



Silhouette[®]

1829
August

SILHOUETTE
Romance[®]

The
Hometown Hero
Returns

JULIANNA MORRIS

Julianna Morris

The Hometown Hero Returns

Аннотация

He could still put her heart in a tailspin...When Luke McCade returns to Divine after a long absence, Nicki Johansson realizes that she may have lost the bad clothes and haircut, but it's hard to shake an old crush. Especially when she's never forgotten the first kiss he gave her. Nicki doesn't want to fall for the former high school football star, but how can she not when he's devoted to his ailing grandfather, is successful, thoughtful and still annoyingly sexy! Once they'd seemed to move in different leagues. But now.... Well, a newly confident Nicki vows to use her sweet kisses to show Luke there's no place like home!

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He was the last person Nicki wanted to see.

If she didn't owe so much to his grandfather, she wouldn't be within a mile of Luke McCade ever again. But she did like and admire his grandfather. She'd do almost anything for Professor McCade. Even face Luke and all the memories he represented.

And then his broad shoulders filled the front door.

Despite her resolve, her pulse hammered in her throat.

If anything, he was more gorgeous than ever; small crinkles at the corners of his eyes and a few strands of silver in his black hair made him look solid and dependable. He'd come back to help his grandfather, showing that he wasn't as selfish as she'd always thought.

A flutter of alarm skirted her mind. No. She couldn't afford to think anything positive about him. Luke had put her in a tailspin when they were younger; she wouldn't let that happen this time.

Dear Reader,

This month seems to be all about change. Just as our heroines are about to have some fabulous makeovers, Silhouette Romance will be undergoing some changes over the next months that we believe will make this classic line even more relevant to your challenging lives. Of course, you'll still find some of your favorite SR authors and favorite themes, but look for some new names, more international settings and even more emotional reads.

Over the next few months the company is also focusing attention on the new direction and package for Mills & Boon Romance. We believe that the blend of authors and stories

coming in that line will thrill readers and satisfy every emotion.

Just like our heroines, my responsibilities will be changing, as I will be working on Mills & Boon NEXT. Please know how much I have enjoyed sharing these heartwarming, aspirational reads with you.

With all best wishes,

Ann Leslie Tuttle

Associate Senior Editor

The Hometown Hero Returns

Julianna Morris



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Dr. Dad #1278

The Marriage Stampede #1375

*Callie, Get Your Groom #1436

*Hannah Gets a Husband #1448

*Jodie's Mail-Order Man #1460

Meeting Megan Again #1502

Tick Tock Goes the Baby Clock #1531

Last Chance for Baby! #1565

†A Date with a Billionaire #1590

†The Right Twin for Him #1676

†The Bachelor Boss #1703

†Just Between Friends #1731

†Meet Me under the Mistletoe #1796

The Hometown Hero Returns #1829

JULIANNA MORRIS

has an offbeat sense of humor, which frequently gets her into trouble. She is often accused of being curious about everything. Her interests range from oceanography and photography to traveling, antiquing, walking on the beach and reading science fiction.

Julianna loves cats of all shapes and sizes. Her family's most recent feline companion is named Merlin, and like his namesake, Merlin is an alchemist—she says he can transform the house into a disaster area in nothing flat. And since he shares the premises with a writer, it's interesting to note that he's particularly fond of knocking books on the floor.

Julianna happily reports meeting Mr. Right. Together they are working on a dream of building a shoreline home in the Great Lakes area.

Dear Reader,

I come from a large family and have watched grandparents, great-aunts and other loved ones go through difficult times. It isn't easy to see someone you love changing due to age or illness, but there can be many reasons for those changes. I believe it's important to keep asking questions, and one of those questions should be about depression.

Depression is an illness that can be treated. Through personal experience I've seen that it can resemble other conditions, or it

may not be diagnosed at all—remember that “Uncle Joe” may act quite differently at the doctor’s office than he does at home. I’ve seen it, and I’ve seen how a doctor can have a hard time seeing the changes a family has observed. I’ve also seen how asking questions, talking things out and getting treatment can make a world of difference.

While the recovery of the hero’s grandfather in my story is probably faster than would normally occur, I hope that reading this novel and hearing a little about my own experiences will help someone out there. You are not alone.

As a small side note, the artist who painted my hero’s great-grandmother is fictional. However, the other artists mentioned in the story are real. Artists such as Alfred Sisley and Mary Cassatt were gifted Impressionists. More about their work can be learned at the library or on the Internet.

My best wishes go with you and yours.

Julianna Morris

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Chapter One

“Here goes nothing,” Nicki Johansson muttered.

She pulled a rectangular package from her car and stared at the house before her. He was inside that house. He was the last person she wanted to see. If she hadn’t owed so much to his grandfather, she wouldn’t have come within a mile of him ever again.

Still, Luke McCade was gorgeous.

But impossible—a reminder of awkward childhood days when a plain teenaged whiz kid in secondhand clothing had dreamed of having the captain of the football team fall in love with her.

Hah, Nicki snorted to herself. They’d been thrown together back then because Luke was in the hospital and needed a tutor. She’d convinced herself that his bored flirting might actually mean something, even though she hadn’t even liked him...at least, not that much. But she did like and admire his grandfather. She’d do almost anything for Professor McCade. She’d even face Luke and all the memories he represented.

She marched up the walkway with the thought that Luke might have put her in a tailspin when they were younger, but not anymore. Despite her resolve, her pulse hammered in her throat as the door swung open and his broad shoulders filled the space.

“Yes?” he said without a spark of recognition in his brown

eyes.

Nicki shifted her feet, torn between an unsettling attraction to Luke's athletic grace and fallen-angel looks, and an obligation to his grandfather. Darn him. If there were any justice in the world he would have developed a paunch and a receding hairline.

"Whatever it is, we're not buying anything." He began to close the door and Nicki stuck out her hand.

"No, wait, I'm not a salesman. That is, a saleswoman, or should it be a... a s-salesperson?" she stuttered as his brow gathered into a frown. Swell, she sounded like an idiot. "I'm here about the yard sale a few months ago."

"Oh." Luke sighed. "Look, we appreciate people bringing things back that Grandfather shouldn't have sold, but I'm sure it's all right if you keep whatever it is. He's confused and not himself, but the valuable stuff is still here."

"No, it isn't."

His eyebrows shot high. "Excuse me?"

Nicki cleared her throat. If anything, he was more gorgeous than ever; small crinkles at the corners of his eyes and a few strands of silver in his black hair made him look solid and dependable.

No.

A flutter of alarm skirted her mind.

She couldn't afford to think anything positive about him. Luke McCade had always made her want things she didn't have. Somebody to love and want her, as much as she loved and wanted

him. To belong. Luke served as a reminder that it might never happen. She was alone in the world, while he belonged to a large, loving family. Now he'd come back from Chicago to help his grandfather, showing that he wasn't as selfish as she'd always thought.

