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1490
December

Mixing Business...with Baby

DIANA WHITNEY

STORK EXPRESS

SILHOUETTE Romance®

Diana Whitney

Mixing Business...With Baby

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Mixing Business...With Baby / D. Whitney — «HarperCollins»,

Successful, handsome Rick Blaine wanted to know everything about his lovely new employee Catrina Mitchell. What did she like? What made her laugh? But when Rick learned Catrina's daughter was the source of joy in Catrina's luscious brown eyes, his racing heart came to a screeching halt.Having a little girl look up at him with hopeful eyes scared him to death. Children were a lifetime commitment–and he was a confirmed bachelor.But Catrina wasn't so easy to forget…. Should Rick start mixing business with romance–and both with a baby?

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Catrina had been asleep for five hours. Rick would probably be ready to kill her.

The television was on in the living room. Catrina shaded her eyes and saw the top of a head barely visible above the back of the sofa.

With her heart pounding, she quietly walked around the sofa and nearly melted at what she saw. There was Rick Blaine, with orange stains on his shirt and spaghetti stuck to his hair, cradling the squeaky-clean, pajama-clad toddler in his arms. Both were sound asleep.

For a moment, Catrina just stood there, unable to trust her own eyes. Never in her life had she seen anything that touched her so deeply. This was the real Rick Blaine, she realized. Not the glib genius, not the brilliant bachelor. In one vulnerable, unguarded moment, she had glimpsed the soul of a man who had the power to change her life forever.

Dear Reader,

This holiday season, as our anniversary year draws to a close, we have much to celebrate. The talented authors who have published—and continue to publish—unforgettable love stories. You, the readers, who have made our twenty-year milestone possible. And this month's very special offerings.

First stop: BACHELOR GULCH, Sandra Steffen's popular ongoing miniseries. They'd shared an amazing night together; now a beguiling stranger was back in his life carrying Sky's Pride and Joy. She'd dreamed Hunter's Vow would be the marrying kind…until he learned about their child he'd never known existed—don't miss this keeper by Susan Meier! Carolyn Zane's BRUBAKER BRIDES are back! Montana's Feisty Cowgirl thought she could pass as just another male ranch hand, but Montana wouldn't rest till he knew her secrets…and made this 100% woman completely his!

Donna Clayton's SINGLE DOCTOR DADS return…STAT. Rachel and the M.D. were office assistant and employer…so why was she imagining herself this widower's bride and his triplets' mother? Diana Whitney brings her adorable STORK EXPRESS series from Special Edition into Romance with the delightful story of what happens when Mixing Business…with Baby. And debut author Belinda Barnes tells the charming tale of a jilted groom who finds himself all dressed up…to deliver a pregnant beauty's baby—don't miss His Special Delivery!

Happy reading!

Mary-Theresa Hussey
Senior Editor

Mixing Business…with Baby
Diana Whitney

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To Cinderella dreams, and those who dare believe in them.

Books by Diana Whitney

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The Last Bachelor #874
One Man's Vow #940
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††A Dad of His Own #1392
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†Daddy of the House #1052
†Barefoot Bride #1073
†A Hero's Child #1090
‡Baby on His Doorstep #1165
‡Baby in His Cradle #1176
Who's That Baby? #1205
††I Now Pronounce You Mom & Dad #1261
††The Fatherhood Factor #1276
‡Baby of Convenience #1361
Silhouette Books
36 Hours
Ooh Baby, Baby

DIANA WHITNEY

A three-time Romance Writers of America RITA Award finalist, Romantic Times Magazine Reviewers' Choice nominee and finalist for Colorado Romance Writers' Award of Excellence, Diana Whitney has published more than two dozen romance and suspense novels since her first Silhouette title in 1989. A popular speaker, Diana has conducted writing workshops, and has published several articles on the craft of fiction-writing for various trade magazines and newsletters. She is a member of the Authors Guild, Novelists, Inc., Published Authors Network and Romance Writers of America. She and her husband live in rural Northern California with a beloved menagerie of furred creatures, domestic and wild. She loves to hear from readers. You can write to her c/o Silhouette Books, 300 East 42nd Street, 6th Floor, New York, NY 10017.

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Chapter One

"I got the job!" Rushing into the tiny, downtown book nook, a breathless Catrina Mitchell Jordan danced the gray-haired proprietor around shelves stacked with leather-bound tomes. "I got the job, I got the job, I got the job!"

Her final exuberant trill was completed by the blending of a rumbaesque hip check and the hip-wriggling victory dance of a football player after a game-winning touchdown.

"Of course you got the job." Gracie Applegate chuckled, smoothing a ruffled strand of silver hair back into her gleaming chignon. "There was never a doubt in my mind."

"Well, there was plenty of doubt in my mind. If not for that tip you gave me, I'd still be scouring the want ads and wondering how to pay next month's rent." Suddenly limp with relief, Catrina sagged against the checkout counter fighting foolish tears. She'd been out of work for weeks, and her meager savings account was nearly drained. "I don't know who you called, or how you managed to work this miracle, but I'm forever in your debt. Thank you so much."

Gracie flicked her wrist as if shooing a pesky fly. "Pish and silliness, child. It's Blaine Architectural that should be thanking me for sending over the best accounts receivable clerk they'll ever lay eyes on. I'm sure my dear friend Martha in the personnel department would agree."

"Is there anyone in Los Angeles that you don't personally know?"

"Oh, I imagine a few folks have slipped past, but one of the perks of owning the finest antique and rare book establishment in the county is the pleasure of meeting lots of lovely, intelligent people. Speaking of which…" Angling a sly glance, she feigned interest in refilling a crystal bowl with fragrant potpourri. "Did you have an opportunity to meet the head honcho himself?"

"Mr. Blaine?" Catrina shook her head, still a bit nervous about meeting the fellow that every employee to whom she'd been introduced had described in the most glowing terms. "Apparently a group of managers had negotiated a lucrative contract to renovate a downtown office complex so he took them all to lunch as a reward."

"How nice. Why are your eyebrows all scrunched up, dear?"

"He took them to lunch in San Francisco, Gracie. Just piled them into a rented plane and flew it himself." Catrina shuddered. "Rich people make me nervous. My sister Laura made the mistake of marrying a rich man. He nearly destroyed her."

