makeup counter, Sarah sat on the fat khaki chair in her living room across from Carmella Lopez and Emily Winters, daughter of Lloyd Winters, owner of Wintersoft.

When Sarah had called Carmella Friday night, Carmella had suggested they enlist Emily's help with Sarah's makeover because Emily bridged the gap between Carmella's and Sarah's generations. And she had been correct. Using bits and pieces of the experience of three females of varying ages, they had turned Sarah into a stunning woman. With a closet full of new clothes, a new hairdo and just the right makeup, she now had as much confidence about her looks as she had about roping cattle.

"So, are you nervous about tomorrow?" Carmella asked, setting her teacup on the wooden coffee table, right beside the vase of white roses that had started all this.

Sarah looked lovingly at the white blooms. "Surprisingly, no. I know I asked for your help as part of a plan to show Matt I could be feminine, but something else happened. I feel like I've finally found the real me."

"Finding the real you is actually the point of a makeover," Carmella said with a short laugh.

"And simple and sensual is definitely you," Emily agreed. A satisfied smile curved her lips, and her sapphire-blue eyes sparkled with approval. "You look great."

"I feel great. I feel confident enough to conquer the world."

Carmella frowned. "I hope this doesn't mean you've changed your mind about Matt!"

"No!" Sarah said. "I really like Matt. If he's interested in me, I want a chance with him, too."

"Well, if he doesn't get that message from your new look, then he's blind," Carmella said, rising from the sofa.

"Right," Emily agreed as she also rose. "We'll see you tomorrow. Remember, come to work a half hour early. The weather report says rain, so you may want some time to pull yourself together before you make the walk down the hall to your office."

Already at the door, Carmella asked, "Are you sure you're not uncomfortable making an entrance?"

Sarah laughed. "I think it's what I need to do. Go for the shock value, get my new self out in the open right off the bat and see how he reacts."

"I think so, too," Carmella said and squeezed Sarah's hands. "We'll see you tomorrow."

Sarah let her new friends out of her apartment, then closed the door behind them, wondering if she would get any sleep. She wasn't nervous about seeing Matt. But she did know he might not react the way Emily and Carmella believed he would because she hadn't exactly done as he had asked her to do.

For the first time since she'd received the flowers, she was glad for the secret admirer cover. Just as Matt had used it to get his point across to her, Sarah planned to use it to get her point across to him. Looking for her femininity had brought out a sexy side of her personality that even Sarah hadn't known she had. But when she considered her natural boldness, she knew being confident about her sexuality was her true personality, a part of who she was, and she couldn't change that. If Matt didn't want her as she really was, it would break her heart, but at least they would have the cover of anonymity so no one besides Carmella and Emily would know the exchange had occurred.

Matt looked up from his desk Monday morning and the sight that greeted him caused his breath to catch and his mouth to fall open in awe. Sarah walked up the aisle to her workstation, her head high, a smile on her lips.

Her long red hair had been cut and her braid had been replaced by a hairdo that could only be described as sensual. Fat locks of looping curls cascaded to her shoulders and bounced with every step she took.

Her cinnamon-colored suit looked like suede. The skirt was short and Matt could see enough of her legs to realize she hadn't been hiding just a feminine woman beneath the bland skirts and jackets she usually wore. She had been hiding a goddess.

He rose from his seat and cautiously made his way to the workspace she shared with Sunny Robbins.

'Sarah?'

"Oh, good morning, Matt."

She greeted him as if there was nothing different about her appearance today, and for ten seconds Matt couldn't decide if he should say something or let it alone. He knew he had been the one to tell her to change the way she dressed, but he hadn't expected she would turn into a completely different person, and he wasn't sure his real reaction to her new look would be appropriate. What he wanted to do was whistle.

She bent to toss her little brown purse into her desk drawer and Matt's gaze traveled the curve created by her shapely derriere, down the long length of leg to brown high heels of stiletto proportions and he felt as if his heart stopped. His common sense, boss instincts and attraction all got jumbled and before he knew what was happening, he gasped, "What did you do to yourself?"

Sarah straightened quickly, a stricken look on her face. "You don't like it?"

"Like it? Dear God. You're going to give half the men on staff coronaries."

Her face brightened. Her well-painted lips curved into a smile. "So, I did okay?"

