



*Silhouette*<sup>®</sup>

1690  
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# Her Pregnant Agenda

LINDA GOODNIGHT

SILHOUETTE  
*Romance*<sup>®</sup>



# **Linda Goodnight**

## **Her Pregnant Agenda**

### **Аннотация**

From the desk of Emily Winters Bachelor #2: Grant Lawson Title: General Counsel Problem No. 1: How to get the brooding lawyer to love again Problem No. 2: How to help Ariana in PR get custody of her unborn twins How about merging both problems for the perfect solution! Grant might have sworn off marriage, but if anyone can get the stubborn millionaire to feel again, it's tenderhearted Ariana. She needs an ace attorney to fight for her babies, and she deserves a good, honorable man to lean on as she prepares to bring her two bundles of joy into the world. If love solves everything, then perhaps together they will find the answer to their problems...and dreams.

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

"You have a miracle in there."

"Two of them," Ariana responded.

Grant moved a hand to either side of her belly and drew her to him. The babies moved beneath his touch.

They stood there, connected in a most elemental way, and Grant's urge to share in her babies shifted and changed. He had the most frightening need to pull her closer, to lay his mouth over hers, to feel her heartbeat against his.

Their glances connected. She knew he wanted to kiss her and she wanted it, too.

Ariana Fitzpatrick, pregnant or not, was exquisite. A dark and delicate beauty who caused him to feel things he didn't want to

feel and to think things he had no business thinking.

With the great discipline he'd cultivated over the years, he removed his hands and stepped away.

Dear Reader,

October is bringing big changes in the Silhouette and Harlequin worlds. To strengthen the terrific lineup of stories we offer, Silhouette Romance will be moving to four fabulous titles each month.

Don't miss the newest story in this six-book series—**MARRYING THE BOSS'S DAUGHTER**. In this second title, *Her Pregnant Agenda* (#1690) by Linda Goodnight, Emily Winters is up to her old matchmaking tricks. This time she has a bachelor lawyer and his alluring secretary—a single mom-to-be—on her matrimonial short list.

Valerie Parv launches her newest three-book miniseries, **THE CARRAMER TRUST**, with *The Viscount & the Virgin* (#1691). In it, an arrogant royal learns a thing or two about love from his secret son's sassy aunt. This is the third continuation of Parv's beloved Carramer saga.

An ornery M.D. is in danger of losing his heart to a sweet young nurse, in *The Most Eligible Doctor* (#1692) by reader favorite Karen Rose Smith. And is it possible to love a two-in-one cowboy? Meet the feisty teacher who does, in Doris Rangel's magical *Marlie's Mystery Man* (#1693), our latest **SOULMATES** title.

I encourage you to sample all four of these heartwarming

romantic titles from Silhouette Romance this month.

Enjoy!

Mavis C. Allen

Associate Senior Editor, Silhouette Romance

# **Her Pregnant Agenda**

## **Linda Goodnight**



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

For Gayle Warrington, who encouraged me from the beginning and still awaits every book with enthusiasm and excitement. Friends like you are hard to find.

# **Books by Linda Goodnight**

Silhouette Romance

For Her Child... #1569

Married in a Month #1682

Her Pregnant Agenda #1690



# LINDA GOODNIGHT

A romantic at heart, Linda Goodnight believes in the traditional values of family and home. Writing books enables her to share her certainty that, with faith and perseverance, love can last forever and happy endings really are possible.

A native of Oklahoma, Linda lives in the country with her husband, Gene, and Mugsy, an adorably obnoxious rat terrier. She and Gene have a blended family of six grown children. An elementary school teacher, she is also a licensed nurse. When time permits, Linda loves to read, watch football and rodeo and indulge in chocolate. She also enjoys taking long, calorie-burning walks in the nearby woods. Readers can write to her at [linda@lindagoodnight.com](mailto:linda@lindagoodnight.com).

FROM THE DESK OF EMILY WINTERS

Five

## ~~Six~~ Bachelor Executives To Go

### Bachelor #1: Love, Your Secret Admirer

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

### Bachelor #2: Her Pregnant Agenda

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

### Bachelor #3: Fill-in Fiancée

Brett Hamilton—The playboy from England is really a British lord! Can I find him a princess...or has he found her already?

### Bachelor #4: Santa Brought a Son

Reed Connors—The ambitious VP seems to have a heavy heart. Only his true love could have broken it. But where is she now?