“May I come in?”

Nicki stiffened when Luke hesitated, then took a calming breath. She had a bad habit of overreacting when her confidence was shaken; friends said her pride could make her as bristly as a pincushion. It was a holdover from always being the odd kid out when she was a child.

“I'm not a thief or con artist or anything, if that's what you're worried about,” she said finally, trying to sound reasonable.

“I didn't think you were. It's just...” Luke shrugged and stepped back, opening the door wider.

Nicki had never seen the interior of the McCade house, and she looked about curiously. Inside, the foyer was big and airy with rooms opening off it, and through one of the archways Nicki saw her old professor dozing in a chair. He was a lovely man who'd devoted himself to art and teaching...quite the opposite of his eldest grandson, who had gained a reputation as a hard-nosed businessman interested solely in profit margins. She knew this because the local newspaper often ran articles about him, and his name was regularly in the Chicago paper she read.

“This way,” Luke said, motioning in the opposite direction.

“How is Mr. McCade doing?” she asked as she was led to the

kitchen.

“Fine,” he said, giving her a careful look. “Do you know my grandfather?”

She put the package on the table. “We’re acquainted.” It was the truth, but only part of it. She’d been a shy student in the back of Professor McCade’s classes, trying to avoid notice. But the lessons he’d taught about the beauty of art and the human spirit would stay with her forever. “I...um, took all of his courses at the college before he retired. Plus, it’s a small town,” she added.

“Yes, it is,” Luke said slowly.

Drat.

She didn’t want to get him thinking. If he remembered her, he’d remember his nickname for her...Little Miss Four-Point-O. She’d just hated that name, which had naturally pleased Mr. Perfect Captain of the high school football team to no end. Of course, that probably was the point of calling her names in the first place.

“Anyway, I’m here about the picture frame I bought.” She ripped the brown paper from the face of the package and held it up for him to look at.

“It’s nice, I suppose,” he murmured, barely giving the frame and painting a glance.

Nicki rolled her eyes. Luke was certainly obtuse about the fine points. Maybe it had something to do with him being a land developer. No doubt when someone was tearing down buildings and putting up strip malls, subtlety didn’t have much value. On

the other hand, maybe it was because he was an ex-jock. Her ex-husband had been a sports guy like Luke, and he'd possessed the sensitivity of a steamroller.

Along with a few other undesirable qualities.

Sighing, she looked Luke square in the eye.

"It isn't about the frame. I mean, that's why I bought it, but that's not..." Her voice trailed off as she tried to collect her thoughts. "The thing is, when I examined the painting I discovered it was quite valuable. Take a look at the signature."

Leaning forward, he pulled a bit of paper away from the lower right-hand corner of the canvas. "A. Metlock. So?"

"So, Arthur Metlock was one of the finest American impressionists of his day."

Luke swallowed a stab of impatience. His uninvited guest had big blue eyes in a heart-shaped face, and a scatterbrained manner that was oddly appealing. If she'd shown up at his office in Chicago selling raffle tickets he would have bought a dozen. But right now he was getting ready to go back to Chicago and didn't have time to think about anything except his grandfather's worsening health. The doctor had diagnosed senility and prescribed medication to slow the progress of the condition, but nothing was helping.

"Look, Miss...?"

"J-Johansson."

"Miss Johansson. So it's worth a few dollars more than you paid for it. We don't mind. Granddad probably won't be staying

in the house, which means we'll be getting rid of most everything, anyway, before we sell the place."

"I can't keep this." She sounded genuinely shocked.

Lord. Luke had forgotten how stubborn people from Divine, Illinois, could be. He was accustomed to a cutthroat business world where getting a steal of a deal was the ultimate achievement. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate the woman's honesty—too few women were honest about anything—but he didn't have the time or energy to deal with something new.

"Truly, you don't have to worry about it," he said, knowing irritation had crept into his tone.

"Of course I'm worried." Her obstinate expression seemed familiar for some reason. "It's worth at least twenty thousand dollars."

Luke blinked. She had to be mistaken. His grandfather had been a shrewd man in his day, writing popular art history books, collecting art and teaching at the local private college. No matter how mentally shaky he might be now, he wouldn't have sold a valuable painting at a yard sale.

But then...Luke rubbed his temples. Granddad had gone downhill after Grams's death three years ago. It was one of the worst parts of their loss. Grams had gone quickly, her smile still bright and true despite the swift course of her illness. But Granddad seemed to lose a piece of himself with each day that passed, without even trying to get better. In fact, he seemed determined not to get better. Love had done that, taken the spirit

out of him.

Luke didn't have any use for love. It had betrayed him more than once, and his grandfather's pain was just another reason not to trust an emotion that was elusive at best, destructive at worst.

"How do you know it's worth that much?" he asked. "Are you some sort of art genius or something?"

Out of the blue, the woman turned pink. The color was kind of pretty next to her tousled gold curls and blue eyes, and Luke watched with interest. It had been a long while since he'd seen a woman blush—probably not since he was a kid and he'd embarrassed the hell out of Little Miss Four-Point-O, the smartest kid in school....

His eyes widened.

Johansson? Why hadn't he noticed before?

"As I live and breathe," he drawled. "If it isn't Nicole Johansson."

"And if it isn't Stud McCade," Nicki tossed back, as defiant as ever.

Luke winced at the nickname he'd once strutted over. In the old days he'd been smugly confident that he was irresistible to women and about his future as a pro football player—until his senior year, when basketball with his buddies had turned into twelve weeks of traction. That was when he'd gotten up close and personal with Little Miss Four-Point-O. She'd been hired to tutor him.

The memory was bleak enough without recalling what it

meant to be Divine's football hero, injured just as the team was on its way to the state finals for the first time. Maybe things would have been different if he'd gotten hurt during a football game, but the entire town had hated him for blowing things when it mattered most. All except Nicki, who hadn't cared about football one way or the other. She'd hated him for other reasons...most of the time.

"You've changed," he said.

"You haven't."

It didn't sound like a compliment, and Luke couldn't blame her. He hadn't behaved well back then, resenting being tutored by a kid nearly three years younger than him. He tormented her because of it...when he wasn't trying to tease her into a kiss. She'd been cute in a studious sort of way, and he'd been bored. And angry, at Divine and the rest of the world. Very angry. He'd had a chip on his shoulder the size of Canada.

Because it was easier thinking about something else, he looked at the painting. "We'll get this appraised. If it's that valuable you should receive a reward. By the way, how much did you pay my grandfather for it? I need to refund your money." He reached and pulled out his wallet.

"There's no need."

"I'm serious. I can't take something for nothing."