"Okay? Sarah, you look like a totally different person."

Her stricken expression returned. "I hope you mean that in a good way." She paused and bit her bottom lip. "Because this is the real me." She caught his gaze. "And I want my secret admirer to see the real me."

The quivering that had set up residence in Matt's abdomen turned to a rock of misery. He might have been the one to instruct Sarah to change a bit for her secret admirer, but, at the time, the guy had seemed more theory than a real person. With that comment, Sarah turned Matt's "theory" into a living, breathing male. No longer a concept, but competition. "You did this for your secret admirer?"

"You said I needed to be more feminine."

"I said feminine," Matt argued, not because he didn't like her look, but because he did. He really did. But he couldn't have her. Some other guy would be the recipient of all this femininity. "I didn't say..."

"Sexy?" Sarah said, interrupting him. Her enthusiasm returned and she smiled broadly. "That was my idea."

"Why?"

Sarah walked around her desk and stood directly in front of him. "Because after talking to Carmella and Emily on Friday night, I realized that feminine for me would be sexy."

Matt's brow furrowed. "Carmella Lopez and Emily Winters?"

"Yes. After our discussion about the roses I decided I needed some help with my makeover, I called Carmella and she brought Emily. But we didn't run to a store the minute they arrived at my apartment. We talked first, and they told me that feminine could mean a lot of things."

Not at all willing to hand over this Sarah to another man, Matt said, "Yeah, like flowered dresses, little white purses and lace-trimmed gloves."

"I'm sure there are proper ladies in the South who would agree with you." She took a step closer and smiled the smile that made Matt's knees weak. "But I'm not like one of those ladies and I believe my secret admirer needs to see the real me."

"And this is the real you?"

Holding his gaze, she nodded.

Matt stifled the urge to tug at his shirt collar because with her standing about a foot in front of him, smiling her confident, positive, sexy smile, the room was suddenly very warm. "You're sure?"

She nodded again. “Carmella says it’s all about confidence and this is the most confident I’ve felt in years. If I were in a dainty dress with little white gloves I would feel like a fake.”

She shifted away from Matt so she could hit the switch to turn on her computer monitor and Matt took the opportunity to loosen his collar so he could catch his breath.

“But the plain suits weren’t me, either,” she continued. “So we experimented with a few looks until we got to this one and, voilà,” she said, facing him again. “Suddenly I felt like me.”

“Holy cow!” Sunny Robbins, paralegal to Grant Lawson, Wintersoft’s in-house counsel entered the office. Her chin-length sun-kissed brown hair had been tossed about by the September breeze and her black pantsuit was rain-splattered.

Matt quickly glanced back at Sarah. She hadn’t worn a coat or a rain hat. Yet her suit was dry and her hair was perfect.

Sunny stopped beside Sarah and ran her gaze from the top of her head to the tips of her perfectly dry, brown, high-heeled sandals.

“Holy cow!”

Sarah laughed. “Thanks. I think.”

“Oh, my ‘holy cow’ definitely deserved a thanks,” Sunny said as she rounded Sarah’s desk and tossed her purse onto her chair. “You look great.”

“I feel great! I feel terrific!”

Sunny laughed. “I would feel terrific, too, if I looked like that! What brought this on?”

Matt glanced at dry, perfectly coifed Sarah again. Something was wrong here. There was no way she got from the bus to this building without getting wet. She must have stopped somewhere and fixed herself up before stepping into the office. If he didn’t know better, Matt might think she had actually made an entrance.

His voice slow and cautious, Matt said, “Sarah has a secret admirer.”

Both of Sunny’s eyebrows rose. “Really?”

“Yeah, he sent me flowers late Friday afternoon,” Sarah said. Hearing the odd tone in Matt’s voice, she glanced at him, saw the confused expression on his face and decided that look was the final nail in the coffin. From the second she’d arrived, he’d been sputtering and arguing with her choices. Now his quiet voice and unhappy expression confirmed what she’d guessed all along. He didn’t like her new look.

The thought made her stomach churn and her knees shake like two leaves in the wind. Worse, her breath wanted to come out in quick panting gasps, but just as Carmella had taught her over the weekend, Sarah controlled all that. Because, deep down inside, she genuinely believed what she had told Matt. This was the real Sarah Morris. If Matt didn’t like the real her then she had to move on, find a guy who would like her, exactly as she was. No matter how much it hurt that it wasn’t Matt.