Of course, another rich man had galloped to the rescue, just like Prince Charming on the proverbial snow-white steed, although Catrina considered that to be sheer luck.

Gracie tsk-tsked, skimming a disapproving frown in Catrina's direction. "Now, now, dear, you can't judge all well-to-do folks by the actions of a few. Besides, if Rick Blaine were as rich as the rumors imply, he wouldn't have had to rent a plane would he?"

Catrina couldn't help but smile. "No, I suppose not."

A wreath of laugh lines bracketed the older woman's thin mouth, and her blue eyes twinkled with peculiar slyness, as if she knew something that nobody else knew.

And she probably did. Gracie Applegate was a dichotomy, equal parts of grandmotherly wisdom and elfin mischief blended with a pinch of mystery and a dash of clairvoyance. Catrina adored her.

So did Heather.

A cranky gurgle caught Catrina's attention. She moved through the open doorway into the bookstore office to retrieve her sleepy toddler from a playpen that had been set up behind Gracie's desk. "There, there, sweetums, did you have a nice nap?"

The baby's hair was moist and tangled. A reddened pressure mark stained her right cheek. She fussed, stretched, patted Catrina's face. "Gamma Gracie gave me apple."

"Did she now?" Catrina widened her eyes, affectionately exaggerating interest in the mundane information. "That was very nice of Gamma Gracie wasn't it?"

As Heather bobbed her little head in agreement, Catrina angled a questioning glance at the older woman in the doorway.

"Humor an old woman's small pleasures," Gracie replied, displaying her gift for reading Catrina's thoughts. "Since my son has decreed himself a confirmed bachelor for life, the only way I'll ever hear a child call me 'grandma' is if I bribe one to do it. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind. Every child needs a doting grandmother. My own mom passed away several years ago, and Heather's paternal grandparents live 3,000 miles away."

"Ah. That's too bad."

"It's for the best. They are nice people, I suppose, but they were never into the grandparent scene. I got the impression that they were relieved enough to have survived raising one child, and weren't anxious to get involved with another one." She shifted the child against her shoulder, nuzzling her soft skin and inhaling the sweet baby fragrance. "Given the pathetic result of their initial foray into parenthood, I can't say as I blame them."

Gracie smiled, but her eyes were sad. "The young man must have had some redeeming characteristics, or an intelligent woman such as yourself wouldn't have married him in the first place."

A warning chill slipped down Catrina's spine. The divorce had been messy, bitter, and the sour taste of failure hung heavily on her tongue. "Dan had always been a sullen, unhappy man. I thought I could change that. I couldn't."

Squeezing her eyes shut, she hugged Heather so tightly that the child squirmed in her arms. She loosened her grip, murmuring soft reassurances as the baby popped a wet thumb back into her mouth. A pang of regret and uncertainty stung Catrina, as it always did when she fretted about how the choices she'd made would affect Heather's future, just as her own mother's choices had affected Catrina's past.

Catrina had grown up without a father. He'd deserted the family when she'd been an infant. That loss had always haunted her. Now it would haunt her beloved daughter too, since Dan hadn't even requested visitation privileges. He'd never really wanted a child.

As it turned out, he'd never wanted a wife, either. He'd wanted a housekeeper, a scapegoat, and a convenient bed partner. Soft footsteps scuffled closer, and she knew Gracie was beside her before she felt the woman's gentle touch on her shoulder. "Sometimes we have to endure the bad times in order to recognize the good ones."

Catrina sniffed, juggled the child in the crook of her arm to free a hand and wipe a stray tear from her own cheek. "I know. But when I think of my daughter growing up with the knowledge that her own father doesn't care about her, it breaks my heart."

Gracie opened her mouth, closed it, and took another moment to consider her words. When she finally spoke, her voice carried a peculiar quiver. "Maybe it just takes some men a while to figure out what's truly important in life. You'll find the right one someday. Just give it time, dear."

"I don't want a man. They cause nothing but heartache and misery, and sooner or later they always walk away. So what's the point?"

"Why, love is the point!"

"Love is a myth."

Gracie made a clucking sound with her tongue. "So young to be so jaded."

"I don't believe in fairy tales, if that's what you mean."

"Of course you don't." Gracie's merry blue eyes twinkled. "That's why you've spent countless hours in my humble establishment poring over great love stories of the ages."

Feeling her skin heat, Catrina shifted her daughter in her arms and shouldered the diaper bag. "Thank you so much for watching Heather. Thank you for everything. Your friendship means so much to me."

Gracie merely responded with a warm smile and a reassuring squeeze on Catrina's shoulder. But as Catrina wound her way through the delicious shelves filled with fanciful tales of love and triumph, a memory echoed inside her head.

You can't count on anyone but yourself, Cattie-girl. The world will break your heart if you let it.

"You were right, Mama," she murmured. "You were so right."

"Please don't toy with me. I'll do anything you want. Anything." Kneeling before that which had imminent power, Catrina leaned in close, whispering softly as her fingertip traced a sensual path downward. "Whatever you want, whatever you need, your wildest fantasy fulfilled. Just grant me this one, teensy favor, and you can name your price." She pressed her cheek against the cool, plastic skin. "Six measley copies, collated and comb-bound before the 3:00 meeting. Your operating manual says you can do this. Please, I'm begging you. I'll polish your glass. I'll vacuum your innards. I'll stack your paper properly and double-check your controls every hour for the rest of my life." She hesitantly pressed the Start button.

The machine whirred, hiccuped, fell silent.

Catrina exhaled all at once. "Or I can smear axle grease on your window, glue your gears together, and let my fingers do the walking through the office equipment pages of the telephone book. The choice is yours, fella. If you cooperate, you live. If not, there's a screwdriver in my desk, and I know how to use it."

A male voice from behind startled the daylights out of her. "I don't know about the machine, but I'm certainly convinced."

Catrina lurched to her feet so abruptly that she caught a heel in the hem of her swingy flowered skirt. With the sick sound of ripped fabric ringing in her ears, she spun to face a tousle-haired man wearing a pair of pleated khaki slacks, a casual golf shirt and a bemused smile.

He stepped back, raised his hands over his head. "Don't hurt me." A smile of uncommon brilliance brightened sky-blue eyes sprinkled with curiosity and sparkling with humor. "Look, I'm unarmed."