"What you really mean is that you can't let yourself be beholden to someone here in Divine. Right?" Nicki asked tartly.

"Still analyzing me, are you?"

“Jocks aren’t hard to analyze, they only have one thing on their mind.”

“Maybe, but I sure didn’t get that one thing from you, did I? ‘Cause good girls don’t put out,” he said mockingly.

“You only wanted me because I was the only girl around,” she snapped. “If there’d been a cheerleader in the room I would have been invisible. And just how far do you think we could have gone with you in traction?”

“Hey, I was willing to be creative.”

“Stop squabbling, children,” said an amused voice, and Luke glared at his sister, who was standing in the kitchen doorway. There were times she could imitate their mother annoyingly well.

“What do you want, Sherrie?”

She made a face. “I just got off the phone from California. My partner at the veterinary clinic broke her leg last night, so there’s no one to cover the practice.”

Luke uttered a curse and closed his eyes to close out Sherrie’s worried expression and Nicki’s reddened cheeks. Over the past year the family had spent an increasing amount of time in Divine, trying to help his grandfather stay in his own home. He’d been back in Divine himself for the last three weeks, and Sherrie had just arrived to take a turn.

“Don’t worry, I’ll find someone to cover the clinic,” Sherrie said quickly.

“No. You’ve spent more time here than anyone, and it isn’t fair to ask you to do more than the rest of us. I’ll arrange to stay

longer. You can fly back today.”

Embarrassment warmed Nicki’s cheeks as she gazed between the siblings. They were dealing with a serious problem, and she’d let an old resentment get the better of her. Resentment based on insecurity.

Involuntarily, she glanced down. She’d put on a loose cotton dress, suitable to the unseasonable late May heat. It wasn’t stylish, but at least it wasn’t as bad as her clothes used to be. Perhaps she ought to do something about the way she dressed. Yet as soon as the thought formed, she pushed it away. It felt too much like hoping to catch Luke’s attention, though they weren’t likely to meet again. Besides, she wasn’t the kind of woman that a man like Luke wanted. His kind of woman was beautiful and sophisticated and sexually confident, while she was anything but those things.

“I’m sorry, Nicki,” Sherrie said. “I shouldn’t have interrupted, but it was just like hearing you guys fight in the old days.”

“That’s all right.” Nicki smiled. She’d enjoyed visiting with Sherrie when they were kids, though Nicki’s father hadn’t wanted her to be friends with anyone, saying it would distract her from schoolwork. But Sherrie had been nice, when her brother wasn’t, and they’d often gone down to the hospital cafeteria to talk. “I’m sorry about your grandfather. I admire him so much. Is there anything I can do to help?”

It was an offer she meant with all her heart. John McCade had inspired her to pursue a career different from what her authoritarian father wanted. The professor could never know how

much his warmth and small kindnesses had meant to a lonely girl who'd never felt as if she belonged.

“Well, we—”

“No,” Luke interjected quickly. “We don’t need any help.”

Both women ignored him.

“Anything you could do would be wonderful,” Sherrie said. “It’s been tough trying to keep things together here. What brings you over today?”

“I’m returning a painting Professor McCade accidentally sold to me at a yard sale,” Nicki explained. “I teach art history at the college, but I also do appraisal work for several museums. So, when I discovered it was such a fine piece, I couldn’t possibly keep it.” She shot a look at Luke, daring him to say something sarcastic.

“This is Great-grandmother Helena,” Sherrie said, examining the portrait. She gave her brother a worried look. “We’ll have to have everything in the house inventoried. We have no idea how valuable Granddad’s collection might be. At the very least it should be insured until we decide what to do.”

Luke nodded. “I’ll look into it.”

Sherrie brightened. “Maybe Nicki could inventory the collection for us. She’d be perfect for the job.”

“Uh...no, Sherrie. That is, we couldn’t possibly impose.”

Nicki lifted her chin. “I did offer to help,” she said stiffly, at the same time wishing desperately that it was Sherrie who was staying in Divine, instead of Luke.

“Why?” he asked with characteristic bluntness. “You don’t owe us anything.”

“I don’t owe you anything, that’s for sure,” Nicki snapped. “But Professor McCade is different. He’s...well...I became interested in art when he started coming to the high school as a guest lecturer. Of course, in the beginning I enjoyed it because that kind of thing drove my father crazy. That is, I started acting interested because it drove him nuts. He wanted me to be a scientist or something else he considered really impressive.”

Luke stared at her.

“Um, that isn’t my point,” Nicki muttered. Her brain had short-circuited. Something about Luke’s dark hair and eyes and long, powerful body had a chemical effect on her. Back in school she used to feel like a shrimp next to him—a yellow-topped pixie in bad clothes and an even worse haircut. Her entire childhood had been one bad-hair day.

“What is the point?” he asked impatiently.

“Professor McCade always seemed so happy and I thought it was because he was so passionate about art. Of course, now I know it was mostly because he loved his wife so much and they had such a great marr—”

“Nicki. Please get to the point.” He crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a stern look.

“Your grandfather inspired me,” she said. “I told my father I was taking an evening math course at the college under a program for advanced students, but I was really taking one of Professor

McCade's art history classes. I know I shouldn't have lied....” Her voice trailed and she blushed again.

Luke watched, still fascinated by the way color spread across Nicki's cheeks. He couldn't imagine the women he knew in Chicago getting embarrassed by anything, much less the memory of a harmless white lie they'd told in high school. For that matter, he couldn't imagine any grown woman blushing. Maybe it was a trick of Nicki's fair Scandinavian skin.

“Well, anyway,” she said, the pink of her blush deepening, “it was because of Professor McCade that I went backpacking through Europe and saw such wonderful paintings and architecture in Italy and other places. He probably doesn't know it, but he changed my life.”

Luke sighed, understanding a little better. Someone like Nicki would never keep something valuable she hadn't paid full price for, not when it belonged to someone she admired so much.

His world didn't allow for Nicki's brand of idealism. And he could never have returned to Divine to live, the way she'd done. After graduation all he'd wanted was to prove to the town he wasn't a loser...that he wasn't like those guys who became big and important in high school, then turned into bullies on the local police force as they tried to relive “the old days.”

He even felt like a bully now for taunting Nicki over the past. It was hell coming home, especially with old feelings sitting around like land mines waiting to explode. You thought you were a responsible adult and then bam, you reverted to acting like a two-

year-old.

Obviously, having her around wasn't a good idea. He'd been trying to manage his business long distance, while at the same time caring for his grandfather, and didn't have time for distractions. Especially distractions like Nicki. She might be annoying, but she was also cute, smart and sexy.

Sexy?

He frowned.

That was odd.

How he could think Nicki was sexy when she was wearing a shapeless dress and had her obstinate nose up in the air was beyond him. But there was something different about her—a freshness that was undeniably appealing. The women in his circles seemed perpetually bored with life.