“I left the flowers here, Matt brought them to my apartment and we got to talking about why someone would send me flowers anonymously,” Sarah said, watching as Matt disappeared into his office. “Matt guessed that the guy wanted some kind of signal from me that I was interested in dating, and this is what Carmella, Emily and I came up with.”

Sunny shot her a skeptical look. “Matt told you that changing your look would signal the secret admirer to ask you out?”

“Yeah.”

Sunny laughed. “Just goes to show what he knows! The truth is, Sarah, secret admirers are usually friends trying to cheer you up.”

Sarah frowned. She had thought exactly that. Right from the beginning she’d decided that if Matt had sent her those flowers it was to boost her morale.

“But in your case, I think Matt took advantage of the flowers to go one step further.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” she said, pointing at Sarah. “Look at you. You look wonderful. One of your friends might have sent you the flowers, but Matt used them to get you to come out of your shell. Lots of guys are going to ask you out. He did you a huge favor.”

With every sentence Sunny spoke, tears pricked Sarah’s eyes. She finally understood. She still believed Matt had sent her the flowers, but she now knew he hadn’t done it so she would bring out her feminine side for him. It was of no consequence whether or not he liked her new look. He’d encouraged her makeover so she’d find another man.

She’d thought she and Matt were using the secret flower sender facade to protect Matt, but the truth was he might have created the secure forum of a secret admirer for her. That anonymity was the only thing keeping her from dying of embarrassment right now.

But it wasn’t doing a darned thing to protect her bruised heart. He’d never wanted her. He probably hadn’t even considered wanting her.

Matt drove to his father’s house that evening feeling as if someone had punched him. He’d spent the day watching out his office door as every woman and probably fifty percent of the men employed by Wintersoft had trickled into Sarah’s office to see her new “look.” All the women had gasped with envy. All the guys had gasped in awe. The single men had asked her out. And Matt’s teeth were now ground down to about half their size.

He pulled his SUV into his dad’s driveway and climbed out, not sure it was a good idea to keep his long-standing every-other-night dinner date with his dad. He knew he wasn’t going to be good company. Worse, he knew his dad would demand to know why.

He didn’t even get the whole way up the walk before his dad, Wayne Burke, also a CPA and probably the picture of what Matt would look like at age fifty-five, with his short brown hair, broad shoulders and blue eyes, opened the door.

“Somebody stole your fire truck,” he said, referring to the fact that when Matt was seven a neighbor kid had run off with his toy and wouldn’t return it until Matt’s dad had interfered.

“No,” Matt said, as he stepped inside the neat-as-a-pin foyer of the Cape Cod house, not in the mood to play this silly game with his dad.

“Just give me the name and I’ll go talk to his father, get it back for you.”

“This isn’t funny tonight, Dad.”

“I think it is. I think it’s hysterical,” Wayne said and laughed heartily to prove it. “I love it when you’re in a bad mood. Gives me a reason to poke into your personal life since you’re usually not too free with information. Here, give me your raincoat.”

Though he tried to smile and look like his usual happy-go-lucky self, the raincoat reminded Matt of seeing bone-dry Sarah walk into the office and sent his blood pressure soaring again. He could only figure that Sarah had made an entrance this morning. Given that he and Grant Lawson, Wintersoft’s legal counsel, were the only two men in that section of the office, that had to mean Sarah believed Grant had sent her those flowers, and she wanted to look picture-perfect the first time he saw her new look.

But the more Matt thought about it, the more he decided that Sarah would have to know that men like tall, handsome, suave Grant didn’t need to send women flowers anonymously. They were bold enough to come right out and say whatever they wanted whenever they wanted. They didn’t need to be secret admirers.

Grant himself backed up Matt’s theory. If Grant had been the person to send Sarah flowers Friday afternoon, he would have been eager to see her reaction—which in this case was an eye-popping makeover—and he would have commented. Instead, he didn’t seem to notice Sarah’s makeover when he arrived, and he had stayed sequestered in his office most of the day.

But Matt’s whole hypothesis had fallen through when Wintersoft’s general counsel had stepped into Sarah and Sunny’s workstation two minutes after Sunny had left and started making small talk with Sarah.