Under normal circumstances Catrina would have appreciated the amusement factor of her bizarre situation. The circumstances, however, were far from normal.

She was tense, feeling both pressured by the expectations of a new job she hadn't yet conquered and embarrassed by having been caught threatening a recalcitrant office machine. "If you don't wish to be implicated in a crime, I suggest you leave the vicinity at once."

The man hiked a brow. "Is there no other way? You don't seem the type to contemplate violence against a helpless collating device."

"Helpless? Ha." Her cheeks burned until she suspected she must be glowing like a neon tomato. "That's what it wants you to believe. It suckers you with its simplistic controls, its benign operating manual, then waits until your entire career is on the line before going in for the kill."

"Is your entire career on the line?"

"If I don't get these reports to the budget committee in the next fifteen minutes it very well may be."

"Hmm, sounds serious." Pursing his lips, he regarded the lumpy device as if actually giving credence to her concern. "Perhaps I can be of assistance. I have some experience with machinery."

"You do?"

"I repaired a lawn mower once."

"How impressive." A covert perusal of his casual attire suggested that he was either an outside vendor or one of the draftsman from the engineering department. "Do you work here?"

The question clearly startled him. "As a matter of fact I do. Why?"

Too exasperated to do more than take vague note of the surprised glint in his eye, she shoved a tangle of hair from her face and glanced at a nearby wall clock. "Because I doubt management would appreciate me giving a non-employee access to company equipment. If you end up destroying the

danged thing, I'd personally shake your hand, but the company would either take the replacement cost out of my paycheck or out of my hide. Neither alternative is particularly appealing."

He cocked his head in a manner that was oddly self-effacing and arrogant at the same time. "Then I'll have to be exceptionally gentle, won't I?"

Catrina smiled in spite of her tension. There was a certain charisma about this man that wormed through a person's defenses, a mellow charm that sneaked up slowly, insidiously. Before she could stop herself, she heard herself say, "Blow in its ear, and maybe it will follow you home."

His pupils dilated, darkening into a pool of sensual interest that instantly put her on guard. "Is that all it takes?"

Embarrassed and angry at herself for having fallen into a trap of her own making, she yanked her gaze away and glared at the hapless machine. "If you can make this thing work, I'd appreciate it. Otherwise you'll have to excuse me. There isn't much time for me to make other arrangements."

He recognized her request to depersonalize the conversation and respected it. "I'll see what I can do."

Stepping forward, he opened the access door and peered inside the machine. He hummed, grunted, reached into a cabinet nested in the corner of the alcove and pulled out a stack of tooth-edged plastic templates.

It took a moment for the significance of what he was doing to sink in. When it did, she was mortified. "Please don't tell me that the binder cache was empty."

"All right, I won't tell you." He tapped the stack of plastic edging to square it, then slipped it into the binder cache. "I will simply suggest that when programming a set of instructions, it's helpful if the machine contains all the items necessary to fulfill your request."

With that he pressed the start button, and the machine whirred to life. A minute later, the first neatly-bound report spat out into the holding rack.

Catrina wished the ground would open up and swallow her whole. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She didn't have to look at him to know he was smiling. A fresh scent wafted past as he leaned to inspect the results of his handiwork, a masculine blending of soap and cedar that was well suited to his casual, outdoorsy appearance.

Clearing her throat, she angled a glance, realized to her shock that he'd retrieved one of the budget reports from the holding rack and was idly flipping through it.

She immediately plucked it out of his hands. "Are you a member of the budget committee?"

He stared at her as if she'd suddenly sprouted antlers. "Not exactly."

"Then I can't allow you to see this. It's a confidential document."

"I don't think the committee would mind if I took a quick look at the preliminary projections."

"I'm sorry, but company policy forbids the review of budget documents by anyone other than accounting personnel or the budget committee."

"It does?"

"Yes."

"Hmm. I'll have to give the policy manual another look-see."

"That might be prudent." She stacked all of the reports, scooped them into her arms, giddy with relief. Her task was complete, and with five minutes to spare. Life was good. "I suppose I should get these to the conference room."

"Yes, I suppose you should."

She hesitated. She didn't know why. "Thank you again for your help."

There was something incredibly appealing about the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. "You're welcome again."

After another moment, she sucked a breath, managed a smile and stepped from the copy-room alcove, nearly colliding with a gray-suited man carrying a thick document tucked under his arm.

She stiffened instinctively, snapped to attention as she recognized the company finance director, her boss's boss.

The fellow dodged, spun, touched her shoulder to steady himself. He didn't favor her with a second glance. Instead, his gaze darted around the bustling accounting department with preoccupied verve. "Have you seen Rick?"

"Rick who?"

He blinked, then laughed as if she'd cracked a joke. "That's a good one—" He glanced past her shoulder, toward the copy alcove from which she'd just emerged. "Ah, there you are. Look, the city lawyers are in your office, and I need a signature on these contracts posthaste."

A chill slipped down her spine as the man who'd just witnessed her embarrassing ineptitude with the office machine accepted the proffered documents, flipping through them with practiced skill. "Has the legal department reviewed these?"

The finance director nodded. "Yes, all we need is your approval, and the deal is done."

"Let me give them a quick read first. I'll have Marge hand-carry them to your office when I'm through."

Catrina steadied herself on a metal file cabinet. During the past week of her employment, she'd met dozens of company employees, including most department directors and top managers. She'd met only one person named Marge. She was the personal assistant to the head honcho, one of the few people to whom she had yet to be introduced…the elusive Rick Blaine.

Rick glanced up from the contract long enough to see the color drain from the young woman's face. He'd realized moments earlier that she hadn't known who he was. That hadn't bothered him, actually.

Having just returned from a boring round of golf with the dull-as-dirt CEO of a national conglomerate in need of a new headquarters complex, Rick realized he looked more like a mail-room employee than the founder of a multimillion dollar architectural firm. He'd always made a point of personally knowing each and every employee of his company. He wondered how this breathtaking young woman had escaped his notice.

The embarrassment in her eyes was quickly replaced by a snap of anger, barely visible before she spun on her heel and marched toward the conference room. A thick gather of toffee-colored hair spilled to her shoulders, bouncing with each hurried step, and the torn hem of her skirt dangled as a reminder of the earlier accident. For some odd reason, the minor disarray of her clothing made him feel strangely protective.