"I really don't think it would work out," he said.

"Of course it would work." Sherrie sounded exasperated. "If Nicki is willing to tackle the job, then we'd have someone who we know is honest and competent." Then she gave Nicki a worried look. "Except you'd have to go into the attic. Granddad put a lot of stuff up there after Grams died, and I don't know how many spiders and mice might be lurking in the shadows."

Nicki restrained a shudder. Mice didn't bother her, but she could imagine what pragmatic Luke would say if he knew how much she disliked anything with more than four legs.

"N-no problem," Nicki said quietly and less firmly than she would have liked.

Luke shook his head. “No, Sherrie.”

“Yes.”

Brother and sister glared at each other and a twinge of envy went through Nicki. They might disagree, but they were plainly fond of each other.

“Besides, Nicki could talk to Granddad about art,” Sherrie argued. “It might help him. We’ve tried everything else, why not this?”

Uncertainty flickered across Luke’s face. It was the first time Nicki had ever seen super-confident Luke McCade look unsure of himself. His unshakable confidence was one of the most irritating things about him. Even lying in a hospital bed with one leg suspended lamely in the air he’d managed to be cocky.

And heart-stoppingly handsome.

It was Luke who’d made her really aware of the opposite sex—not that she’d known what to do about it. She’d stayed ignorant until she’d met Gregory “Butch” Saunders in graduate school. It was too bad that for the second time in her life she’d fallen in love with the wrong man. Only that time she married the wrong man—someone who expected her to just look the other way when he cheated. She sometimes wondered if Butch had picked a not-so-gorgeous wife in her because he thought she’d be so grateful for a husband that she wouldn’t object to his indiscretions.

“We don’t want to impose,” Luke said finally.

Nicki’s eyes narrowed.

She didn’t want to be around Luke any longer than necessary

—and part of her hoped he'd talk Sherrie out of the appraisal—but you helped a neighbor because you cared, and because it was the right thing to do.

Someone like Luke wouldn't understand that.

He'd always wanted to make it big. First he'd planned to be a famous football player, then, after his accident, it was all about making a million dollars by the time he was thirty—something he'd accomplished numerous times over according to the newspaper and Divine's inescapable grapevine.

“It's no imposition. I'd love to help,” she repeated, trying to sound sincere. She did want to help, she'd just prefer helping when Luke was out of town. “I wouldn't have offered if I hadn't meant it.” She almost said something about men with cash registers for souls not understanding old-fashioned neighborliness, then decided it would be too rude.

Really, for his grandfather's sake somebody ought to save Luke from himself. Not her, of course, but somebody.

“That's terrific,” Sherrie said. “You're hired.”

Nicki shook her head. “Not hired. I'm not teaching this summer, so I have plenty of free time. And it's a privilege to do something for Professor McCade. I'll come back in the morning, if that sounds all right.”

“No.” The word burst from Luke and they both looked at him. “That is, go ahead and start tomorrow, but we'll pay you.”

Nicki gave Luke a smile she hoped would drive him crazy. “No thanks. I've already been on the McCade payroll once, and

I don't care for the working conditions.”

He glowered at the reminder of their adolescent encounters. Or maybe it was just his stubborn pride. She didn't know why Luke had resented her so much, or why he'd alternated his resentment with killer smiles, blinding charm and invitations to “warm up” his hospital bed. She did know that every time she'd refused, or kissed him and drawn back again, he'd gotten more outrageous...and his sarcasm had gained a sharper edge.

But they weren't teenagers any longer, and she wasn't the same uncertain girl who'd found herself in a situation she couldn't handle. She was twenty-nine years old. She'd gotten a doctorate by the time she was twenty-one. She had been married and divorced from the worst philanderer on the planet. She knew Luke could only turn her world upside down again if she let him.

And she had no intention of letting him do any such thing.

Chapter Two

“Drat,” Nicki muttered as she rang the McCade doorbell.

She’d told him she would be here at nine this morning and it was nearly a quarter past. As a rule, she was never late. But her neighbor had come down sick and needed some groceries, so she’d run to the store first.

“You’re late,” Luke growled as he opened the front door.

Normally she’d apologize, but this was Luke, and it wasn’t a good idea to let him get the best of her. “Then I guess you’ll have to dock my pay.”

He had the grace to look uncomfortable at the reminder she was donating her time out of respect and appreciation for his grandfather.

“May I come in?” Nicki asked. “Or should I use the back door with the rest of the help?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Luke growled.

A smile tugged at her mouth as she stepped inside, this time better able to appreciate her surroundings.

A wide, graceful staircase swept down from the second floor to hardwood floors that contrasted nicely with scattered Oriental rugs. Mahogany framed the doors and archways, while delicate eggshell-white walls lightened the overall effect.

And once again, through an archway, Nicki saw Professor McCade sitting in the rear living room. This time he was awake,

though he seemed to be staring at nothing at all.

Instinctively Nicki took a single step toward him, then stopped and sighed. She'd never seen anyone look so sad. What would it be like to love someone so much that when you lost them your entire life turned gray and empty? It was scary; yet at the same time it was the kind of love she wanted—the kind of unconditional love she'd always heard about but never found, not even from her own father.

“I guess you'll want to start in the attic,” Luke said. “There's a lot of stuff up there.”

“Er...I thought I'd do a general walk-through to begin with,” Nicki murmured, still distracted by the elderly man's distant eyes. Was he remembering the good days, when his wife would bring cut flowers into the house and he'd rush home, just to be with her? Nicki had never spoken about personal matters with John McCade, but as the author of several books, he'd written eloquently of his wife and her passion for gardening.

“Come along, then.” Luke proceeded to give her a ruthlessly efficient tour of the large house, pointing out various places where paintings had once hung. “We think they're in the attic,” he explained.

“Like the portrait of your great-grandmother?”

Luke glared. Trust Nicki to bring up that damned portrait. He'd done some Internet research on Arthur Metlock the previous evening, and the information had shocked him. If it were genuine, the painting she'd returned was indeed worth a

huge chunk of money.

He didn't know anything about art, though Granddad had tried to interest him in the subject. And Luke had certainly never realized anything in the collection was worth more than a few dollars. John McCade had always spoken of his art in terms of its beauty rather than its monetary value. If he'd attached a dollar sign to the lessons, it would have been more interesting.

"I'm sure that was just an accident," Luke said, wincing at his stuffy tone. "My mother talked about getting rid of things in the house that the family wouldn't care about keeping. She probably started collecting things together and stuck the painting in with the rest of the stuff Granddad put up there, thinking it wasn't worth anything."

"Hmm. Your parents retired and moved to Florida a few years ago, didn't they?"

