

An oil painting of a man and a woman in a romantic embrace. The man, on the left, has dark hair and is wearing a white shirt. The woman, on the right, has long, wavy, reddish-brown hair and is wearing a blue and white striped shirt. They are both smiling and looking at each other, with their faces just inches apart. The background is a warm, reddish-pink color. The artist's signature 'O'LEARY' is visible on the woman's shoulder.

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The Millionaire's Proposition

NATALIE PATRICK

Natalie Patrick

The Millionaire's Proposition

«HarperCollins»

Patrick N.

The Millionaire's Proposition / N. Patrick — «HarperCollins»,

WILL YOU...When down-on-her-luck Becky Taylor was pursued by billionaire Clark Winstead, she thought her prince had finally arrived. But Becky blinked at Clark's offer. Clark wanted a mistress and a child—but not a wife! Well, Becky refused to be seduced into motherhood. That is, unless Clark wooed her the old-fashioned way....HAVE MY BABY?Clark believed his proposal—uh, proposition—was the best solution. It skipped the marriage and jumped to the essentials: joint custody. But while Becky dreamed of white lace, Clark vowed never to walk down the aisle. Surely a powerful, sophisticated businessman couldn't be roped into commitment by a sweet virgin—or could he?

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I love kids and they love me. When the time comes, I think I'd be a very good mother.

Becky's words echoed through Clark's mind.

Clark did not often run into women like Becky. The novelty of her spirit and innocence intrigued him, stirred something up in him.

Flawless-as-cream skin, hair that looked like the spun gold curls straight off a Christmas angel and every bit as wholesome. And she was a virgin, too. He'd stake his fortune on that fact.

That "fact" touched something in him, awakened his male protective instinct and made him feel proprietary, even though he hardly knew Becky. And any woman who did that for a man like Clark deserved due consideration.

Yes...Becky Taylor might just be exactly what he was looking for....

Dear Reader,

The end of the century is near, and we're all eagerly anticipating the wonders to come. But no matter what happens. I believe that everyone will continue to need and to seek the unquenchable spirit of love...of romance. And here at Silhouette Romance, we're delighted to present another month's worth of terrific, emotional stories.

This month, RITA Award-winning author Marie Ferrarella offers a tender BUNDLES OF JOY tale, in which The Baby Beneath the Mistletoe brings together a man who's lost his faith and a woman who challenges him to take a chance at love...and family. In Charlotte Maclay's charming new novel, a millionaire playboy isn't sure what he was Expecting at Christmas, but what he gets is a very pregnant butler! Elizabeth Harbison launches her wonderful new theme-based miniseries, CINDERELLA BRIDES, with the fairy-tale romance—complete with mistaken identity!—between Emma and the Earl.

In A Diamond for Kate by Moyra Tarling, discover whether a doctor makes his devoted nurse his devoted wife after learning about her past... Patricia Thayer's cross-line miniseries WITH THESE RINGS returns to Romance and poses the question: Can The Man, the Ring, the Wedding end a fifty-year-old curse? You'll have to read this dramatic story to find out! And though The Millionaire's Proposition involves making a baby in Natalie Patrick's upbeat Romance, can a down-on-her-luck waitress also convince him to make beautiful memories...as man and wife?

Enjoy this month's offerings, and look forward to a new century of timeless, traditional tales guaranteed to touch your heart!



Mary-Theresa Hussey

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The Millionaire's Proposition

Natalie Patrick



www.millsandboon.co.uk

NATALIE PATRICK

believes in romance and has firsthand experience to back up that belief. She met her husband in January and married him in April of that same year—they would have eloped sooner but friends persuaded them to have a real wedding. Ten years and two children later, she knows she's found her real romantic hero.

Amid the clutter in her work space, she swears that her headstone will probably read: "She left this world a brighter place but not necessarily a cleaner one." She certainly hopes her books brighten her readers' days.



Chapter One

Why don't you just come home to Woodbridge, Indiana, meet a nice fellow, get married get a mortgage, a minivan, and have a couple terrific kids? Becky Taylor could just hear her older brother Matt's very sensible and very predictable advice. And she wasn't taking it!

No, when she came home to Indiana, it would be in triumph. Even Matt could appreciate her need for that. Growing up—he the oldest, Becky the baby—in one of the poorest families in town,

they knew what it meant to go hungry, to not know what crisis they would face next, to be scared often and sometimes angry. But they'd also known a lot of love and had been raised to believe they could do better for themselves. A lot of folks around town doubted that, but Matt had proved them wrong and so had her other brothers and sisters—now it was her turn.

No, she certainly would not go slinking back with her tail between her legs after only five months in Chicago. She would not go through the struggle just to end up in another low-paying dead-end job, about the only kind a town as small as Woodbridge could provide a girl without a degree and her limited work experience.

And how could she go back and face her old boyfriend after telling him she'd outgrown the town, the life-style and most especially her puppy love/first attraction for him? The last was certainly true and had been true for most of the year they'd dated. But then how hard was it to outgrow a guy who thought buying you a microwave burrito at his father's gas station was taking you out to eat?

A guy who thought all women should be barefoot and pregnant—except when they put on their steeltoed boots to go to work at the local factory? A guy who had never understood, much less supported, her quest for self-improvement, her plans to go back to college, her longing for something more?

She shuddered. If she never saw the likes of Frankie McWurter again, it would be too soon. And if she never took her brother's typical Midwestern male advice, then...

She fingered the two tiny silver baby booties on her charm-laden bracelet, one for each of Matt's children, her niece and nephew. Thinking of her brother and his wife, Dani, and those adorable toddlers did make her think twice about never taking her brother's imagined advice. Actually, she did want to get married eventually and have those babies. In fact, she counted on it.

Marriage, after all, was what girls in Woodbridge, Indiana, were raised to do best—even enlightened, educated girls, um, women of the so-called "Generation X." And babies? Becky loved babies, their tiny toes and fat tummies, the way they smelled, the way they cooed and laughed. The very idea of having one of her own someday radiated through her like sunshine through the dreariness of her day.

Becky absolutely wanted to get married and have a baby—with the right guy, at the right time and under the right circumstances. A triple threat, her sister-in-law would tease her and tell her the odds were stacked against realizing all three of her goals at the same time.

"Find Mr. Right," Dani would say, "and the rest suddenly won't matter quite so much."