Small talk! Lawyers never made small talk. Every word they spoke had a purpose. And, in this case, the only purpose could be that Grant was putting the moves on Sarah.

Matt wanted to punch him.

Wayne closed the closet door and headed for his bright yellow kitchen. “I made your favorite. Roast beef and mashed potatoes.”

Matt followed his dad down the hall. “I’m not hungry,” he said, then wished he could bite his tongue.

His dad stopped, faced Matt and shook his head. “You know I’m going to get this out of you before the end of the night.”

Matt sighed. “There’s nothing to get out.”

“Great, then I’m sure you’ll want seconds on potatoes.”

“All right,” Matt said, realizing he wasn’t in the mood for two hours of twenty questions while being forced to eat mass quantities of food that would taste like sawdust, so he might as well tell the truth and get it over with. “If you have to know, I’m preoccupied because Sarah has a secret admirer.”

“Your assistant Sarah?” Wayne asked, pushing open the swinging door that led to his kitchen. The round oak table had been set for dinner.

Matt walked to the refrigerator and grabbed two beers. “Yes.”

Wayne laughed. “And you’re jealous.”

“No. I’m concerned because I think it’s Wintersoft’s legal counsel, Grant Lawson.”

Matt’s dad thought for a second before he said, “I must not know him.”

“He’s a nice enough guy,” Matt said, taking his usual seat and setting his napkin on his lap. “But he’s divorced and I get the impression he’s soured on marriage enough that he’ll never take the plunge again.”

“Oh, so you’re worried about Sarah?”

“Yes,” Matt said, sighing with relief that his dad understood. He wasn’t jealous. Really. He was concerned.

“And you’re not even a little jealous?”

“No. Just very concerned,” Matt said, but a picture of Sarah in her cinnamon-colored suede suit popped into his head and his chest tightened.

“That’s why your face just turned beet-red. Because you’re not jealous.”

Matt tossed his napkin to the table. “I don’t know why I come here to have dinner with you.”

“You come here because I’m your dad and I don’t let you get away with lying. Especially not to yourself.” Wayne served himself a thick slice of pot roast. “Which means you want me to be honest, so I have to come right out and say this. You’ve got the look of a jealous man on your face.”

Matt sighed. “Okay, you want me to come clean. I’ll come clean. Sarah got flowers Friday night and, yeah, I got a twinge of jealousy. But I squelched it because bosses are not supposed to date the women they supervise.”

Wayne took a big bite of mashed potato, chewed, then said, “So get her transferred.”

Matt gaped at his dad. “That would be idiotic.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because she’s a good worker. I need her.”

“You know what, Matt? You’re thirty-one. At this point in your life I would much rather hear you say you need a woman sexually than as a good secretary.”

Matt squeezed his eyes shut. “Here we go again!”

“I’m not getting any younger. Neither are you. I would like to have grandkids while I still have energy enough to bounce them on my knee.”

“You might want grandkids now, but I can’t afford kids for another few years. Besides, you’re the one who always told me not to get involved with a woman until I’m ready. So butt out.”

Wayne’s face reddened, and he looked down at his green beans.

Matt was instantly repentant.

“Dad, I’m sorry, I…”

“No, it’s all right. You’re right. A man needs to be ready to get married and even more ready to have kids. If you think you’re not there financially, then I support you.”

Matt said, “Thanks.” But he felt awful, really and truly awful. Not because he had insulted his dad, though he had. But more because he wasn’t ready. And because he wasn’t ready he couldn’t give his dad the family he wanted.

Worse, he felt awful because he couldn’t protect Sarah.

The next morning, Matt sat behind his desk feeling like the starship Enterprise on red alert. Grant had to pass through Sarah and Sunny’s workstation to get to his office and if he said one word that Matt didn’t like, Matt was pouncing. He couldn’t save Sarah by dating her because he was her boss, but that didn’t mean he would let her get involved with a man who had no intention of settling down. So far neither Grant nor Sarah had arrived, but Matt was ready.

Even as he finished that thought, Sarah turned the corner from the main entryway. As she had the day before, she walked down the hall to her office as if in slow motion. The thick curls of her beautiful red hair bounced around her. Her long legs ate up the space to her office as if it were nothing. Her navy-blue suit fit her as if it had been made for her. Her flawless makeup made her look like a model rather than an accounting assistant.