Beside him, the finance manager continued to drone on about the particulars of a contract he'd be reading himself in a few minutes. He interrupted with no particular grace. "Who is that woman?"

"Which woman?" Frank Glasgow blinked, followed his gaze. "Oh, that's our new accounting clerk. Jordan, I believe…Catherine, Caitlin…something like that."

"Find out."

"Find what out?"

Even after the clearly aggravated Ms. Jordan had disappeared into the conference room with her hard-earned stack of budget reports, Rick kept his gaze glued on the vacant doorway, awaiting her return. "Her name. I want to know her name."

"Why?"

"Because it's rude to refer to one's employees as 'hey, you.'"

"Oh." Frank shot a quizzical look, cleared his throat. "Now about the completion clause and non-compliance penalties, I think we should attempt to negotiate a more favorable—"

"Yes, yes, you're quite right," Rick mumbled as the gorgeous Ms. Jordan reappeared in the doorway.

She hesitated, noting his presence with an annoyed sideways glance before hurrying across the spacious open area to a neat desk in front of the management cubicles. She seated herself stiffly, deliberately turned her back on him, a subtle signal that she'd noted his visual interest and rejected it.

"Rick, have you got a moment?"

A vaguely familiar feminine voice caught his attention. He glanced around as a portly, middle-aged woman rushed toward him. "Good afternoon, Sandra. I hear your son's football team won the league championships. Congratulations."

"Thank you. He's up for a sports scholarship at U.C.L.A."

"Really? That's quite a coup. You must be very proud."

"Oh, I am."

"You've done something different with your hair."

"Why, yes." She patted her chic, scissored coiffeur, gave him a grateful smile. "Even my husband didn't notice. Do you like it?"

He flashed her a smile that usually made women flush and giggle. "Extremely attractive. Brings out the resonance of your eyes and draws attention to your lovely smile."

"Flatterer."

"If the truth is flattering, so be it."

Sandra flushed and giggled, then caught herself, clearing her throat and drawing her ample shoulders back with a modicum of dignity. "When you finally get married, you'll break a million hearts, you devil, you."

"Why, I can't possibly get married when the most perfect woman on Earth is already taken." Lifting her hand, he brushed a light kiss across her knuckles, then offered a conspiratorial wink that raised a crimson stain across her cheeks. "I hope your husband realizes what a lucky man he is."

"I'll tell him you said so."

"You do that."

Still blushing madly, Sandra sighed, floated a few steps away, then jerked to a stop. "I almost forgot. The drafting department elected me to express our appreciation for the merit bonus this week. It was very generous of you."

"I'm the one who is appreciative. Please convey my gratitude to your colleagues for a job well done. Because of their efforts, the company was able to secure a lucrative renovation contract that benefits us all."

Sandra was pink with pleasure. "I'll pass that along."

"Please do." Rick gave the woman his undivided attention until she broke visual contact by turning away. Then his gaze immediately returned to the fascinating Ms. Jordan just in time to see her roll her eyes and swivel her chair around until her back was to him again. That she'd been unimpressed by his employee interaction skills couldn't have been more clear if she'd held up a scorecard.

Rick's smile flattened. He wasn't exactly insulted, but he was most certainly confused. People just naturally liked him. They always had, perhaps because he naturally liked them as well.

"It seems as if I've inadvertently gotten off on the wrong foot with our newest employee," he murmured to no one in particular.

"Hmm?" Beside him, Frank followed his gaze and scowled. "She's probably just preoccupied with learning the position. The finance department is one of the most complex and important in the company."

Frank's reminder of his own importance didn't escape Rick's notice. "We couldn't get along without you."

Frank's tailored lapels seemed to puff a bit. He was a short man, thin and balding, with a mustache so neat it appeared to have been trimmed with a template. He was also a man prone to agitation when his ego wasn't routinely stroked, but he was exceptionally good at his job and treated his subordinates with respect. Frank was an excellent manager. Rick appreciated him immensely and

would have spent more time stroking that fragile ego if he hadn't been so overwhelmingly intrigued by his own peculiar turmoil.

"We could spend some time discussing those contracts if you'd like," Frank said. "I'm free until 4:30…."

The remainder of Frank's comment dissipated as Rick made a beeline for Ms. Jordan's desk.

The subtle stiffening of her shoulder blades was the only indication that she was aware of Rick's presence. "It occurs to me that we were interrupted before we could complete the introductory process," he said jovially. "I'm Rick Blaine."

"So I gathered." She stared at the computer monitor as if mesmerized by it. Her fingers clicked over the keyboard with impressive speed. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Blaine."

The final comment was added as an afterthought and without benefit of a glance.

Rich shuffled uncomfortably. "And you are…?"

She leaned forward, hit the backspace and re-entered a number. "Catrina Jordan."

"Catrina. That's a lovely name." He repeated her name, which was pronounced Cat-rina, emphasis on "Cat," rather than the softer European pronunciation. "Your mother must have been a feline fancier."

"My mother was allergic to cats. I was named after my grandmother." Another correction made its way to the monitor. She studied her notes a moment, then went back to inputting figures without further comment.

"I see." Rick felt like a high-school nerd trying to ask the homecoming queen for a date. "My mother was a big Humphrey Bogart fan." He flashed his famous smile, presuming she would be dazzled by it.

And she might have been, if she'd bothered to look up. "He was a fine actor."

He puffed his cheeks, blew out a breath. "She named me after Humphrey Bogart's character in Casablanca."

"How interesting," she murmured in a tone that clearly implied she'd rather discuss the genetics of animal dander with an intellectual dwarf than indulge in further conversation with him.

"Look, I want to apologize for what happened earlier. I didn't mean to embarrass you. I mean, if you were embarrassed there was no need to be. This is a casual company. We're all on pretty much a first-name basis here. It didn't occur to me that you'd be intimidated just because my name is on the letterhead."

Her fingers froze over the keyboard, then she tucked them in her lap. She took a deep breath, then swivelled around to face him. "I was not intimidated, Mr. Blaine, nor am I interested in conducting an office flirtation with the boss, or with anyone else for that matter. I take my work very seriously, and I'm good at what I do. I need this job. I'll be a valuable employee for your company, but that is all I will be."

If she'd shoved her keyboard down his throat sideways he couldn't have been more shocked. "Exactly what kind of reputation do I have among my employees?"