"Find Mr. Right?" Becky muttered, clutching her thin all-weather coat close to her body. Right now she'd be happy to bump into Mr. Coffee. She stopped by the glass front of a chaotic little coffee shop on the first floor of an elegant skyscraper.

The aroma of the exotic blends, the rich lattes, the freshly ground beans all enticed her. She shut her eyes, tipped up her nose and savored it. Since savoring was all she could afford, why not enjoy the very best? she thought.

She'd checked her budget again this morning, trying to find just enough extra to allow her to replace the contact lens she'd lost the night before. She glanced at the image of herself reflected in the huge plate-glass window before her. Even her best perfectpink job interview suit didn't make up for the pair of bent wire-framed glasses perched on her nose or the still-damp mass of golden-brown curls glommed on top of her head. If only her roommate hadn't moved out last week and taken the blow dryer along with her half of the living expenses, her hair at least might be presentable, Becky thought.

No, her budget would not budge for contacts or coffee. When she'd lost her job last week, she'd stocked the fridge and paid the rent and figured out the total cost of utilities, necessities and buying a paper every day for job-hunting purposes. Luxuries like latte did not fit in the picture.

She gazed longingly at the hot steaming cups set down by the waitress. Even the half-empty ones, which got whisked away almost before the patrons had left the premises, didn't look bad to Becky today. She fought off a yawn and moved her bedraggled umbrella from one shoulder to the

other. In the shop, two women in stark business attire got up from their seats, their cups still brimming, and left the coffee disregarded as lightly as the cast-off newspaper one tossed onto the counter.

Of course! Becky brightened. If she spent her allotted money for a plain, small cup of coffee and lingered over it long enough, she could gather up someone's unwanted paper for free. Not only could she get the want ads that way but she wouldn't go through the day feeling like some job-hunting zombie.

Her heavy charm bracelet jangled and icy water droplets splashed on her wrist and leg. She yanked and pulled and finally got her miserable pink-and-blue floral umbrella shut. She looked at the sad old thing with one rib bowed out and another bent at a forty-degree angle so that even closed it seemed as if about to burst into a rendition of "I'm a little teapot." As soon as she got a job, that umbrella was going to go and the first thing she was going to buy was a new one, she told herself. No, make that the second thing.

She pushed through the heavy glass doors of the mammoth building, heading for the inner entrance to the shop. The first thing she would buy was a new charm for her bracelet—to mark the passage into this new, mature phase of her life. She gave her bracelet a confident shake and forged ahead, throwing herself into a throng of gray suits and shuffling wing tips.

Ping.

"My charm!" She'd felt the small object bounce against her knee moments before it hit the floor. A quick check of her bracelet told her she'd lost one of the baby booties she so cherished. Replacing it at a time like this was not an option, she thought. She had to find it!

She scanned the floor. The bright silver should stand out against the black marble, shouldn't it?

She raised her hand to bite her fingernail and unintentionally stabbed not one, but three passersby with the tip of her crooked umbrella.

"Sorry. So sorry. I'm sorry." She tried to meet the eyes of each of those she'd gouged.

None of them returned her gaze. She hung her head, feeling two feet tall. Of course, she thought, if she were two feet tall, at least then she might spot her charm more readily. She'd lost her job last week, her contact last night and her baby bootie moments ago, but that didn't mean she had to lose her sense of humor or her dignity.

"Oh, my!" She gasped as something metallic winked at her just a few inches from the elevator doors. Maybe she didn't have to lose her bootie after all. Disregarding the flash of feet and press of bodies, she dove for the tiny trinket, determined not to let it get swept inside the opening elevator doors.

Her teeth jarred as her knees hit the floor. Her fingers ached in stretching so hard to reach. Almost. Almost...

Crunch.

"Ow!" She drew back her hand, her fingertips smarting. The charm had disappeared and the man who had clomped on her fingers with it inside the elevator.

Scrambling to her feet, she jerked her head up in time to see a tall, black-haired man in a tailored suit and white shirt that set off the dark undertones of his skin dig something small and silver out of the heel of his shoe.

"That's my charm," she called out.

The man looked up and directly into her eyes. Her heart stopped. This was not the kind of man she normally ran into in Woodbridge or even in her usual activities around Chicago. Those kinds of men, the best of the bunch, wore power ties. This man wore power itself, raw yet refined, barely contained the way his fitted suit could not entirely temper the primitive qualities of his lean, muscular body.

His lips, pale and hard, looked like they could kiss a girl senseless, and Becky had no doubt that life provided him ample opportunity to do just that. His straight nose and dark eyebrows set

off his penetrating brown eyes, which, she imagined could practically spark to telegraph underlying anger or humor or even lust.

She gulped in the damp morning air carried in on overcoats and rain hats.

Had she ever seen such compelling features, Becky thought, even in his current mild state of bewilderment? Yes, she decided with one more look, she had—in late-night movies on her thirteen-inch borrowed TV. Cary Grant, she thought. A younger, in-the-flesh version of the world's most romantic movie star had just crushed her fingers—and taken off with her baby-bootie charm. She blinked her eyes and came back to reality.

“Hey, you! You, in the expensive suit.” She pointed at him with her umbrella. “You can’t just grab my bootie and take off like that.”

Heads turned.

She thought she heard at least one indignant huff.

She wanted to pull her coat up over her head and quietly slink away.

At the back of the elevator, the man with the Cary Grant face didn’t even blink. He gave a droll smile, cocked his head above the push of people wedging into the small cubicle and shouted back, “It was an accident, miss. Rest assured, I wouldn’t have grabbed anything of yours on purpose.”

A strange little squeaking noise gurgled in the back of her throat. Wouldn’t have grabbed anything of yours... Why that smug jerk, she thought. Of course, if he was the jerk, why was she the one who felt like running away?

She took a step backward. A lock of her already droopy hair plopped cool and wet against her scorched cheek. Her glasses wobbled. The last possible passenger stepped into the waiting elevator. The gorgeous jerk and her precious memento were about to disappear.

“I won’t forget this, you know. I am not the kind of girl who lets some man—even a man like you—take her b—” She caught herself. This was obviously an important man; she needed to rise to the occasion with class and dignity. “I am not the kind of girl who lets a strange man take advantage of a situation, then just walk away without expecting some kind of accountability.”