Luke grimaced because it was such a small-town thing for everyone to know everyone else's business. Privacy was not a prized commodity in Divine. He preferred the anonymity of city life. "Yes, but they've been coming back every couple of months to help Granddad out. Do you need anything to get started with the inventory?"

Nicki didn't say anything right away, she just looked around the front living room where he had ended the tour, a thoughtful expression on her face, one that seemed to be less about curiosity than about gathering her thoughts.

She'd always been an odd mix of nervous energy and

intelligence. It was easy to forget that a formidable brain hid behind her habit of running off at the mouth, but even when he was a brash kid, Luke had known that Nicki Johansson was smart, so why hadn't she gotten out of Divine for good? After the way the townspeople had acted when he hurt himself, he hadn't been able to leave fast enough.

"I did leave for a while, then I came back," she said without looking at him.

Luke winced, suddenly realizing he'd voiced the question aloud. "I...uh, would have thought you'd go crazy here. Divine isn't the intellectual capitol of the state."

She shrugged. "The college is excellent—highly academic—and I often travel with my consulting work. Just last year a museum in New York sent me to London as part of a team to authenticate a newfound Rembrandt."

"But you live here. The college is closest to Divine, but even the students live over in Beardington. This town is dying and everyone knows it. I'll bet there hasn't been a new business here in twenty-five years."

She glanced at him and there seemed to be a hint of pity in her blue eyes. "Of course I live here, it's home," she said simply. Home.

He shook his head. It didn't make sense to him, but it wasn't his concern if she wanted to bury herself in a backwater town. Thank God Divine was only a few short hours from Chicago by car, or he would have had trouble managing his frequent trips

into rural Illinois.

Regret stabbed at Luke with the thought, and he looked at his grandfather, sitting vacantly by the cold fireplace. John McCade did little during the day except sleep or turn his chair periodically, as if turning from a painful memory taking hold of his mind—senility, accelerated by grief.

Luke sighed. They'd hoped the medicine would help, but it hadn't. And if Granddad could no longer function, he couldn't stay alone. Grams would have hated seeing him like this. She'd been so full of life, tending her garden and her family with equal zest and pleasure.

A hand touched Luke's arm and he noticed Nicki watching him gravely. "I'm really sorry about Professor McCade," she whispered.

"It's just one of those things." He shrugged with false indifference. "You can't let it get to you."

Instead of seeming shocked, Nicki looked sadder than before. "You don't have to pretend," she said, letting her hand drop.

"Who says I'm pretending?"

"I do. Even an idiot could tell how much you care about Professor McCade, and I'm not an idiot."

Luke pressed his mouth shut. Nicki was far from being an idiot, but since it was easier thinking about anything but his grandfather, he narrowed his gaze and tried to decide if the years had added any inches to her bustline. She wore a pair of loose slacks and an oversized shirt that wasn't tucked into the

waistband, so her figure was left to the imagination. Typical Nicki.

He remembered the day she'd edged into his hospital room, clutching a stack of books to her chest, wearing clothes so baggy they were practically falling off. She'd kept her gaze fixed to the worn linoleum floor and mumbled that she'd been sent to tutor him on his missed schoolwork.

Tutor him?

His temper, already on edge because his girlfriend and the other cheerleaders hadn't bothered to visit, flared hot and furious. The day he needed tutoring from a flat-chested, stringy little girl would be the day he froze in hell. He'd followed up his reaction with language from the boys' locker room to shock her into running away. But, instead of backing down, she'd sat in a chair and begun reading aloud.

After a while he'd run out of things to say and started listening. Boredom was a tough enemy and he'd had more than enough to last a lifetime. And as it turned out, Nicki hadn't been as flat-chested as he'd thought, he eventually discovered.

"Do you have any preferences about where I start?" Nicki asked, as if nothing had been said about his grandfather. Yet traces of compassion remained in her eyes and he had a bizarre urge to spill his worries to her.

Luke's mental images of the past faded with her words.

Aside from Nicki's clothes and the lingering remnants of her stiff-necked pride, she seemed nothing like the girl she'd once

been. He might have trusted her in the past, but nowadays he didn't trust any women except his mother and sister.

He shook his head. "No. Start wherever you want."

"Thanks. I'm sure you have things to do," Nicki said. "And I don't need company. It will just keep me from concentrating. I'll call if I need you."

She'd dismissed him so coolly he felt he might have imagined the quick, warm sympathy he'd seen in her face. Of course, he'd bet anything that she regretted letting down her guard...just as much as he did.

A certain defensiveness was probably the only thing they'd ever had in common, except that he was obviously still better at keeping things to himself than Nicki had ever been.

Nicki walked into the spacious foyer, trying to regain her composure. She didn't often get a chance to explore such a lovely old house, but it wasn't John McCade's house raising her temperature, it was John McCade's grandson.

Darn him.

She didn't flatter herself that Luke's leisurely appraisal of her body indicated an attraction. It was second nature for jocks and ex-jocks to look at a woman as if she were a piece of meat. The only thing that Nicki did flatter herself about was not giving into the embarrassment. She knew she barely filled out a B-cup bra—something her ex-husband had regularly pointed out—but she had a good brain and wouldn't apologize for not being a sexpot.

Yet her edgy response to Luke was deeper and earthier

than anything she'd felt before, making her aware of her body in a whole new way. Even after yesterday's less-than-friendly encounter, the slide of sheets against her legs had made her think of him. Then she'd found herself thinking about him when she put on her typical practical clothing that morning, followed by the thought that wearing something more flattering wouldn't be such a terrible thing. After all, it wasn't as if she were trying to attract Luke, just trying to look a little nicer.

Jeez, she had better get herself in hand, or she'd be in big trouble.

With a last glance into the living room and John McCade's sad face, she started up the sweeping staircase. The one place Luke hadn't shown her was the interior of the attic. He'd simply pointed to a door on the second floor, in the back near the kitchen staircase. It was the logical place to start.

Though it was still cool in the rest of the house, heat had built up in the attic, and Nicki fanned herself as she stared in awe at the gaping space.

"Holy moly," she breathed.

It was huge.

And filled with everything imaginable, from an old pedal sewing machine, to paintings, to an accumulation of dust and spiderwebs that made her acutely nervous. She really didn't like spiders.

"Phobias are the sign of a disorganized mind," she reminded herself as she lifted a painting from where it leaned against a

broken coatrack. She smiled as she recognized one of her favorite artists, and before long she was exploring the farthest corners of the crowded attic.

Antique furniture comingled with art and an old gramophone that actually still worked. In a trunk she found an Edwardian-era dress and wondered how she would look in such a lovely gown. Ridiculous, probably. Yet she couldn't resist holding it up and swishing the ivory skirt so it swirled around her ankles.

What would it be like to feel pretty and sexy? To wear something that was deliberately provocative? Something silky and outrageous?