The dart of her gaze proved he'd hit a nerve. "You are highly regarded," she confessed. "Everyone I've spoken with thinks the world of you."

"So I'm not known as a lecherous skirt-chaser?"

That adorable flush revealed itself in crimson patches on her otherwise perfect complexion. "On the contrary, you're known as a man who is generous and outgoing to everyone."

"And you just naturally resent generous, outgoing people?"

His teasing question was rewarded by the hint of a smile, which she quickly quashed by biting her lip. "I apologize for my rudeness. The truth is that you're right, I was embarrassed because I didn't know who you were and because I'd made such a fool of myself in your presence. I presumed you were deliberately taunting me. Perhaps I was mistaken."

"Perhaps?" He tilted his head in a manner he knew was boyish and unthreatening. "Let's start over, shall we?" He stuck out his hand. "My name is Blaine, Rick Blaine. I work here."

She hesitated, then offered her hand. "Catrina Jordan. I work here too."

Her hand nested in his with a perfect fit. It was soft to the touch, a warm contrast to her cool demeanor. "I hope we can be friends, Catrina."

Apparently that was the wrong thing to say, because she withdrew her hand with more speed than would normally be expected. "I'm sure we will be, Mr. Blaine."

"Rick."

"Very well. Rick." With that, she swiveled her chair toward the monitor and began inputting figures into the computer.

Rick stood there like a spurned suitor, knowing he should muster whatever small dignity he retained by walking quickly to the nearest exit.

As usual, however, Rick rarely did what he should do, but followed his instinct instead. He took the opportunity of studying this unexpected woman, the firm curve of her jaw, the determined crease of her chin.

He'd seen fear in her eyes when she'd looked at him, a fear that both saddened and intrigued him. He acknowledged that Catrina Jordan represented a challenge, not only to his masculine ego but to his sense of humanity. Something had wounded her, something she still feared, something that she apparently recognized in him. Even though this seriously bothered him, Rick chose not to explore it too closely.

He wanted to know about this lovely young woman, wanted to know everything about her, what she enjoyed, what she disliked, what made her laugh, what brought out the joy in those luscious brown eyes.

A glance around her desk gave him a few tantalizing hints. There were no personal items, no family photographs. Her ring finger was bare, a fact he'd noticed when he'd first seen her threatening the collating machine.

He spotted a small but healthy philodendron plant at the edge of her desk, alongside an extra-large disposable cup emblazoned by the logo of a coffee boutique not far from the office. She liked plants and gourmet coffee.

On the floor behind her chair was a gym bag with a pair of running shoes tied to the handle. She was a probably a jogger, and he presumed she headed to the nearby park during lunch hour since she'd brought her fitness togs into the office.

He was still scrutinizing her personal effects when she suddenly spun around, skewered him with a stare. "Will there be anything else, Mr. Blaine?"

"Uh…nice plant."

"Thank you."

Feeling chastised and thoroughly dismissed, he backed away and returned to the spot where Frank Glasgow had been watching with obvious disapproval.

"It's not my place to question," Frank said, "but I thought you had rather firm rules against, well, mixing business with pleasure, so to speak."

"Is it that obvious?"

"I'm afraid so."

Heaving a sigh, Rick absently ran his knuckles over his scalp, a habit that made it even more difficult to control a shock of nut-brown hair that drove his barber crazy. Frank was right, of course. Rules were rules, and no business could be effective if its employees were constantly sizing each other up for romantic entanglement.

But there was something about Catrina Jordan, something that stuck like a sharp tack somewhere inside Rick's chest and wouldn't let go. "Rules are like mirrors. You never mean to break them, but sometimes it just happens."

Frank shook his head. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”
“So do I,” Rick replied quietly. “So do I.”

Chapter Two

"One large house blend, please, to go."

Pushed and prodded by the crowd around the counter, Catrina struggled to extract the cash to pay for her purchase, only to have her wallet elbowed from her grasp by a burly patron. Frustrated, she bent to retrieve it, but it was wedged under the heel of a large, booted foot. She puffed her cheeks, blew out a breath.

It was definitely going to be one of those days.

"Excuse me, sir. Sir?" She hesitated, then tugged the hem of the blue jeans extended over the offending boot. A man with a brushy beard sniffed the air like a puzzled grizzly before frowning down at her. She swallowed, tried for a smile. "You're standing on my wallet."

He blinked, glowered, stepped to one side.

Murmuring her thanks, Catrina scooped up her wallet, gasping in horror as the coin purse yawned open to disperse a handful of jingling change.

Coins rolled across the crowded floor, lodging between a forest of shifting legs and shuffling feet, where only a desperately broke masochist would venture in an attempt to retrieve them.

Catrina dropped to her knees and frantically scooped up as many as she could find.

By the time she slapped a handful of coins on the counter along with her last dollar bill, flyaway strands of hair stuck to her moist cheek, there was a hole the size of Wyoming in the knee of her panty hose, and she was pretty sure that her deodorant had failed.

It was barely 7:30 a.m.

She shouldered her purse, snatched her covered cup of coffee, then muscled her way through the surging crowd desperately hoping that everything that could go wrong already had. Then she collided with a well-formed chest wrapped in a casual knit shirt sporting the suspiciously familiar scent of soap and cedar.

"Well, fancy meeting you here." Rick Blaine widened his eyes as if stunned by the coincidence. "Ms. Horton? Catherine, right?"

She managed a tight smile, spoke through her teeth. "Jordan, Catrina Jordan."

"Of course. I remember now." He flashed a grin, pushed the glass door open and held it for her.

She grunted her thanks and brushed by him, striding quickly up the sidewalk toward the office. She wasn't surprised when he fell into step beside her.

"I see we both have excellent taste in coffee." He angled a speculative glance at the capped cup in her hand. "Latte, skim?"

"House blend, black."

"Ah, that explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Your rather high-strung and spirited disposition."

She swivelled to stare at him, stumbling on an uneven patch of concrete. "I beg your pardon?"

He was sipping his coffee through a small hole in the cap, and allowed himself to complete the process before favoring her with a glance. "No insult intended, of course. Anyone who starts the day with enough caffeine to jump-start a semi is bound to be a bit jittery, that's all."

"I am not jittery."

"You haven't drunk your coffee yet."