“Good for you,” he told her with an almost imperceptible wink. “One rarely finds a girl willing to defend her...charms so vehemently these days.”

“Oh! You...” Words simply would not do. This situation called for action—drastic, immediate action. She thrust her deformed umbrella forward between the closing doors. Unfortunately, someone inside the elevator saw it coming and batted away the protruding umbrella tip. The momentum carried it in a slow upward swing until it popped open of its own accord in all its ragged glory. As the door slid shut between herself, her charm and her living vision of masculinity and sophistication, she could only stand there looking for all the world like a pathetic Mary Poppins just flown in through a mild hurricane.

“Have you ever thought of...getting married?”

Clark Winstead glanced up from the silver bauble in his hand to his longtime confidant and generously overpaid tax accountant. Even knowing his always high-strung, slightly neurotic old pal would not appreciate the wry humor, he had to deadpan, “Why, Baxter, are you proposing?”

“Ha-ha.” Baxter Davis shoved open the door marked The Winstead Corporation, International Headquarters and held it open for Clark. “But seriously, have you?”

“You know my stand on marriage.” Just saying the word made Clark tense. Knowing even his close friend could not appreciate the depth of his feeling on the subject, the weight of the pain his own parents’ miserable marriage had laid on his shoulders, he simply shrugged and gave a flippant reply. “It’s against my principles.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. You’re the product of divorced parents, the statistics don’t bear out the risk factor, yadda, yadda, yadda. Big yawn.” The door fell shut behind them. “But what about other advantages?”

Clark glanced around the bustling outer offices of his headquarters, his mind moving on to other things. “In this day and age, a man can avail himself of those advantages without the decided disadvantages of a marriage going sour.”

“I was thinking about children.”

The rounded toe of the small-scale baby bootie dug into the pad of Clark’s thumb. He’d love to have a child, a son to carry on the Winstead name or a daughter to hold his heart in her delicate hands. “Actually, Baxter, I’d like to have an heir, or even two, but the price of getting them—marriage—is simply not one I’m willing to pay.”

“As a wise old sage once said to me, ‘In this day and age, a man can avail himself of those advantages without the decided disadvantages of a marriage going sour.’”

“I’m not the sort to adopt and raise a child on my own, Baxter.” They moved swiftly through the maze of desks and computers and such. Clark could not ignore but neither did he acknowledge the quiet fervor that accompanied his arrival. “I’m too busy to do the job right, and why do anything, raise children above all, if you can’t give it your best?”

“You could hire someone.”

“To have my children?” The idea struck a spark in his muddled thoughts. He hired people for everything else that mattered to him—to run his businesses, tend to his homes. He even had a personal trainer to see that he kept his body in top shape, though he rarely needed the external motivation for that. He hired the best and let them share in the reward as well as the responsibility. Could he simply take that concept one step further?

“I meant hire someone to raise the child.”

That, too. If he found the right woman to bear his child, wouldn’t it only follow that she would be the right one to raise it? Clear away the deadwood, get rid of everything that doesn’t contribute to growth—that was his business philosophy. Why not apply it to this more personal but every bit as significant decision? And it would be neat, too, cutting out the messiness and pain of divorce and simply skipping ahead to the inevitable last step of any marital relationship—joint custody. If he could find the right woman, it might work.

“Well, you’ve certainly given me something to think about, Baxter.” He paused outside the inner office occupied by his private secretary.

“Honestly, Clark, you’d consider it?”

“Having a child?”

“No, marriage.”

“Marriage?” Clark gave a contemptuous snort. “Why should I?”

“For love, for companionship, and barring that, for tax purposes.” Baxter fixed his beady gaze on his friend as if watching a bug under a microscope. “Marriage and children both provide tax benefits, you know.”

Clark slid the trinket he’d been toying with into his pocket and brushed past his friend. “Haven’t you heard, Mr. Davis, CPA and so forth? The rich don’t pay taxes.”

“Oh. I know all about the rich, my friend. I’ve learned from watching you up close and I can tell you this—it’s been one fascinating study.”

“Has it now?” Clark chuckled to himself.

Entertaining as he found his friend’s long-winded observations about the misery of money and its effects on those who game too much of the stuff, he didn’t have time for it right now. Already this morning an unfortunate run-in had provided him with unfinished business and Clark hated unfinished business.

He held up his hand to silence Baxter’s forthcoming diatribe, then hit his secretary’s gleaming cherry desk with both palms flat, his arms braced. He narrowed his eyes to command her immediate focus.

“Miss Harriman, call the coffee shop downstairs right away and ask them if anyone there saw a young lady—” he straightened, making use of all his faculties to get an unerring description “—about this tall.” He slashed his hand at his own chin level. “With a great mop of curly hair sort of stuck up on one side of her head.”

Baxter scowled.

“A pair of lopsided glasses, carrying a badly bent umbrella and wearing a...what’s it called?” He pointed to his wrist, then the answer hit him and he snapped his fingers. “Wearing a silver charm bracelet”

Miss Harriman, trained to act fast and not ask questions, already had the receiver in one hand and was tugging a pencil from behind her ear with the other.

“Find out if they know anything at all about her. Does she come here often? Work in this building? If nothing else, find out if anyone saw which way she went.”

“Yes, sir,” Miss Harriman said, and began jabbing numbers on the phone with the pencil eraser.

“Oh, and if the coffee shop doesn’t have any answers, try the newsstand in the lobby.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And if that doesn’t pan out, you might go down and see what you can learn from Henry, the fellow who gives the shoe shines.”

“I will, sir. Whatever you say.”

“Find her and there’s a big bonus in it for you, Miss Harriman.” He wrapped his knuckles on her desk and pivoted to head into his own expansive office.

“It always comes down to money with you, doesn’t it?” Baxter practically nipped at his heels through the door, their footsteps dramatically hushed by the plush carpet as they entered the private sanctum of Clark’s immense business domain.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Baxter,” Clark said, rolling the miniature baby bootie in his pocket between his thumb and forefinger.

“You’ve seen some woman, undoubtedly the object of your next conquest—”

“Conquest?” Clark smirked to himself at the outdated and ridiculous term. “You make it sound like I plan to climb on top of her, plant my flag and claim her as my personal territory.”

“Well, you do, don’t you? All possible sexual metaphors aside—”

“Yes, that’s how I prefer my sexual metaphors, actually. On the side.” Clark plunked down on his chair, the leather sighing as he settled in. He withdrew the small charm that had started the day’s turmoil.