### Bachelor #5: Rules of Engagement

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

### Bachelor #6: One Bachelor To Go



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# Chapter One

She was not going to cry.

Ariana Fitzpatrick rushed into the forty-ninth floor ladies' room of Wintersoft, Inc., found the place thankfully empty and slammed into the first stall. She shoved a Kleenex hard against her eyelids. No matter how rotten the day, no matter how guilty she felt, she would not cry. Not again. She was past the crying stage of pregnancy.

She glanced down at the seven-and-a-half-month protrusion around her middle and sniffled. "Way past the crying stage."

She sniffled again and leaned her throbbing head against the cool stall divider. Reaching for another tissue, she found the dispenser empty, and that was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Sobs ripped free like a mob at a soccer game. Once loose there was no stopping them. She, normally so professional and calm, cried until her headache became a concussion, her eyelids turned to puff pastry, and her throat felt like raw hamburger.

"I hate you Benjy Walburn," she blubbered, slamming one fist into the wall.

"Are you all right in there?" A voice called, and Ariana wished she were anywhere but here. She clapped a hand over her mouth and hiccuped.

Someone rapped on the stall. "Would you like to talk?"

“No.” And that one word started the bawling over again.

“Open the door,” a concerned voice demanded.

“Who is it?” Ariana managed to squeak.

“Emily Winters. Who’s in there?”

If she wasn’t already squalling her brains out, she’d cry. Emily Winters, the boss’s daughter. The jig was up, the party was over. She may as well come clean. Besides, she was desperate for a tissue.

“Ariana Fitzpatrick,” she said and stepped out, taking care not to whack her belly on anything in the process. She grabbed for the tissue dispenser.

“Ariana!” Emily’s gaze flew to Ariana’s midsection. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she managed to say, which was a silly answer given that she clearly was not all right.

How could she explain to Emily Winters, of all people, the extent of her duplicity? Ariana battled another wave of tears. More than anything she didn’t want to lose her job. Couldn’t afford to lose it now with the babies coming and Benjy gone like the wind.

“Obviously, something has happened. If not your babies, then what?” In a chic blue sheath topped with a white jacket, Emily looked slim and professional. With the emphasis on slim.

Ariana was desperate to tell someone, was certain she would explode if she didn’t. These months of white lies and saving face and fretting over possible damage to Wintersoft, Inc. had taken

an enormous toll on her. Who better to hear the truth than the boss's tenderhearted daughter? Before the tears rolled again, she managed to blurt, "I'm a big fat liar."

With the emphasis on fat.

Emily didn't look shocked, only concerned. "Want to tell me the problem? Maybe I can help."

"I'm pregnant."

"Well, uh—yes," Emily's sapphire gaze dropped to Ariana's middle filling up half the distance between the stall and the sink. "I had noticed that."

Ariana finally found her humor and laughed. Emily joined her. Who wouldn't notice a woman who'd swallowed a Volkswagen?

"I think everyone in the company is excited about your twins and the upcoming wedding."

Ariana fought back a new threat of tears. "That's the problem. There's not going to be a wedding. I made that up." The little white lie had seemed like the best solution at the time. "Benjy jilted me two months ago—on the day we were supposed to be married."

"Oh, Ariana, I'm so sorry." Emily ripped more tissue from the dispenser and poked the soft paper into Ariana's hand. "But I don't understand. Why lie about it? You're not the loser, he is."

Ariana sniffed and dabbed at her sodden face. One of the twins elbowed her. Taking the hint, she leaned sideways, giving him more room. "I love my babies and wouldn't undo them

if I could. But I was worried about causing a problem for the company. My job in public relations is to make Wintersoft, Inc. look good. Instead I'm a walking poster child for an abstinence program."

At least that was part of the reason. She'd thought everything would eventually work itself out and the lie wouldn't matter, but the problem only grew until she didn't know what to do anymore.

"Nonsense. The company's image is not the important issue here, Ariana. You and your twins are." Emily frowned. "This Benjy jerk is planning to support you financially, isn't he?"

Ariana sighed and pressed the tissue into her burning eyes. "According to Benjy, I'm on my own. He thinks the stork brought these babies."

"That's outrageous!"