"Coffee or no coffee, I am not a jittery person." The nerve of this man, a virtual stranger presuming to cast comments upon her personality. "It's ridiculous for you to make such a categorical statement about a person you don't even know."

"You're quite right, it is. The only way for me to make reparations for my boorish presumption is to rectify that situation. How about dinner tonight?"

Only then did she note the sly gleam in his eye and realize that she'd leaped right into the trap. "No, thank you."

"Tomorrow night?"

"No. Thank you."

"Ever?"

"Probably not."

"Ah, probably leaves the door open."

"No, it doesn't." She reminded herself that this man had the power to take her job away, a job that she desperately needed to care for her baby daughter. "Please, don't take it personally. I'm not in the market for a romantic relationship, or any relationship for that matter."

"Not even a friendship?"

"In my experience, friendship is nothing more than the masculine code word for sex without commitment."

He choked on his coffee, coughed until his eyes watered. When he could speak without wheezing, he stared at her in genuine astonishment. "Don't hold back, tell me what you think."

She couldn't bite back a smile this time. He really was a charming fellow and definitely an attractive one. Under other circumstances, she would have been flattered by his attention and might even have responded favorably to it. "I apologize if I've insulted you. I do have an unfortunate tendency to speak my mind a bit too candidly at times."

"No, no, I appreciate candor." He frowned, shot her a glance. "That's a lie. I hate candor."

"Most men do."

"Most women do, too. For example, would you appreciate being told that the hole in your nylons makes you look like you have a fist-sized wart on your knee?" He grinned when she jerked to a stop and stared at him. "I didn't think so."

Her astonishment melted into amusement. She chuckled. "Touché, Mr. Blaine."

"Rick."

"Touché, Rick."

They had reached the offices of Blaine Architectural. He politely opened the door for her. "So now that we know each other well enough for brutal honesty, will you go out with me?"

"No," she said pleasantly. "But I will regret it more than I would have ten minutes ago."

"It's because of my eyebrows, isn't it?"

"Your what?"

"My eyebrows. I know they're ugly. They tweak in the middle, sag at the side, and I've been told they make me look like a stunned Chihuahua. I'll bet you hate dogs."

"I love dogs."

"Then why won't you go out with me?"

Exasperated, she stepped into the elevator, whirled around and pressed a palm in the center of his chest to keep him from following. "Because you are rich, arrogant and pushy. Does that about cover it?"

He blinked. "Yes, I believe it does."

The midday sun was warm, the autumn air cool, and the shady park was bustling with activity. From his vantage point behind a sprawling cedar, Rick watched the svelte blonde completing her warm-up exercises beside a glossy, forest-green bench. She rolled her arms, flexing her shoulders beneath a sweatsuit worn thin at the elbows, and patched at the knees. Her shoes were old too, scuffed and scarred from repeated use.

It didn't matter. She could have been wrapped in stenciled burlap, and Rick still would have thought her the most appealing woman on Earth.

He didn't know why.

Fascinated, he continued to stare as she stretched her calf muscles, dipping down until her forehead brushed her knee. Every movement was fluid and graceful, the epitome of vibrant health and lithe femininity.

His greedy gaze absorbed every nuance, every twist of her waist, every bend of her knee until she shook her body as if it were a limp rag. As soon as he realized she was preparing to sprint away, he emerged from behind the tree, planting himself directly in her view.

It took a moment for her stunned double take to announce that she'd recognized him. He pasted a grin on his face, offered a cheery wave. Even though she was at least fifty feet away, he saw her brows furrow in a suspicious frown.

Initially he'd planned to jog alongside her, try to engage her in conversation. The look in her eye made him rethink that option. Instead, he simply called out, "Nice day for a workout, isn't it?"

She simply stared at him.

Rick felt his jaw slacken. He'd never in his life had to work so hard to win a woman's interest. Nor had he ever been so determined to do so.

Clearly she was not approachable at the moment, so Rick decided to carry his charade a bit further by emulating the warm-up exercises he'd just watched her perform. Placing his hands on his hips, he twisted his upper body several times. A glance out of the corner of his eye confirmed that she was watching him. Emboldened, he flashed another of his winning smiles, then stretched out one leg as she'd done, and flung his torso forward, planning to touch his forehead to his knee.

Something popped in back.

His spine went numb. He could no longer feel the outstretched leg, and the one on which he was supporting his weight began to quiver madly.

The horror of his situation dawned on him a fraction of a second before he toppled sideways into a clumsy heap. The moment he hit the ground, his left calf went into spasms. He let out a howl, grabbed his leg, and writhed like a clumsy snake, oblivious to the startled stares of passersby.

By the time he'd kneaded the knots out of his muscles, the path beside the forest-green park bench was empty. Catrina was gone.

Rick limped back to the office, daunted but determined. Whether Catrina Jordan realized it or not, she'd thrown down a gauntlet of challenge.

Pain shot from his lower back to his shoulder blades. Rick sucked a breath, listening to the shower sounds emanating from the women's locker room. He'd guessed that she'd use the health club on the top floor of their office building to change clothes and shower after her lunchtime jog, and the familiar battered duffel left on one of the workout benches confirmed his assumption.

He also presumed that she had witnessed his clumsy tumble in the park and had no doubt been mightily amused by it. Ego wouldn't allow him to let her believe that he was inept enough to have actually hurt himself, so he'd dragged himself up here to put on yet another show of machismo.

She would no doubt appreciate the effort. Women always appreciated a cunning display of male physical prowess. And Rick appreciated their appreciation. Even if it was undeserved.

Slowly, painfully, he lowered himself onto a weight bench, which supported his torso as he planted his feet on the floor. A tubular rack above his head held an iron bar affixed to a set of iron discs. The past ten years had not been the most athletic of his life, but in college Rick could bench press one hundred pounds without breaking a sweat, so it didn't occur to him to double-check the weight of the unit. Besides, he didn't want to move again until he absolutely had to. A lack of routine exercise was revealed in the tremor of his strained muscles.

He was already panting like a whipped dog, his back was killing him, but the sound of running water in the women's locker room had just been replaced by the whir of a hair dryer so it was nearly show time.

He sucked a breath, curled his fingers around the bar over his head and waited.

Within a matter of minutes, Catrina emerged from the locker room wearing street clothes, and carrying her jogging ensemble under her arm. He noticed that her ruined nylons had been removed, leaving her legs bare and pale and exquisitely attractive.