Baxter ignored the joke, which came as no surprise to Clark whatsoever. “When you see anything you want, whether it’s another business or a new opportunity or a person, you’ve come to expect that all you have to do to get what you want is to throw money at it or them or him...or her. And once you’ve got them, you seal the deal with more money. Then you plant your flag, my friend. You plant it deep and you plant it good.”

Clark cocked his eyebrow. “I had no idea my reputation for that kind of thing was so renowned.”

Again, Baxter ignored the innuendo. “In business, you do it with your company name, your emphasis on employee empowerment and your fancy benefits packages.”

“I should be shot.”

“With your friends, you do it with loyalty and generosity, and don’t forget jobs.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“More than one poor sucker who happened to have grown up in your neighborhood or went to college with you or even some kid who used to deliver your paper, you’ve rewarded with a high-paying job and fat expense account, myself included.” Baxter began to pace, his long, gangly legs taking him swiftly from one end of the room to the other. “You do it with charities, too. You buy them equipment and hand out grants. Why, just this week you’re launching a scholarship program at our old university.”

"That? I just want to give back some of the opportunities that helped me succeed. It's my way of coming full circle, of wrapping things up in a neat little package." He sat forward in his chair and pressed the buzzer on the office intercom. "Miss Harriman, any luck yet?"

"No, sir, not yet," the voice crackled back at him.

"Well, buzz me as soon as you find out anything."

"Yes, sir."

Where was that girl? How could she have just vanished like that?

"And women, too," Baxter raved on. "You do it with women. You most certainly do."

"I can't help it. I happen to like women." He sat back in his chair, glanced at Baxter and smiled. "That kind of thing is genetic, they say."

Baxter didn't even crack a smile.

Clark didn't care. His mind was elsewhere—with that girl. He could still see the look of stupefied innocence and outrage in her sparkling eyes, the tinge of red flushed over her peaches-and-cream complexion.

He glanced down at the charm. A baby bootie. A token representing her own child? He thought not. No woman who had become someone's mother would allow herself to get so easily flustered by a seductive wordplay and a predatory glance by a stranger.

Besides, a mother who'd lost a sentimental token like that would have waited there by the elevators for him to bring it back to her. He'd tried, gotten off at the next floor and come back down, but she'd already taken off. Maybe it didn't mean as much to her as she wanted him to think. Maybe she'd expected him to offer a large remittance for damage to the trinket and when he did not offer that instantly...

"You've got it all figured out with women, too." Baxter created a flourish with his hand. "You lavish the women in your life with gifts and take them on luxurious trips and pamper and spoil them —"

"The poor dears, and I practically have to force them to accept."

"And when it's all over, do they want to scratch your eyes out? Write tell-all books about their horrific experiences? Slap you with palimony lawsuits?"

Clark started to push the intercom button again, then curled his fingers into a fist. Someone had to have seen that girl. Her appearance alone drew enough attention to her to insure that, and the scene she'd made, not to mention her last threat to him...

"No, any woman you've tangled with always wants to stay friends. They actually still like you even after you've treated them like goddesses and given them their every desire!"

"Imagine that. They must be deluded."

"Yes, they are, and the sad fact is they don't even know it."

"If you were deluded and you knew it, you wouldn't exactly be deluded, not in the strictest sense, would you?"

"They think they're happy!"

"But they're not?"

"No! How could they be? They've all been run through the Clark Winstead patented self-integrity shredder."

Clark frowned. "Which one of my companies makes that one?"

"Make fun if you want. But I'm telling you the truth. Look out this window." Baxter swiveled Clark's chair around so that he had a view of the street below. "Any other person would look at all those people there and see the pride and accomplishments, boredom and despair, the little joys and deep-seated depressions that are all part of the human condition."

Clark gazed at the smudges of color through the rain-speckled glass. She was out there, somewhere. A wounded kitten who thought her claws made her a tiger. How was he going to find her?

"But does Clark Winstead see those things? No, he does not!"

Clark scanned the bustling crowd, wondering if he might be able to pick her out from this distance.

“Clark Winstead sees every human being with a price tag on them.” Baxter straightened up, his neck lengthened, his chin up. He gave his head a shake like a rooster getting ready to crow. “And if he likes what he sees, he has no problem meeting that price to get his way.”

Clark blinked, then twisted his head toward his friend. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that all of us, every employee who takes a frivolous bonus or accepts a bigger salary than they earnestly merit, every woman wearing a piece of jewelry given by you—and not a one of them a wedding or engagement ring in all your thirty-nine years, I might add—”

“The first few of those thirty-nine years they had to settle for candy necklaces, I’m afraid.”

“Every charity that names a Clark Winstead scholarship winner or dedicates a Clark Winstead memorial wing,” Baxter went on with dogged determination to finish, “every friend who takes a handout and company that gets treated to one of your affable takeovers, we’re all walking around with your flag blazing over us—planted right square in our backs—like the proverbial dagger.”

“I’ll have to see if our insurance covers that kind of thing.”

“We all know, deep down, that you’ve got us. We’re bought and paid for and we owe you. As much as we like you, we do owe you. We’ve sold out, and no man—or woman—can be truly happy knowing that about themselves.”

Clark considered that a moment.

“That’s why I think you’ve never married, my friend.”

“I’ve never married—I never intend to marry—because I do not personally believe in the institution. I saw how it destroyed my parents and I want no part of it.” He started to turn his attention back toward the window.

“Had!”

Clark gawked at Baxter.

“You’ve never married, Clark Winstead, ol’ pal, because you know what I just said is true. You know that you could have any woman you want, but you don’t want any woman you could have because in your heart you’d know it was just another sellout. Ironical, isn’t it?”

“What’s that?”

“That good ol’ Clark Winstead is trapped in the same illusion as he’s created for the rest of us. He thinks he’s happy, but because of who he is and what he’s got, he can’t be—”

“Then I’m content in my anguish,” he lied, feeling all but content in his impotence at finding this girl with the wayward charm.

“Ha!”

“What is your point, Baxter? What?” he finally snapped. Baxter had it all wrong about him. He really did bear the scars of a terrible childhood. Watching his parents squabble and then drag him into the middle of the fray made him vow that he would never go through that again. Most of all, he would never put another child through it. To hear his hidden pain made light of on top of the incident with the girl did not put him in a sterling mood. “listening to you, a person might think I’m some kind of devil.”