Nicki frowned and rustled the skirt again. She'd always worn practical, oversized clothing, clothing that lacked style of any kind. It might have been different had her mother lived, but her father had never paid attention to anything but her schoolwork. Later, her then-husband, illogically jealous, hadn't wanted her to wear anything revealing.

She frowned, thinking about Butch.

Maybe he had loved her in the only way a possessive, insecure jock could love anyone. He'd certainly begged her not to divorce him, swearing he would change if she'd just give him another chance. Problem was, she had already given him too many chances, and she'd realized that her ego would eventually get so beaten down by his insults and cheating that someday she wouldn't be able to leave.

The sad thing was they ought to have been good together—

they'd laughed at the same things, loved watching old movies, had both wanted a honeymoon at Walt Disney World. People who could laugh and play together had a head start in making a marriage work, didn't they? But things changed just before they got married. His older brother died and Butch tried to fill Danny's oversized shoes in a family that never approved of him and his dropping out of college after only one semester.

"Forget it," she murmured. Part of her was sad that her marriage had ended, and part of her was desperately relieved. With a sigh, she tucked the gown away again and continued looking through the crowded attic.

Every now and then she startled a mouse, which would squeak and run in terror into the shadows. But it was Nicki who yelped when she reached for a dusty crystal vase and a fat, hairy spider tumbled onto the back of her hand.

The spider hit the opposite wall, and with more speed than grace, she hopped over a steamer trunk and raced down the stairs, slamming the door behind her. In her head she knew most spiders were harmless, but there was something about a creature with a surfeit of legs that gave her the willies.

"Is something wrong?" Luke came out from the study.

"Uh...no. I'm just...you know, taking a break. It's a little warm up there."

He gave her an irritated look and waved the sheaf of papers in his hand. "I can't concentrate on my work if you're slamming doors all day! I've got business that needs my attention."

She wanted to smack him. The reaction distracted her spider-jangled nerves. “I’m soooo sorry, Mr. McCade. I won’t let it happen again.”

Luke opened his mouth, then shut it. It wasn’t Nicki’s fault he couldn’t concentrate, it was worry over Granddad and making decisions for him that got him so tense. Nobody in the family wanted to make a decision, they just wanted everything to be miraculously restored to how it used to be. But wishing wouldn’t work.

He kept running it over and over in his head. The family had practically forced Granddad to see the doctor because of his vague and forgetful behavior, and Dr. Kroeger had finally diagnosed senility. But the medication wasn’t having any effect, and neither had the mental exercises they’d tried—it was hard to keep therapy going when the patient wouldn’t cooperate. Too bad he couldn’t fix granddad’s problem the way he’d handle a contractor who didn’t do his job.

Luke again wished he could talk it over with Nicki. She had a good head on her shoulders, and since she wasn’t family she might not let emotion cloud her judgment. But it wasn’t possible; some things you didn’t discuss with virtual strangers, especially when that stranger was so sentimental about the man in question.

He cleared his throat. “I shouldn’t...that is, I didn’t mean to bark at you like that. I’ve been working on a land deal that isn’t going well. Did you find anything valuable?”

“Right now I’m just getting an idea of what’s there and how to

organize myself.” She seemed pale and was scrubbing the back of her hand on her thigh.

Luke frowned, remembering the small cry he’d heard from the floor above. “Are you sure nothing is wrong?”

“What could be wrong? It’s warm, that’s all.”

“I don’t want you passing out from the heat,” he said, his brow still creased. “I’ll bring a bunch of stuff down to one of the spare rooms. You can work in there. When you’re done with the first batch, we’ll move it to another room and I’ll bring more down. This house is huge, so there’s plenty of space.”

“That’s thoughtful of you,” Nicki said politely. He was sure she hated saying anything of the kind, since he hadn’t exactly proven himself thoughtful, either in the past or in the present.

But nothing added up when it came to Nicki. Why had she decided to live in Divine? With her brains she could have done anything, gone anywhere. Yet she’d chosen to come back, and talked about the town as her home. He couldn’t see why anyone would live here if they had a chance to get out.

“You must have family here in Divine, right?” he asked abruptly, again breaking his cardinal rule of noninterference.

“No.” She blinked. “My mom died right after I was born, and my father passed away when I was a junior in college. He did have a sister—in Texas, I think—but they’d lost contact. I’m not sure if I have anyone else—Dad wouldn’t talk about family.”

“I didn’t know about your father. I’m sorry.”

Nicki looked pensive, then sighed. “We weren’t close.”

For some reason Luke wanted to know more, to hear why Nicki and her father hadn't been close and why he hadn't talked about family. But it wasn't his concern, any more than anything else was about Nicki.

"I'll go get a load," he murmured.

Luke went up the steps to the attic, memories crowding in on him. Once his grandparents' attic had been a place of vast adventure where he and Sherrie and their cousins played to their hearts' content. The floor had been clear and open then, and his grandmother would bring up lemonade and apple cake to slow them down when things got too rowdy. Grams's apple cake had been delicious, always winning awards at the county fair until she stopped entering the competition, citing her eight grand-prize ribbons as an embarrassment of riches.

A nostalgic smile curved Luke's mouth before he shook his head. Times changed, he reminded himself. Grams was gone and he wasn't eight and content with imaginary adventures any longer. Yet it was nice to be reminded of happier days in Divine. Usually, his memories lingered on that disastrous last year of high school.

"Do you need some help?" Nicki asked. She had followed and was cautiously peering around the door frame.

"Don't tell me, you thought you saw a mouse up here," Luke guessed dryly. He'd never met a woman who wasn't scared of mice. Even his sister hated rodents, which was a problem when someone brought one to her as a veterinary patient.

Nicki shrugged. "I've seen several, actually. You need to set some traps to get rid of the old ones, then get a cat to scare any new ones away. I don't have anything against mice, I even think they're cute, but they're dirty houseguests and destroy paper and fabric."

"Cute?"

"Sure. With their big ears and bright eyes, field mice look like they walked right off a greeting card."

Luke grunted in disbelief and shifted a large basket to one side. Predictably, three mice went scurrying, two of them in Nicki's direction. Despite her claims of being unafraid, he expected her to scream. Yet, while a screech came from one of the mice, she watched them run across her feet without a peep.

"Definitely a cat," she announced. "Da Vinci would have a ball up here. He loves to hunt."

"Stands to reason you'd name your cat after Leonardo da Vinci," Luke grumbled, though he secretly wanted to laugh. Two mice had just done aerobics over her sneakers and she hadn't blinked an eye. Some men wouldn't have taken it so calmly, but she was obviously made of sterner stuff.

"It fit. Da Vinci is curious about everything, and so was his namesake."

"All cats are curious. It's one of their defining characteristics."

Nicki looked surprised. "I didn't know you liked cats."