The bathroom door swished open and Carmella Lopez entered. The older woman took one look at Ariana's tear-stained face and draped a motherly arm over her shoulders. "What's outrageous?"

Executive assistant to Emily's father, Carmella was way too close to the top of the pecking order for Ariana's comfort. She'd much rather Mr. Winters never know about her duplicity. But Emily spoke before Ariana could stop her. "Ariana's fiancé left her and refuses to support their babies."

"The dog." Carmella stepped away, sympathetic brown eyes traveling over Ariana's very pregnant body. "What you need is a good lawyer."



“As if I can afford one,” Ariana bemoaned.

Eyes lighting up, Emily held up a finger. “I told you I could help. One of the best attorney’s in Boston is our general counsel, and I’ll bet we can talk him into taking your case pro bono.” She took Ariana’s hand and pulled her to the door.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t.” Ariana pulled back, horrified. Wasn’t being pregnant, unwed and jilted bad enough without becoming a charity case to boot?

“Of course you can. Lawyers do that kind of thing all the time. Ethics or something. And Grant Lawson is the embodiment of ethics.” She gave another tug, and Ariana, already overbalanced, had no choice but to follow.

Carmella forestalled them. “Emily, could you come by my office later? We need to discuss an important matter.” Some sort of mental message passed between the two women.

“Of course.” Emily wiggled two fingers and pushed Ariana into the hall. “See you later.”

Ariana had a stitch in her side by the time Emily escorted her up to the fiftieth floor, through the outer office and passed Mr. Lawson’s prim and proper assistant, Sunny Robbins. After a soft knock, she poked her head around the door marked General Counsel. “Hi, Grant, do you have a minute? Ariana could use some advice.”

Working furiously over a stack of papers, Grant Lawson glanced up at the interruption. He lay his pen aside. “Advice is what I do best. Come on in.”

Athletically built with black hair and stunning blue eyes, all six foot two of Wintersoft's top attorney exuded strength and power. Mr. Perfect, as the girls in the secretarial pool called him, was gorgeous. Respected by everyone in the company, he was the object of more than one single female's fantasy. But while friendly and polite, he maintained a businesslike reserve that screamed, "Don't get too close."

Though aware of his good looks and impeccable manners, Ariana was not among the drooling. She was too busy falling for men who needed rescuing. Trouble was, she never succeeded in solving their problems; she only added to her own.

Rising, Grant came around the desk. "Have a seat, ladies."

They did. Emily sat with her long, slender legs crossed and her skirt at midthigh. Ariana envied anyone the ability to cross one leg over the other. Choosing the widest chair, she eased into the plush brown seat. Getting out of the thing might be another problem altogether.

"Ariana's ex-fiancé is refusing to pay child support," Emily said. "I told her you might be willing to take her case—pro bono, of course, since her fiancé has left her in such a difficult situation."

Grant leaned his backside against the desk and crossed his ankles. Ariana would bet a week's salary that suit was tailor-made to conform perfectly to his oh-so-fit physique. There ought to be a law against a man looking that good in the presence of an overly pregnant woman with a tear-blotched face.

"I'll need the details first, but I'm always happy to help a co-worker if I can."

"Good." Emily rose from the deep cushioned chair, graceful as you please. Ariana turned green with envy. "I'll leave you two to discuss the particulars." She squeezed Ariana's shoulder gently. "Everything will work out. Don't worry. You're in good hands."

With that she took her leave and Ariana was left to confess her total stupidity to Mr. Perfect. As the story unfolded, faint lines appeared in Grant's forehead. Occasionally he broke in with a question. Twice he nodded, his appraising gaze drifting over Ariana in a way that made her squirm. He probably thought she was an idiot.

When she finished, feeling that she'd dumped all her dirty laundry on the floor before him, Grant tapped one thumb against his lip, clearly thinking the matter over. A gold Rolex peeked from beneath perfectly white cuffs.

"So, Ariana—Do you mind if I call you that?"

"I'm feeling pretty old lately, but Ms. Fitzpatrick really does me in. Ariana would be great."

A tiny smile tipped the sides of his mouth. "And I'm Grant. Somehow you don't look like a Fitzpatrick. Irish, isn't it?"

The expression on his face said her tan skin and mahogany hair sharply contrasted with the image of an Irish woman.

"My dad is Irish. Mom is Cuban."

"Ah. That explains it. I'd wondered."