“Worse.”

“Worse than a devil?”

“Yes, much worse because you’re not just a devil...”

Suddenly, a splash of blue and pink out the window caught his eye, then the outline of an umbrella shaped like a squatty teapot. Her! She was standing there on the street corner, her head bent over her cupped palm.

“...you, Clark Winstead, are the worst kind of devil. You are a decent man.”

“Hold that thought, will you?” Clark stood so fast his chair spun halfway around and slammed against his leg. In two long strides he was at his office door.

“Hey, where are you going?”

Clark grinned and gave the door a mighty push. “Off to corrupt another soul.”

Chapter Two

“Twenty-five, thirty-five, thirty-six...forty-six...” Becky flicked her fingernail through the change in her hand and muttered, “Give me back my charm, that’s what I should have said.”

The wind plastered her thin coat against her back. The umbrella that balanced over her shoulder rustled in the wind. Rain from the flapping awning overhead splashed the back of her neck and made her shiver. She lifted her head, suddenly on alert. People hurried past her as if she did not exist.

In the past five months, she’d grown accustomed to that feeling. But even after that amount of time on her own in the city, she could not accept getting stepped on or having something of hers so blithely whisked away.

That arrogant jerk’s attitude still galled her and if he were here right now she’d probably... The image of him, this virile suit-and-tie man with a supercharged aura of confidence, to-die-for eyes and a quick, wicked grin, filled her mind.

She’d probably stare at him like the big, uncultured goof that she knew in her heart she was, she thought. Her shoulders slumped forward. Maybe her brother had the right idea. Maybe she should go back to Woodbridge, marry a guy like Frankie McWurter and have a bunch of bucktoothed kids with big ears who all looked like their hairy-backed, knuckle-dragging father.

Becky shuddered at her own meanness toward poor ol’ Frankie and at the prospect of marriage to a small-town Lothario. On the other hand, she thought, maybe she’d stay in the city and give finding a job another shot. After all, after a day like today, how much worse could it get?

She inched in farther under the awning, closed her umbrella and propped it against her shin. She narrowed her gaze again over her cluster of coins. “Forty-six plus another twenty-five, that’s—”

Kaching.

“Seventy-one,” a deep masculine voice intoned.

“My missing charm,” she whispered, raising her gaze from the slightly mangled baby bootie to the man who had just dropped it into her palm.

“No, it’s my charm that’s been amiss today.”

Her heart did a little kaching of its own, skipping out an erratic rhythm at this first slow, enthralling look into that man’s eyes up close. “You? You!”

“Me. Me.”

“I looked all over for you in there.” She pointed lamely to the building across the way. “Even got in the very next elevator to try to catch up with you.”

“And I got on the very next one coming down.”

“You did?”

“Of course, what did you think? That I’d tromp on your trinket and then not see that you got it back?”

She had thought exactly that. “Um, no, I—”

“I’m surprised our paths didn’t cross in the building, though. I came right back and looked around for you, but you seemed to have disappeared without a trace. Instead of wasting too much time trying to seek you out, I went up to my office and had my secretary start an all-points search for you.”

“Y-you did?” Wow, she thought, her and her little charm had caused all that?

“I did indeed. She didn’t have any luck, either. Why was that? Did you take the stairs coming back down?”

“No.” She lifted her face and inhaled the smell of rain and exhaust from the street mixed with just a hint of masculine cologne from his expensive overcoat. “I, um, I had no idea where you were headed, so I, kind of, well, I...I pressed every button in the elevator, and when the doors opened, I stuck my head out to see if there was any sign of you.”

“I’m sure that made you very popular with the elevator crowd.”

“Well, when you look slightly unbalanced, people don’t tend to voice their complaints.” She held out her arms a bit, offering herself as evidence.

He took a long, leisurely look at her, not the least bit hesitant in showing how his gaze traveled from the tips of her waterlogged shoes to the top of her haywire hairdo. A subtle smile played over his hard lips at the parts in between. Nothing leering, just a hint of appreciation that carried over into his voice as he said, “I think you look very nicely balanced.”

She giggled. Giggled. That’s a great way to impress a suave man like this, she chided herself.

“And I admire your character, not afraid to go after what you wanted, protecting what belonged to you, Miss... Mrs... 7”

“Ms.”

“Of course, how Neanderthal of me.” He smiled but not just with his lips—with his eyes, the tilt of his head, the lines in his face. Even his posture added to his air of amusement. “Ms...?”

“Taylor. Becky—Rebecca—Taylor.” He admired her. Who’d have expected that? She tugged off her warped glasses and shoved them into her coat pocket. Legally, she needed the corrective lenses for driving and they helped tremendously when navigating the streets of Chicago on foot, but in a pinch she could get along without them. She pulled free the rubber band constraining her ponytail, shook her head, then fluffed her hair with one hand. “Becky, usually.”

“Well, Ms. Becky usually, I believe I owe you an apology for not returning this to you more promptly.”

He tapped the charm in her still-outstretched palm with his blunt fingertip.

The coins jingled.

Becky’s pulse leaped.

The simple gesture of this man dipping his finger into the hollow of her hand had an instant, almost erotic effect, with tiny, tingling waves building outward from the spot where his skin touched hers.

“I hope I didn’t inconvenience you too much by the delay,” he said.

“Oh, no. You didn’t delay me. You couldn’t delay me. I mean, I have nowhere special to go. Oh...that makes me sound homeless or...I’m not, not yet at least. I’m job hunting, so you see...I’m just unemployed...” The words rushed out all breathless with an unexpected young-girl quality that made her selfconscious, aware of the need to shut herself up. “Um, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He took his hand away and slipped it into his pocket, but before he did, Becky took the time and care to notice that he wore no wedding ring.

She focused on the objects remaining in her hand, wanting to say something, anything, to show herself as calm and casual about the whole awkward situation. This man had seen her looking like a big fool after all, and suddenly it felt very important to counteract her first impression. She plucked up the bootie, turning it this way and that. The gray morning light brought out the flaws and fine details of its design. A thought struck her. “I feel a little like Cinderella here. You know, you tracking me down with only this shoe to go on.”

“That would make me, what? Prince Charming?”