She didn't spare him a glance. Instead she stuffed her sweatsuit into the open duffel, grabbed her worn-out shoes from beneath the bench and tied them to the bag handle.

She was clearly preoccupied. Her lips pursed in a sensual pout, her pale brows puckered with appealing concentration. Her skin was slightly flushed from the shower, a pink glow from cheek to jaw that imparted an appealing radiance to her creamy complexion.

Rick thought she was just about the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life.

He cleared his throat. "Hello, again."

She spun around, touched her throat in a gesture of vulnerability that he found strangely enticing.

"Our paths just keep crossing." He flexed his fingers around the weight bar, fought a grimace as his back issued a protest. "Uncanny, isn't it?"

Tilting her head, she regarded him. "Yes, uncanny."

"I would have joined you at the park, but I didn't want you to feel bad if you couldn't keep up."

She smiled then, a brief flutter of lips that was absolutely devastating. "I'm sure you would have left me in the dust. Presuming, of course, you had stayed on your feet in the first place."

Well, at least she'd been watching him. He took some small consolation in that. "A minor mishap. Have you never gotten a pebble in your shoe?"

"A pebble?"

"Sharp little devil. Poked itself right into my instep. You know how it goes."

A flash of tooth scraped her lower lip, as if she was biting back a smile. "Of course."

"So other than jogging, what else do you do to buff up?"

"'Buff up'?"

"You know, tone the old quads, beef up the biceps."

"Oh. Well, I enjoy tennis. Or I used to. There's little time for it any more."

A clue. He pounced on it. "This is truly amazing. Tennis is absolutely my game." Grab a ball, hit it with a racket. How hard could it be? "Maybe we could share a court some time."

"Maybe."

She was softening, he could see it in her eyes. "You ought to try working with the weights, too. It's great for the cardiovascular system." To prove the point, he hoisted the bar with a macho grunt and felt something give at the base of his spine. His arms collapsed like wet noodles, and the bar came down on his chest, pushing the air out of his lungs with a humiliating whoosh.

Catrina widened her eyes. "Are you all right?"

He opened his mouth, sucked a wheezing breath. "I meant…" a peculiar hiss emanating from somewhere deep inside "…to do that."

She blinked. "Why?"

It took a few seconds before he could speak again. "Lower weights—" he wheezed "—then lift them." He wheezed again. "That's how…it works."

"I see," she murmured, clearly unconvinced. "Well, I'll leave you to your workout."

Rick smiled, managed a painful nod. "If you see Frank Glasgow, could you…send him up?"

"Of course." She glanced once more in his direction, then scooped up her duffel and left.

After what seemed a small eternity, Frank poked his head into the gym. "What can I do for you?"

"You can get this…damned thing off." Rick gritted his teeth. "Then drive me to the hospital… I think I broke a rib."

"I tell you, Gracie, it's absolutely eerie. Every time I turn around, there he is. And he's sending me presents."

"Presents?" Gracie's eyes popped. "You mean like diamonds and perfume and furs?"

"Well, no." Catrina cleared her throat, glanced away. "Er, a case of panty hose." Expensive panty hose, attached to a dozen colorful helium-filled balloons and shuttled to her apartment door by a uniformed courier who was most unhappy when she refused to accept the delivery.

Gracie blinked rapidly. "Oh, my, that does sound a bit personal."

"Actually, it was kind of a private joke. You see, I dropped some coins at the coffee shop and ripped the knee out of my—" Blushing furiously, Catrina clamped her mouth shut, embarrassed by Gracie's knowing grin. "Never mind. The point is, I think he's stalking me."

"Stalking you?" Gracie chuckled. "Perhaps he's just interested in you. After all, you're a very attractive young lady."

"Well, I'm not interested in him."

She quirked a brow. "Not even a little?"

Catrina shrugged, shifted Heather on her hip as she tossed a handful of pasta into a pot of boiling water. "I'll admit he's an appealing man, but that isn't the point. I'm not interested in any man, appealing or not."

"You prefer women?"

"Gracie!" Catrina laughed, shook her head. "You know what I mean. I've just extricated myself from one bad relationship. I certainly am not going to fling myself into another one."

"Then how about flinging yourself into a good relationship?"

Catrina's smile faded. "There's no such thing," she said firmly, and meant it. "My mother suffered through two terrible marriages. Two men used her, abused her then walked out on her. My eldest sister divorced a man so shallow and narcissistic that he ran off to Europe rather than support the child he had fathered, and I ended up with a fellow who thought women should have been born with scrub brushes instead of fingers, and a built-in beer cooler on their backs. Heather and I are better off alone, thank you very much."

"Not all men are adolescent control freaks."

"Of course not. Just the ones I know." Sighing, she slipped Heather into the high chair, handing her a spouted cup of juice to placate her until dinner was ready. "I understand that it's not fair to judge an entire gender by the behavior of a few, but the point is that I can't afford another mistake. I have a child to think about, a child who means the world to me. I won't risk having her hurt, her trust broken by yet another daddy who will disappoint and abandon her."

"There are good men out there, Catrina, men who are worthy of your love and respect."

A slow throb worked its way around her temples. "Then why couldn't you find one?" The minute the words emerged, Catrina regretted them. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Of course you did." Paling visibly, Gracie nonetheless attempted a smile. "I'm the first to admit that when it came to choosing husbands, I wasn't the brightest porch light on the block."

"Gracie—"

"No, no, you're right. I'm hardly an authority on relationships." She shifted her gaze, stirred the pot of spaghetti sauce bubbling on Catrina's stove. "Just because you invite me for dinner once a week doesn't give me license to tell you how to live your life." A sly glance bounced so quickly that Catrina nearly missed it. "I'm sure you're not the least bit interested in my silly musings."

"Of course I'm interested," Catrina assured her. "If I didn't want your opinion, I wouldn't have brought the subject up in the first place."

Gracie laid the saucy spoon on the counter, wiped her hands on a tea towel. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"I wouldn't want to intrude—"

"Gracie! Tell me what you think I should do."

The older woman's face spread into a wreath of smile lines. "Well, since you've asked, I think you should continue doing exactly what you've been doing."

"I've been ignoring and avoiding him."

"Exactly."