“Good morning, Matt!”

He cleared his throat. Without getting up from his seat he called, “Good morning.”

Grant Lawson picked that precise second to walk down the corridor. Reading a newspaper and carrying a briefcase, he nearly walked into Sarah.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” he said, dropping his briefcase and grabbing her shoulders to right her when she swayed on her tall navy-blue shoes.

Sarah smiled at him. “It’s okay. No harm done. I should know better than to stop in the hall.”

Gazing into Sarah’s eyes, Grant grinned and Matt’s pulse began to hammer. He rose from his seat and rounded his desk. He was halfway to Sarah’s workstation before he realized he had no clue what he would say, and no right to say anything anyway.

Grant stepped back. “I still should have been looking,” he said, then picked up his briefcase. “Would you tell Sunny to buzz me the second she gets in? I’m closing my door today. I don’t want to be disturbed.”

Sarah turned and walked to her desk. “Sure. I’ll be glad to.”

Grant stuck his nose in his newspaper again. “Great. Thanks.”

Matt stared at the scene, deciding he must have imagined anything flirtatious he’d thought he’d seen in the beginning of that mess. Not only did Sarah not look interested in Grant, but Grant didn’t look interested in Sarah. A swell of relief filled Matt’s chest, until he realized he really was jealous. And not just the I-wish-I-was-like-him kind of jealous. He was full-blown, man-woman jealous. And there wasn’t a darned thing he could do about it.

“Do you need something, Matt?” Sarah asked curiously and Matt recognized that he had been standing in his doorway, staring at her, for at least thirty seconds.

He looked at her beautiful red hair cascading around her and at her pretty green eyes. In that second, he knew that if the situation were right, he would be dating her. And it didn’t seem fair that he couldn’t.

But, fair or not, it was life. Not dating a subordinate was a rule made not to protect bosses, but to protect the people who worked for them. Because he would never, ever, do anything to hurt Sarah, Matt turned and walked into his office without a word. He would get beyond this. He had to.

But as the morning wore on and the parade of men continued, Matt began to get tense. He also noticed something else. Not one other executive in this company seemed concerned about dating a subordinate. True, none of them was Sarah’s immediate supervisor as Matt was. But they were

still supervisors. And supervisors didn't date subordinates! They all should be staying the hell away from her.

The flirting and silliness went on throughout the afternoon, and Matt's irritation grew. The whole world seemed intent on thumbing its nose at rules Matt held sacred. He became more and more angry at the injustice of it, until he snapped at Carmella that night when she stopped in his office to deliver a copy of a confidential memo from the head of the company, Lloyd Winters.

"Sorry," he said, then ran his fingers through his short hair, spiking it.

Carmella smiled at him. "That's okay. It's nearly eight o'clock," she said, obviously referring to the fact that he was working late. Not only was the quarterly report due in six weeks, but also he did his staff review for Lloyd the first two weeks in September. "It's been a long day for you."

"Yeah. A long day made longer by the parade of men stopping by to flirt with my assistant."

Carmella grimaced. "I'll talk to her."

"It's not Sarah that's the problem. It's the guys coming to ogle her."

Carmella studied Matt for a second and he felt his face redden as she smiled knowingly. "You're not angry. You're jealous."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." She took a seat on one of the captain's chairs in front of Matt's desk and grinned at him as if this were some sort of game. "So, what are you going to do?"

"Nothing," he said, tossing his pencil to his desk, confused that he seemed to be the only reasonable person in this company since Sarah got her makeover. "In the first place, she's my assistant. Asking her out is a sexual harassment suit wait to happen."

"I don't think Sarah would..."

"It doesn't matter," Matt said, interrupting her, deciding that the entire office had gone around the bend and there was no sense trying to persuade Carmella with an argument she wouldn't understand. Particularly since he had a better argument up his sleeve. One she couldn't dispute. "There are more considerations here than just the boss/assistant thing. For one, I'm not in a position yet where I could ask somebody to marry me."

Carmella only stared at him. "Are you kidding?"

He stared back. "About what?"

"Oh, come on, Matt. I know you're one of those people who likes to be prepared, but don't you think it's a bit overboard not dating a woman because you can't ask her to marry you?"

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