Ariana batted her eyes in surprise. Grant Lawson, aka Mr. Perfect, had wondered about her? She was seven and a half months pregnant with twins and a man like Grant had wondered about her? The teeny compliment lifted her spirits immeasurably.

“So tell me about this ex-fiancé.” Grant resumed his relaxed posture, leaning on the desk. Ariana suspected he struck the stance as a means to disarm people and gain their confidence. His pose worked. Some of the tension eased from her shoulders, relieved to finally share her problems—and the truth—with someone in the company.

For weeks, ever since she'd waited three hours at the courthouse only to discover Benjy not only wasn't going to marry her, but he had moved in with a woman he'd been seeing for weeks, Ariana had propagated the myth that they were awaiting the twins' birth before tying the knot. Wintersoft had been good to her, giving her a chance in the competitive field of Public Relations, and the software company didn't deserve a tarnished image because of her.

“Benjy ran off the day we were supposed to be married.”

“Benjy?” He cocked an eyebrow. “Is that your dog?”

She could tell he was kidding. “I wish. Then I could have taken him to the pound.”

“Or had him put to sleep?”

Ariana laughed, surprised that the coolly aloof Grant Lawson had a sense of humor. She appreciated his efforts at

levity. Anything to ease the awful strain she'd been under. "Unfortunately, Benjy is the father of my twins. The very absent, unconcerned father of my twins."

"He is a dog."

"More like a lap poodle. I only wished I'd recognized his penchant for expecting women to take care of him. And when I say women, I mean multiple women."

An instant change came over her new attorney. The cool pose stiffened. His top lip thinned to a narrow line. When he spoke, his voice was harsh. "He cheated on you?"

"I suppose I should have suspected it by the way he avoided making definite wedding plans, but I was clueless until he didn't show up at the courthouse. Even then, I worried he'd been in an accident." She gave a rueful laugh. "Stupid, huh?"

"You had a right to expect fidelity from the father of your children. Trust is an important part of a relationship."

The news of Benjy's betrayal had been a knife in the back. She'd tried so hard to help him when he came out of rehab, but as soon as she was too pregnant to be his pretty little toy anymore, he found other playmates. And she'd been too naive to recognize the symptoms. Admitting such a thing aloud, even to a lawyer, was humiliating.

"And what about you?" Grant pinned her with a courtroom gaze that would have quelled any witness. "Were you unfaithful?"

"Never." Ariana blushed at the blunt question. Though Benjy was not the first in a long line of bad relationships, he had been

her first and only lover. She'd been so certain her love was all he needed to overcome his problems that she'd given herself to him completely.

Ariana's self-confidence suffered to know she'd been used, that Benjy had only wanted someone to take care of him while he got back on his feet. He'd never wanted to marry her. In fact, he'd been furious about the pregnancy and had even urged her to end it. But after a terrible fight, Benjy had done an about-face, asking her to marry him at some vague, future date.

Grant rocked away from the desk and stalked around to his chair. "I'll take your case."

Ariana batted her eyes in surprise.

Just like that? He'd take her case.

He yanked a legal pad from beneath a neat stack on his desk. "Mr. Poodle will do his part to look after your children. You have my word on that."

Grant furiously scribbled notes on the pad, letting his mind drift over the bits of information Ariana had shared. He did plenty of pro bono cases, especially for company employees, and he enjoyed doing them. Those were the cases that made him feel like a true champion of the law, serving those in need. But he hadn't taken Ariana's case out of altruism, not totally anyway. If there was one thing he knew about it was ugly domestic cases in which one partner cheated the other and then tried to skip out scot-free. No one should have to live through that kind of pain.

He raised his eyes to the woman who knew exactly how that

felt and was struck again by her smooth skin. Though every previous conversation had been business related, he'd noticed Ariana before. She was lovely. Almond-shaped eyes that defied him to name the color. And dark brown hair that floated around her shoulders with a rich, natural shine. Always warm and friendly even to the biggest jerks in the building, she had a dark beauty that would fascinate any man who still had a heart in his chest. Which left him out since a great gaping hole occupied the area in his rib cage where a heart once resided.

He tried not to look at her stomach—a near impossible task. He'd never seen anyone quite so pregnant. Behind the brave thrust of her chin and the steady gaze, he saw the tear-stained cheeks and detected the vulnerable quiver of her full lower lip. All his protective urges leaped to the fore. Urges he hadn't acknowledged for a long time. And though they disturbed him no little bit, he'd be hanged if this fiancé of hers got away without taking equal responsibility for those children.