“That’s Snow White. I don’t think the prince in Cinderella ever gave his name.” She shifted her umbrella. “See? There’s another similarity. You haven’t given me your name, either.”

“Winstead. Clark Winstead.” He extended his hand.

Clark Winstead. He even had a great name. She put her own hand forward, remembered she still held the bootie in her fingers, dropped her gaze to it, then started to tuck it back into her other hand.

Clark Winstead stopped her.

“Here, if you don’t mind?” He took the trinket, apparently forgetting about the handshake entirely.

Becky felt a twinge of regret at not getting to feel her band in his. They’d made a connection, she thought, one she’d have liked to prolong if only with a more formal introduction.

"I notice it's a bit worse for the run-in with my heel." He examined the charm with one eye half-shut, then fixed those amazing eyes on her. "Why don't you let me have my jeweler fix that for you?"

This guy has his own jeweler? she thought.

"Or I could replace it altogether," he suggested.

"Oh, I wouldn't want a new one. This one has sentimental value."

"For your own baby?"

"No, I've never had any babies." She gazed up into those heart-melting brown eyes. But I'd have yours, a little voice inside her sighed. "I do hope to have one someday."

He nodded as if she'd just confirmed something to him.

"I know I don't look terribly responsible or anything right now, but I am. I've always had goals in my life—like going to college, moving to Chicago. I made the second one happen—obviously—and hope to make the first one happen when I can afford it. I think that's the kind of thing that helps make a good mother, having priorities and never slacking off on self-improvement."

She knew she sounded like she was applying for the job. She felt the heat rise from her neck to her cheeks, even singeing the rims of her ears, at her chattering on. But a girl like her only met a prince, or a Clark Winstead, once in a lifetime, and something inside her told her to give him as much information about herself as she possibly could. It couldn't hurt and something she said might just strike a chord in the guy.

"Plus I love kids and they love me. When the time comes, I think I'd be a very good mother."

"No doubt."

What had she thought? That he'd be so awed by her blathering that he'd propose right on the spot and ask her to bear his child? She folded her coat around her like a security blanket. "Um, in answer to your question, the bootie charm is for my nephew. I have one for my niece, too. I have a charm for every major event in my life."

She held up the bracelet before she could stop herself from the childish, bumpkin behavior. Like the man wanted to see her stupid bracelet!

"Delightful," he said. "May I?"

This time, he took her hand in his and Becky decided then and there she knew how the "real" Cinderella must have felt when the prince slid that glass slipper into place on her foot.

He turned her hand over and the bracelet clattered softly. "Why, it looks like you've led a very full life, Ms. Taylor."

"I guess as full as a girl can lead and still be allowed to sing in the church choir in Woodbridge, Indiana."

He laughed, probably just out of politeness, but it was a warm, genuine-sounding laugh all the same that radiated through Becky's rain-soaked being.

He raised his eyes to look at her, his chin still tucked in. "That's where you're from? Woodbridge, Indiana?"

"Born and raised," she said, nodding.

"Lucky Woodbridge."

"Thank you," she whispered.

He released her hand and reached inside his pocket. In a moment, he had withdrawn two perfect business cards the color of rich vanilla ice cream. He handed them both to her, then took a pen from inside his overcoat.

Becky recognized the type of pen from windowshopping for a gift for her brother's last birthday. That simple, stylish, fine writing instrument, as they were called in the store, easily cost more than she could earn in a month at her old job in Woodbridge. Well, she thought, had she expected less from a prince?

"Write down your name, address and phone number on one of these," he said. It wasn't a request.

He wants my number, she thought. Her fingers could hardly grip the pen he handed her.

"I'll take the charm to my jeweler to be repaired, then have him send it to you."

"Oh." She blinked. The noises of the city, which had seemed muted by the very presence of the man, came rushing back to fill her ears. Car horns blared, tires whooshed over the wet road, people called out to one another. Becky swallowed hard and managed to eke out a stiff but respectful "Thank you."

If she had a shred of pride left, she'd tell him not to trouble himself. Correction—if she had pride and enough money to get the charm repaired herself, she'd tell him...

She looked up into that face.

His gaze brushed over her chin, her lips, her hair, then settled on her eyes.

She'd tell him... "Here you go. If it takes past the end of the month, I may not be at that apartment anymore, so I jotted down my brother's address in Woodbridge."

He slid the card slowly from between her fingers and placed it in his breast pocket. "Good. And you keep my card just in case they don't do the job to your satisfaction."

She ran her fingertip over the engraved lettering. "thank you. I will."

He tipped his head and took a step backward. "Goodbye, then."

"Bye." She smiled, then stepped back herself, bumping into a burly mailman as she did. Her umbrella slid down her shin and clunked to the pavement, rolled into the gutter, then burst open just in time to get run over by a speeding taxi.

She was having one of the worst days of her life and the only prince she'd ever meet was right there to witness it.

Becky Taylor was either the sweetest, most innocent young woman he had ever run across—or she was a stark, raving lunatic.

"Miss Harriman, have this sent to my regular jeweler for repair and then have it..." He glanced down at the name and number written in delicate swirls on the back of one of his business cards.

Plus I love kids and they love me. When the time comes, I think I'd be a very good mother. Her words echoed through his mind.

He ran his thumb along the sharp edge of the card.

Flawless-as-cream skin, hair that looked, when not bunched up on her head, like the spun-gold curls straight off a Christmas angel and every bit as wholesome.

Clark did not often run into girls like that. The novelty of her spirit and innocence intrigued him, stirred something up in him. Other things about her stirred him up, as well.

Not too thin, but not too plump, either, the girl had a body that would fill a man's hands, that could fulfill his most primal fantasies. Not like those stick-figure women who inhabited his moneyed world. That type wouldn't do more than nibble on the exorbitant meals he'd buy them at all the best restaurants, but they'd damn sure eat a girl like Becky Taylor alive if given the chance.

And she'd give them indigestion for their trouble, too, he decided with a wry smile.

He chuckled to recall the fury she'd shown when she thought he'd made off with her prized ornament. Oh, sure, she looked like a pitiful but precious rag doll at first glance, but underneath it she had fire in her, self-reliance and character. And she was a virgin, too. He'd stake his fortune on that fact.

That "fact" touched something in him, awakened his male protective instinct and made him feel proprietary even though he hardly knew the girl. And any girl who did that to a man like him, someone suspicious of entanglements since childhood and distanced from them by choice in adulthood, deserved due consideration.