Catrina frowned. For some reason, she'd had the impression that Gracie thought she should give the persistent Rick Blaine a chance. "So far, it hasn't exactly chilled his enthusiasm."

"Give it time. Just keep pretending you're not interested and—"

" Pretending? Gracie, I don't have to pretend. Haven't you been listening? I am not interested in Rick Blaine. Not, not, not!"

"Of course, dear, I understand." The woman chuckled, swished her hand as if waving away a pesky fly. "Anyway, you just keep doing exactly what you've been doing, and sooner or later you'll get exactly what you want."

"Exactly what I want," Catrina repeated. The words rolled around her tongue with a smooth feel, a unique flavor. "That would be lovely, of course, if I knew what I wanted in the first place. The truth is I haven't a clue. Does that make me insane?"

"No dear," Gracie said with a chuckle. "It simply makes you human."

Chapter Three

"It's about time you answered. I've been calling for two hours." Rick shifted the tiny cell phone, touched the brake and cruised to a stop at the light. "You missed a terrific steak dinner."

"I wasn't aware we had a date."

"We didn't, but we would have if you'd answered your phone two hours ago."

The familiar feminine chuckle on the other end of the line never ceased to make him smile. "I suppose I should be flattered that a handsome scalawag like yourself would waste a perfectly good Friday night on an old woman."

"You are not old. You have simply blossomed fully."

"Such a silver-tongued lad! No wonder you have to beat women off with a stick." Her chuckle rolled into a tinkling laugh that warmed him from nape to spine. "I'm thinking you must have whacked a tad too hard if you've a free weekend. Either that or the young woman at the office who has taken your fancy must not be as easily persuaded by your charms as you'd hoped."

"Can't a fellow hold a Friday night open for a date with his favorite Mom without being taunted and abused?"

"She turned you down, did she?"

"Not at all." An impatient honk from behind startled him. He touched the accelerator to join the thrumming rush of vehicles across the intersection. "I'm sure if I'd invited her to dinner, she'd have leaped at the opportunity."

A gleeful whoop made him grimace. "Aha! She slammed the door in your face, didn't she?"

"Not literally." Although Rick had little doubt that if he'd had the chutzpah to appear on her porch, the seemingly unattainable and undeniably gorgeous Catrina Jordan would have done just that. "The subject never came up, that's all."

"Yes, well it's difficult to ask someone out on a date if they won't give you the time of day to begin with."

Rick found himself giving the cell phone a wry stare. "Thank you for the maternal support and encouragement."

"Why should I encourage you to break another woman's heart?"

The allegation stunned him. "I've never broken any woman's heart. Every woman I've ever dated has become a lifelong friend."

"Your charm is both a curse and a blessing, dear. People are drawn to you like a magnet, but just as one side attracts, the other propels those who would move too close a safe distance away." Her sigh was poignant, heavy with a sadness that Rick understood, although he wished he didn't. "It seems that we always most desperately want that which we cannot have."

"Mom, please. Don't start."

"Don't start on what? The fact that I will be laid in my grave without a grandchild to grieve my passing?"

He whipped the steering wheel, pulled into a drive that sloped sharply below street level, and stopped at a striped gate. "We've been over this before."

"Yes, we have. Tell me again why the very thought of marriage and family makes you break into a cold sweat."

"You know why." He pressed a button on the armrest with more force than necessary. The window slid down, allowing him to slide the parking-garage access card through the reader. He hated this conversation. He'd always hated it. "I'm flying up to Tahoe next week to talk to a man about renovating a casino. How about joining me? You've never met a slot machine you didn't like, and I promise to keep a never-ending supply of quarters handy—"

"You are thirty-six years old, Rick. It's time you settled down."

"Mom—"

"I want grandchildren!"

"Then rent some." Regretting the snap of his tone, Rick sighed, eased his vehicle into his parking space and shoved the transmission into park. "Mom, please. Trust me when I say that I am doing the females of the world a favor by removing myself from the marriage pool."

Her voice softened. "Don't let my failures harden you."

"You didn't fail. They did."

She sighed, a whisper of disappointment that stirred something deep inside Rick's soul. It was the sigh of a woman scarred by pain, wounded by betrayals that she refused to acknowledge. But Rick acknowledged them, those traitorous emotions that had blinded his beloved mother to the cruelty of misplaced trust. After all the hurt, all the pain, she still viewed life through an optimistic aura of hope, the staunch belief that there was no pain so intense that it couldn't be eased with love and chicken soup.

As much as Rick adored his mother, he saw in her the same cynical naïveté that he'd recognized in Catrina Jordan's eyes, eyes that reflected past pain and betrayal, yet still sparked with wounded vulnerability and a silent hope that had touched a chord deep inside him.

He didn't know why he'd felt such instant kinship, such intense desire to nurture and protect. He didn't know why her image haunted his thoughts, why her scent floated through his dreams. It was as if he had suddenly discovered a lost part of himself, an appendage of his soul that had been missing for so long he'd forgotten it ever existed.

"Rick, are you still there?"

"It's late," he whispered. "You should get some rest."

"I suppose so."

"Mom?"

"Yes?"

He paused. "I love you."

"I love you, too, dear. Good night."

A soft click, a crackle of static and she was gone.

Darkness shrouded him in the dim parking bunker. An eerie concrete coldness enveloped him. It was, he thought, like being entombed in a vehicle graveyard, surrounded by idle hulks of steel that had been tossed aside and forgotten until they could once again be useful.

The analogy was strangely unsettling.

It was a discomfiting mirror of his own life, a life he reflected upon only during times like this, times when he was completely alone, undistracted by the comfortable chatter and bustle of people with which he deliberately surrounded himself.

Quietly alone. Silently alone.

Alone.

Panic crept softly, slithering through the shadows of his mind, chilling the unlit corners of his soul. Loneliness was a dark destiny, but Rick accepted it. There was no other choice.

Frowning, Frank Glasgow stepped off the elevator, clasping his hands behind his back. He took two steps into the hallway, then spun to glower at Catrina. "Surely you were informed that certain training sessions would be required."

"Yes, of course—"

"Then it's settled." Pivoting sharply, he strode toward the warren of executive offices at the north side of the floor.

Catrina hurried after him, feeling frantic. "But a two-day seminar halfway across the state? Even if I could afford the travel cost, I can't possibly leave my daughter for that length of time."

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