“Do you know this Benjy character's current address?”

“I know where he works.” She gave him the address. “But don't expect him to be cooperative.”

The idea angered him. What kind of worthless scum refused to acknowledge his own offspring? Children didn't deserve to be pawns in domestic litigation. If he'd been fortunate enough to have a child...

He put the brakes on that thought immediately. Just as he'd closed the door on love, he'd promised not to dwell on what could

never be.

He pushed a pad toward Ariana. “Will you write that address down? Along with the correct spelling of Mr. Walburn’s name?”

The element of surprise was always important in these cases, so he needed to make certain he had every last detail, right down to the correct spellings. He was nothing if not thorough.

Ariana gripped the chair arms and rocked several times, her off-center body not cooperating. When he started to offer his assistance, she held up one hand to stop him, and shook her head. “I can do this.”

She rocked again and then again. On the next try she stood. Hiding a smile, Grant exhaled, unaware he’d been holding his breath. Her stubbornness appealed to him.

He watched her move toward the desk, a light green dress billowing softly around her legs. Except for the enormous midsection, Ariana Fitzpatrick was actually very small and graceful. Tiny hands, slim shoulders, fine-boned, heart-shaped face with the kindest eyes he’d ever seen. An odd twist wrenched his gut. Sympathy pains surely, though he wasn’t prone to such feelings. A man couldn’t find a woman appealing when she was pregnant with someone else’s baby. Could he?

Absolutely not.

Taking the pen, Ariana leaned over the paper. Her hair spilled forward, inches from his nose. He inhaled—purely a function of normal biology—and filled his lungs with the faint scent of flowers. Gardenias, he thought.



Nature forced another breath. Ah, lovely. So clean and fresh. He studied her profile, admiring the graceful angle of her neck, waiting for the moment she lifted her head so that he could study her delicate face more closely. Purely for professional reasons, of course. An attorney gained a lot of information from a client's eyes.

As she straightened, her naturally dark complexion paled, and she grabbed for the edge of the desk.

"Whoa," she whispered and weaved sideways, knocking his nameplate to the beige carpet.

Grant was out of his chair and around the desk faster than a guilty criminal could say appeal. He slipped an arm around her middle and had the novel experience of feeling a stomach move beneath his fingertips.

Instead of the aversion he'd expected, his own stomach quivered in awed response. He shook off the sensation. Sentimentality had no place in attorney-client relations.

"Are you all right?" His voice sounded gruff.

"Fine." She panted a few times, then took a deep breath. "A little dizzy. That's all."

He backed her to the chair and very gingerly eased her down, then remained standing in front of her, studying the pale line around her mouth. "Has this happened before?"

A little pink tongue flicked out over dry lips. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back. "Occasionally."

Along one wall he kept a small refrigerator stocked with drinks

—one of his perks as head attorney. Keeping one eye on Ariana, he went to it and retrieved a bottle of water. Uncapping the container, he held the drink to her lips. Her eyes fluttered open.

“Thanks.” Her voice was a whisper. She took the water and sipped.

“Are you eating properly?”

She hedged. “Today was a bad day.”

Placing a hand on each chair arm, he bent low and peered into her eyes. “What did you eat?”

She sat up straighter. “I’m fine now.”

“I don’t think so. You’re still pale. Are you getting prenatal care? Taking vitamins? Sleeping enough?”

Her slender shoulders stiffened. She shrank back from him and in a soft voice said, “Am I on trial here?”

“I beg your pardon.” He relented, leaning back slightly, though remaining close enough to notice the lines of fatigue around her eyes and mouth. What if she fainted and slithered out of the chair? He glanced at his watch. Time to go home anyway. “I’ll escort you to your car whenever you’re ready to leave.”

She shook her head slightly. “I rode the T.”

Of course she had. What was he thinking? Most everyone in Boston used public transportation, even him, though lately he’d taken to driving his car because of the erratic work hours. Fortunately, another of his perks was an underground parking space.

He had a car and she didn’t. And she was unwell.

One glance at this Rolex and Grant made a quick decision, his usual kind. “That settles it.”

“Settles what?”

“I’m driving you home.”