"They're all right. It isn't like I have one or anything."

She shook her head at his hasty denial of a feline soft spot and

reached for a painting. Picking it up, she looked carefully at the front, back and sides, then selected another, checking it just as carefully. “What room do you want me to use?” she asked.

“Second floor, second door to the left. It’s Grams’s old sewing room, so there’s a big table you can work at.”

She nodded and walked back down the stairs, holding the paintings as if they were made of gold. Which, Luke supposed, they might as well be if they were anything like the one of his great-grandmother. Surely that was a fluke, though—an old family portrait, by an artist who was unimportant at the time it was painted.

Because Nicki had been so careful, Luke also checked the paintings he carried, even though he didn’t know what he was looking for. He brushed away a few spiders and their webs, but they weren’t doing any harm as far as he could tell.

“Do you need anything else?” he asked after they’d carried down several armloads and crowded one side of the room with paintings. He recognized some from when they’d hung in the house; others were unfamiliar.

“No, I’m fine.” She opened her briefcase and removed notebooks and a magnifying glass. “Don’t let me keep you.”

Luke scowled. Once again he was being dismissed. He tried to remind himself that Nicki was a college professor accustomed to dealing with students. Only he wasn’t a student; this was his grandfather’s house, and he still wanted to learn more about her.

Nicki seemed to have a curiously appealing inner peace. But

it wasn't just that. She was different from the women he knew. She didn't hide her feelings beneath a sophisticated veneer, and seemed willing to do her part.

"How long were you in Europe on your study trips?" he asked, turning a chair backward and straddling it.

She cast him a startled glance. "I thought you had work to do."

Luke lifted his shoulders, a wry smile quirking his mouth. He did have work to do. A mountain of work. There were contracts to review and sign, proposals to study, negotiations pending, calls to make, endless e-mails and a flood of other paperwork to review. A lot of money was riding on his taking care of business, yet at the moment he'd rather talk to Nicki. The feeling reminded him that she was a distraction that might prove problematic.

"I...um, decided to knock off for a while," he said. "So, how long?"

"Three months the first time, six on the second trip. I also did an intensive course of study at the Sorbonne for several months."

Though he expected her to run off at the mouth like always, she instead bent over a small painting and began examining it as if her life depended on the results. His jaw tightened. "What did you enjoy seeing the most?"

She slapped a notebook on the table and glared. "Why are you still here? Don't you want me to get the inventory done quickly? I'm sure I'm the last woman you want hanging around—you always preferred women with bra sizes bigger than their IQ."

"Look, if it'll help if I...well...apologize for the way I acted

when we were kids, I will,” Luke said in the least apologetic tone he’d ever used. He counted to ten and tried again. “I was a jerk. Okay? You have every right to hate me.”

“It has nothing to do with when we were kids. That is, you obviously haven’t changed—you practically have ex-jock tattooed on your forehead.”

It wasn’t hard to guess that “ex-jocks” weren’t Nicki’s favorite kind of men. It ought to have been reassuring, considering the way he hadn’t been able to control his uncomfortable thoughts about her. But after the accident he’d disliked being called a jock. He was about to say so when Nicki stuck out her chin.

“And besides, I don’t hate you,” she added.

“Yeah, right.”

“It’s just that I don’t like you very much,” Nicki admitted, then felt heat rising in her face. “Oh...sorry.” She put her hands over her cheeks and peeked to see how angry Luke might be. To her surprise, he looked pleased.

“That’s one of the few honest things a woman has ever said to me,” Luke murmured, thinking about his one-time fiancée, Sandra, declaring that she adored him, only to continue sleeping around like a cat in heat. One thing he’d learned since leaving Divine, women were as faithless in big cities as they were in small towns.

God, what a fool he’d been over Sandra. So crazy in love he couldn’t see straight—even decking his best friend for suggesting she wasn’t a paragon of virtue. Luke grimaced, remembering his

own anger, and the blood that had trickled from the cut over his friend's swollen eye.

"You don't meet the right women," Nicki said, breaking into his thoughts.

His shoulders lifted and dropped. It didn't matter. After accepting the truth about Sandra he'd decided there wasn't any point to getting married when he could enjoy temporary affairs with like-minded females.

"Sherrie says the same thing, but she doesn't really understand what—" He froze at the sound of a loud voice rising from the first floor.

Luke raced down the stairs and Nicki followed. She'd never heard John McCade's voice raised in anger, but the furious tirade really was coming from the dear old man.

"Never...can't believe...such a mess. The Little Sergeant would never have permitted this disgrace. I've got to get this place in order...it's never been so bad...where did these come from?"

The French doors leading to the rear garden were open and Mr. McCade was tearing at a flowerbed by the house.

"Granddad, please come inside. I promise we'll fix everything," Luke said, crouching next to him.

"Leave me alone. It's my fault. I should never have let this happen. She would be so unhappy. I can't bear for her to be unhappy." He continued to rip at the long grass, his hands white and shaky in the humidity.

"Please, Granddad, I'll take care of it." Luke took his

grandfather's arm, only to be shaken away by an angry exclamation. Luke looked at Nicki, his eyes dark and filled with pain, stripped of arrogance. "I don't know what to do," he whispered.

Without thinking Nicki knelt and laid her hand on the old man's shoulder. "It's all right, Professor McCade. We'll take care of the garden."

Her quiet voice seemed more effective than Luke's frantic tone. The elderly man turned and brushed shaky fingers across his brow. "She would be so...so disappointed."

"Then we'll fix it, so she wouldn't be."

"It was so beautiful," he breathed, looking around with tears falling like memories down his face. "She painted this garden for me. A living canvas. Art, young lady, is not confined to a museum." The last thing sounded so much like an old Professor McCade lecture that she smiled.

"Art is the accomplice of love," she said obediently, though she didn't finish the quotation she'd heard him say so often in his lectures.... Take love away, and there is no longer art.

She didn't think he needed a reminder that his love had been taken away.

"You were always an excellent student, Miss Johansson."

The fact that he remembered her name startled Nicki, and her gaze met Luke's equally surprised eyes.

"Thank you, Professor. I teach now, out at the college."

"Yes, I recommended you for the position when I retired."

That, too, was a shock. She'd been shy in all his classes, particularly when she was tutoring Luke and her emotions seesawed between terminal infatuation and utter loathing. Though kind to his students, she had never expected Professor McCade to take special notice of a mousy, underage kid who always sat in the rear. He certainly hadn't seemed to recognize her at his recent yard sale.

"Th-thank you, sir. I appreciate your confidence."

"It was well deserved."

His eyes began to lose their focus as he looked again around the garden. It was beautiful, though overgrown and neglected. Nicki could feel the love that lingered there and knew there was beauty in the memory of love, as well. His love had changed shape, and wasn't nearly as immediate, but it wasn't wholly lost, either.