Yes—provided she wasn't a lunatic—Becky Taylor might just be exactly what he was looking for.

He closed his hand over the crisp card. "Just have the charm repaired, Miss Harriman, then returned to me. I think I can handle it from there."

Chapter Three

A hot shower. A cool drink. A warm bed, then out cold. That's all Becky wanted tonight. Feet aching and spirit sagging, she trudged up the first flight of stairs, with their worn rubber surface, to her tiny apartment. She gripped the wobbling handrail for support and clutched a file folder filled with copies of her résumé, job applications and the day's paper, thinking only of the night ahead. Well, not only of the night ahead, she corrected herself, rounding the first landing. One other thing she wanted, and wanted badly—to put Clark Winstead completely out of her mind once and for all.

She hadn't done that last night or the night before. In fact, not one morning or afternoon or evening or night—since she'd met the man three days ago—had gone by without something reminding her of him. Each morning when she closed the clasp on her favorite charm bracelet before going out job hunting, she thought of him. When she'd spent an afternoon on a temp job handing out samples of expensive men's cologne, she thought of the scent that had clung unobtrusively to his overcoat. In the evening, when she enjoyed the only entertainment she could afford—a romance novel checked out from the library—the hero's voice became his voice in her mind. And when she went to sleep at night...

Becky bit her lip and staggered to a stop on the second landing. Such dreams! And from a former vacation Bible school assistant teacher and onetime Sweetheart of the Future Farmers of America! She blushed at her own imagination in an area that had, until now, not been overly explored in her life. In aspects of romantic love and unbridled lust, Becky could count herself a novice, a subnovice, in anything approaching serious intimacy. Quaint and old-fashioned as it probably seemed to many, she'd always figured she would reserve learning more about "it" until after she got married.

Now, one bumbling run-in with Clark Winstead and she seemed ready to sign up for night school! What had become of her? She laughed to herself at the ridiculous idea that a man like Winstead would even recall who she was, much less want to sign on as her very own professor of passion.

She started up the stairs again with renewed vigor. This wasn't the mopey little farm girl who had arrived in Chicago months ago. She had too much at stake here to let childish fancies, or even mature fantasies, distract her from her real work of finding a job and making it on her own. She did not need a man to come along and make everything wonderful for her. She had everything it took to make her own way in life, to succeed and excel. She hardly needed rescuing, for heaven's sake. She was strong and resourceful and determined; those traits alone would see her through this current crisis in good stead.

Forget the fairy tales, she told herself, where the prince sweeps the ragamuffin girl off her feet and into a magical world of romance and riches. That kind of thing never happened in the real world. And Becky, with her temp job over and her prospects for gainful employment about as bleak as the overcast evening skies, lived dead center in the real world.

She would probably never see her would-be Prince Charming again, except in her dreams. That, she decided as she took the last step of the dreary four-story walk up to her small apartment, was the story of her life. No job. No prince. No—

"Clark!"

Clark jerked his head up to find a pair of beautiful, shock-widened eyes fixed on him. He stiffened from his jaw to his work-tightened shoulders and all points southward. All points.

That this woman had that kind of intense physical effect on him puzzled and disturbed Clark only slightly more than the profound protectiveness he had felt toward her at their very first meeting. Something about this woman penetrated his steely control and got right to the core of his being. He did not like that. Did not like it one bit.

Clearing his throat, he forced himself to relax as much as he could in this circumstance and give her a smile of indulgent benevolence. "Hello again."

"Hello." Ms. Taylor looked as if she wanted to say more, to say anything, but no sound came out.

Clark did not mind. He enjoyed watching her full lips part, purse, then open slightly. Then, seductive in the sheer instinct of the action, her tongue flicked out to brush the center of her lower lip. Clark found himself wishing he could do the same—brush his tongue slowly, instinctually, over those lips and then—

Becky blew out a long, breathy whistle and shook back her hair.

She wanted him to kiss her, he reasoned. He looked into her eyes and felt them practically pleading for it.

She blinked. “Clark. It’s really...it’s really you.”

“Yes, it is.” He stepped toward her. Really him. Really just about to fulfill the inner need he saw in her, beckoning to him. He angled his head downward just enough to put him in position and then, when her mouth opened again—

“Wh-what on earth are you doing here?” She plunked her hands on her hips and gaped at him.

The stinging disbelief of her tone slapped him back to his senses. He stepped back, unsure of what to say to her. After all, Clark had asked himself the same question—what on earth was he doing here?

He’d asked himself that question more than once today already: when he’d put a senior VP on hold to take a phone call from the jeweler, again when he’d made specific arrangements that the charm not be left with a secretary but delivered to him personally, and yet again when he’d cut short a meeting to take the time to bring the charm to Ms. Taylor himself.

He glanced around at the dimly lit hallway lined with brown-painted doors with brackish brass numbers on the frames. It wasn’t a shabby place by any means, clean but unremarkable, not at all the kind of place he’d have chosen for Becky, though. “Actually, I was just thinking the same thing myself.”

“You were?”

“Yes, I was wondering what a girl like you was doing living in a place like this.” He’d asked it to turn things back to his advantage, he thought, but even he didn’t quite believe that the question had not come from some genuine concern for her well-being. “Not that it’s not perfectly...acceptable, but—”

“But?” She folded her arms over her chest, her eyes sparking with challenge.

That spark set off its own little fire in Clark. No one challenged him—not the big man, the boss, the one who signed the paychecks. He gritted his teeth to keep from grinning in sheer delight at rising to the forgotten feeling. “But I thought I’d find you living somewhere more suited to your personality.”

“Like where?” The tendrils of her hair quivered with the quick, controlled jerk upward of her head. “The armory?”

Clark laughed. It felt good to laugh and really mean it. “Actually, I had more in mind the country, but I assume if you are going to insist on city life, you could do the least damage at an armory. That or one of those steel-and-marble skyscrapers with...no, no, far too many opportunities for elevator mishaps there.”

“I can afford this place—at least for a while longer still. It’s clean, convenient and safe. That’s why I’m here.” She tacked on a look that reminded him he had yet to explain his own presence in her building.

Clark sighed. He had no business being here, he told himself as he skimmed his thumb over the velvety box in his pocket. Damaged charm or not, he had other, far more serious responsibilities demanding his attention right now.

His mind went over the reports his legal team had handed him in the meeting he’d abandoned in favor of this errand. The operation he’d been determined to buy out, a struggling, privately owned company that would flounder within a year on its own—or flourish as a part of Clark’s empire—would not sell. That incomplete transaction gnawed at his insides, but then, so had this dangling bit of unfinished business concerning a certain young lady and a bent baby bootie.

That's why he had come here today, he knew. Once he'd tidied up this nagging loose thread that was Miss Becky Taylor, his mind would settle back on his work and turn to the more pressing issues facing him. All he had to do was hand the young woman her repaired charm, wish her well in her life and then get back on track with his own life.

Clark lifted his head. His gaze honing in on Becky Taylor as a whole package now, he looked with a more critical eye to guard against any of those impulsive, wayward reactions his body might have to her. Even in the grim lighting of the vacant hallway, she looked decidedly pulled together, youthful, healthy, radiant. Her hair, caught up in some kind of casually stylish contraption that matched her blue-and-white suit, gleamed in the yellowed light from overhead. And she was not wearing those bedraggled eyeglasses that made her look as if she needed someone to take her by the hand and help guide her through the perils of life. Still, Clark found himself wishing he could take her hand just the same.

He scowled for no one's benefit but his own. He had to get this over with so he could get his mind back onto the pending buyout with all its pitfalls and problems. He coughed and then put on his most congenial, yet formal tone. "Actually, Ms. Taylor, I am, in fact, here to see you."

"I thought so. Why else would a man like you be in a place like this? It's an okay place, of course, but it doesn't exactly have Clark Winstead written all over it." She blinked at him. Her hand flattened just above her full breasts, and her cheeks flooded with a pale blush.

Any thoughts Clark had of mishandled meetings and arrested acquisitions faded on the spot.

"I mean, that is, Mr. Winstead."

She cocked her head.

"Yes?" He tipped his head to mimic the angle of hers. "What is it, Ms. Taylor?"

"What is what?" she whispered as if hypnotized.

"What is it you want?" He lowered his voice to match hers.

"Want? Want? I don't want anything. You're the one who came here to my apartment to see me, not the other way around." She rolled her eyes and shook her head. Twice she made a quick, gasping sound, one of exasperation that he would even ask such a thing, he believed.

"But you said my name," he reminded her.

"I did? Oh, yes, I said..." She winced, overplaying it with great zeal and apparent self-deprecating humor. "I was correcting myself—for calling you by your first name. I really shouldn't have, not without your asking me to for real, that is, not just in my..." She bit her lip, smiled and then waved one hand in the air. "Anyway, it was rude and I'm sorry."

"Think nothing of it." Clark could not think of any woman, either known to him in business or in his private life, who would have reacted so openly, so honestly, so overtly. In fact, she could not have been less subtle in her flustered chagrin, Clark decided, feeling his smile grow from practiced gesture to genuine enjoyment, if she were choking on a chicken bone. And that endeared her all the more to him. He extended his right hand. "Please, do call me Clark."

"Clark," she repeated. Her gaze sank into his, shining with blatant admiration, he assumed, and hoped he wasn't too big-headed for making that assumption. Her small hand became a perfect fit inside his larger one. Her fingers curled around his and she lowered her chin just enough that her lashes created an enticing veil over her pupils as she murmured, "And you can call me—"

"Rebecca," he concluded, wanting to let her know he had not forgotten how she had first introduced herself. Clark was a detail man and he had no compunction in letting everyone involved with him know that up front. Not that Miss Rebecca Taylor was in any way now—nor was she ever likely to be—involved with him. He released her hand. "Or is it Becky?"

"Becky is fine, thank you." She tucked her hands behind her back, then folded them in front, then let them fall to her sides. "I'm sorry again about calling you by your first name like that. It was so presumptuous of me, but after our little run-in, I just sort of thought of you as...well, I just sort of thought of you as a Clark and not a—" she made a dour face "—Mr. Winstead."

“Well, I am pleased to see I did leave a...lasting impression on you.” He let his gaze linger in hers until she looked away. “And happy to report the impression my heel left on your silver charm was not quite so everlasting.”

He dipped into his pocket and pulled out the box, offering it to her the way one might tempt a high-strung pony with a sugar cube—the box resting in the center of his outstretched hand.

“Why, thank you. You really didn’t have to do this, you know. Just sending it back to me would have been enough.”

Enough for her, perhaps, but Clark needed to see this thing safely and satisfactorily through to the end. Or so he told himself. That’s why he had gone to such great lengths to return the trinket.

“Or I could have come down to your office and picked it up myself.”

“No. I don’t mind doing it, really.” Besides, the idea of this woman loose in his office with her lethal umbrella, her pointedly honest opinions and...those great big angel eyes... Clark blinked at the turn of his thoughts, then shook his head, half-expecting to hear his suddenly short-circuited brain rattling. Even after doing it, he realized he could think of worse things than having Becky in his office, much worse—like perhaps never seeing her again.

She took the box, and just as her fingers brushed his palm, he closed his hand.

She raised her questioning gaze to his but said nothing.

He pressed the pads of his fingertips to her skin, the box still between them. Once he let go, he would have no reason to see her again—unless he made a reason. The picture of Becky dressed, as he could provide for her, in extravagant jewels and designer clothes, or perhaps in just the jewels without the clothes—sprang to mind.

Why not? Why not ask her out, set her up in a nice apartment, give her charge accounts, take her to the finest restaurants, show her the world? It might be a fun diversion for both of them for a while, until it played itself out as those things always did—always. Clark placed his other hand beneath hers and narrowed his eyes, fully prepared to make the spontaneous and quite magnanimous, to his way of thinking, proposal.

Proposition, he corrected mentally. He was not making a proposal; he was making a proposition. Plain and simple. The distinction might be subtle, but it was very real, especially with someone like Becky.

He studied the open expectation on her face, the way she looked up at him and in so doing looked up to him. He drew in the smell of the comfortable old building and the apple aroma of the young woman’s shampoo, which seemed to so suit her. This was not the kind of girl a man propositioned—not unless he wanted a sharp, well-deserved slap in the face. He relinquished her hand.

“Um, thanks. Thank you.” She curled the box close to her chest and smiled up at him without even inspecting the charm.

She trusted him. It showed in her action and in her eyes and it clawed at Clark’s conscience.

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