"You promise to fix it for the Little Sergeant," Professor McCade whispered. It was a statement, more than a question.

The Little Sergeant? Nicki mouthed at Luke.

My grandmother, he mouthed back.

Nicki wondered if it was a promise she could keep. She'd never gardened in her life, and Luke surely didn't want her hanging around any longer than necessary. Yet there was an appeal to working with the earth and painting a picture with growing things. And if it would help Professor McCade...how could she say no?

She gulped. "Um, yes, I promise. Maybe we can get a good

yard service. They could put everything in order in a few days.”

“No.” His thin arms made an agitated gesture. “Not in her garden. I won’t allow it.”

“All right,” Nicki soothed gently. “But it’s too warm to work out here right now. Come inside where it’s cooler. I’ll start early tomorrow.”

They drew him back into the house, where he sat on the same chair as before. But instead of staring blankly, he gazed outside with an unwavering intensity, as if the answers to all the questions ever asked waited there to be discovered. “You promise,” he said without blinking.

“Yes. I promise.”

Chapter Three

Luke grabbed Nicki's hand and pulled her into the library lined with books on built-in floor-to-ceiling shelves, then sank into a chair and rubbed his temples.

Nicki watched, trying to understand how she could let him affect her so much, creating a softening that was neither welcome nor wise. He was a bottom-line kind of guy. She'd returned that lovely painting, but the only thing that had caught his attention was its monetary value. Luke McCade was the last man she should find attractive—partly because of his similarity to her ex-husband, partly because of his difference from her. Luke didn't like small towns, he wasn't the least bit interested in art, and, despite his concern for his grandfather, he was well-known as a hardheaded businessman. She had a feeling that falling in love with an adult Luke would be much harder to survive than a girlhood crush.

Physical attraction was nice, but it was more important to respect someone and find things in common with them. She probably had no more in common with Luke than her likeness to the footballs he played with. Footballs were ugly things, too—brown and awkward and bumpy.

Of course, Luke wasn't ugly.

Or the least bit awkward.

And his only bumps were the ones from muscles.

She bit her lip and sat in a nearby chair, wondering how in less than an hour she'd gone from disliking him to...admiring his biceps. She needed to find her willpower. Fast. The thought of being drawn into a relationship with someone like her ex-husband again made her stomach clench.

It didn't help that Luke had actually apologized. Well, sort of apologized. She'd once thought it was an over-used cliché that men couldn't say they were sorry, but it seemed to be a true one.

"Thanks for the help," Luke muttered after a long minute. "We tried hiring a yard service after Grams died, only Granddad would have none of it. We manage to keep the grass mowed and things watered, but that's all. He didn't want strangers in her garden. Or in the house, for that matter."

"But I'm a stranger—as much as anyone else in Divine. People know each other here, and he'd probably be acquainted with someone working for a yard service."

Luke shook his head. "It's different with you. I don't know why—maybe because you were his student and he recommended you for his teaching position. We have a hard time getting a word out of him at the best of times, but he really sparked when he realized who you were."

"That's because we have a common point of reference."

"I know. Art. But we've tried to get him reconnected to his friends and other professors at the college, and nothing has worked. There must be something different about you."

It wasn't just art, Nicki thought, it was a deep appreciation of

love and beauty. Unless someone could connect on that level, it wouldn't be the same. "Um...the garden seems really important to him."

"Yes, but don't worry about working on it."

"What if I want to work on it?" she asked dryly. "What if keeping my word is important to me?"

"Granddad isn't himself. He won't even remember what happened by tomorrow—he probably doesn't remember now."

"I'm not so sure of that. But it doesn't matter, because I'll remember," Nicki said as gently as possible. She wasn't nearly as convinced as Luke that his grandfather would forget. Something in the old professor's face had suggested much more awareness than his family seemed to believe.

Luke gave her an exasperated look. "And I'm telling you it's all right."

She tried not to get angry. Even if Luke was an insensitive jock, she should be understanding. After all, he had come back to Divine to help his grandfather. A lot of people wouldn't have bothered, or else would have hired someone to take care of everything. "If you don't want me around that long, then maybe you can help to get it done faster."

"It isn't that I don't want you around," he growled. "But that garden is more work than you seem to realize."

"That doesn't matter—I like being busy and having lots to do. My classes are over and I have plenty of free time, except Tuesdays when I deliver meals to shut-ins or when I have

meetings for stuff. I also volunteer at the nursing home twice a month, but you don't garden at night, anyhow."

He lifted an eyebrow. "What do you do at the nursing home? Some sort of craft class, I suppose."

Nicki's face turned warm. Luke hadn't needed to know about her various volunteer activities, especially since he'd probably think it was provincial to be involved in small-scale community concerns. "I...um, call the bingo games."

Luke grinned. "You call the bingo games?"

"Well, yes. It's better than strip poker."

His grin broadened. "I don't like bingo, but I wouldn't mind a game of strip poker. We could play now if you like. Though I have to warn you, I'm damn good at filling an inside straight."

"You're pathetic," she snapped, forgetting she ought to be understanding. "Go play with one of your old girlfriends."

"They're all married."

"Fortunately not to you, right?"

"Yeah. Lucky escape on my part. Besides, can you see me driving a minivan and giving the dog a bath every Saturday?" He shuddered.

"Only if you develop amnesia or have a personality transplant."

"See how life works itself out? I've been saved from a life of domesticity."

Luke grinned as Nicki rolled her eyes in disgust, yet he also saw a hint of laughter in their depths. After that scene with his

grandfather, he'd felt as if a truck had run him over. But Nicki was a breath of fresh air. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad having her around for a few days, and if she wanted to work on his grandmother's garden, then fine. She'd give up soon enough—she was used to teaching, not back-breaking labor.

“So why haven't you ever gotten married?” he asked.

“Who says I haven't?”

The idea that Nicki might be married, or even that she'd once been married, disturbed him. “Because you're using your maiden name and you aren't wearing a wedding ring.”

“And you think you're a modern guy. This is the twenty-first century. Lots of women don't wear rings or take their husband's name.” Nicki tossed her head, sending gold curls flying, and Luke remembered the way she used to drag her hair back from her face in a ponytail, leaving a set of crooked bangs to hide her eyes.

No one had ever gotten to look at her eyes in the old days. It was a shame, too. They were clear and blue and bright and broadcast every emotion she tried to hide. He was big on eyes. He was also big on other parts of a woman's body, but eyes were important.

“So you're telling me you're married?” He kept a narrow look on her, certain the answer was no but wanting to hear it confirmed. He'd flirted with her, and flirting with married women was a taboo in his book.

“Divorced,” she said, her mouth tightening. “And before you

make a dumb assumption, I'm the one who left. It turned out we weren't compatible."

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