“Grant, you’re very thoughtful.” Ariana recapped the water and placed the bottle on his desk. “But I’m fine now—really—and perfectly capable of seeing myself home.”

“This has nothing to do with kindness and everything to do with common sense. You’re exhausted, hungry, and you nearly fainted. You have no business on public transportation. What if you pass out? As a gentlemen I would be remiss not to see you safely home.” He offered his hands, palms up. “Let’s go.”

She drew back, stubborn chin lifting. “I need a lawyer, not a keeper.”

He waited, offer still open. Couldn’t she understand that he knew best? “You’d risk your babies out of stubbornness?”

Ariana fisted both small hands on her thighs. She was getting her Irish up, an attitude he found intriguing. “That was a dirty trick.”

He allowed a tiny smile and shrugged. “I’m an attorney. What did you expect?”

Ariana’s full mouth pursed as she thought over the offer. “Well...I am a little weak in the knees. And the T will be standing room only.”

“Air-conditioned car. No jostling bodies.” He loved negotiations.

Finally she poked a finger at him—a small, stub-nailed finger. “Not that I normally need anyone to take care of me, but okay, you win—this time.”

Suppressing a laugh, Grant helped her out of the chair. Didn’t she understand? He always won.

## Chapter Two

With considerable pleasure, Emily Winters watched Ariana and her new attorney exit the building together. She felt like that legendary Samaritan performing the good deed for the day. Grant, with his take-charge attitude and legal genius, would look after sweet Ariana. If anyone could squeeze support out of that deadbeat fiancé, Grant could.

With a contented smile she headed for Carmella's office. As vice president of Global Sales, Emily had plenty to do, but if Carmella wanted to see her, something important concerning their "secret project" must have developed.

"Have you read this?" Carmella asked as soon as Emily entered her office. Displaying the cover of a romance novel, she then pressed the book to her bosom. "This story is so romantic. Just like Matt and Sarah."

"Everything did work out for the best with those two, didn't it?" Regardless of Emily's discomfort with the whole idea of matchmaking, once the brainy accountant noticed his sweet, innocent secretary there was no stopping the inevitable.

"Ah, if only the others were so easy." Carmella lay aside the book and tilted her head, salt and pepper hair catching the gleam of light. "So, is Grant Lawson to be the next lucky bachelor?"

"Grant? Oh, you mean with Ariana?" Emily shook her head. "The idea never crossed my mind. When I heard Ariana crying

in the bathroom and discovered the reason why, my heart broke for her.”

“So, this is not part of our plan to see another of your father’s bachelor employees joined in happy matrimony?”

Emily sighed. Ever since Carmella had come to her with the distressing news that her father wanted her to marry yet another of the firm’s bachelors, she’d been forced into the uncomfortable roll of matchmaker. If she didn’t find wives for Wintersoft’s eligible men, her father would publicly embarrass himself and everyone else by prodding the bachelors in her direction. He’d done that once already, and the resulting marriage and divorce had left Emily willing to do most anything, right down to prying into other people’s affairs, to avoid suffering that humiliation again. She knew her father well and once he got an idea in his head, he was like a dog on a bone. Anything she might say to try to change his mind was wasted breath, so she had no choice but to resort to playing the reluctant matchmaker.

“No, Carmella, I’m not setting Ariana and Grant up with each other. Ariana really needs Grant’s help.”

“And you really need Grant to find a wife.”

“Other than me.”

“Exactly.”

Carmella patted her hand. “Your father loves you very much, Emily. He only wants your happiness.”

“And ten or twelve grandchildren.”

Carmella laughed. “Would one or two be so bad?”

“Someday maybe, but not now. Until he realizes that I can run this company as good as any man, my career is my primary focus. I know my father loves me, and I adore him, too, but he has a blind spot where I’m concerned. As long as one male employee remains unattached, he’s a candidate for my hand in marriage.” Her father would see to that. “And on that note, how is the research going on the remaining bachelors?”

“Nothing at all on Jack Devon.” Two lines formed between Carmella’s eyebrows as she studied the computer screen. “He’s a rather mysterious creature.”

“What about the very British and ultrahandsome Brett Hamilton? Maybe we should research him next.”

“Whatever we do, we’d better hurry. How much longer can you keep your father believing that story about your new beau?”

Emily gnawed her lip, truly worried. If her father found out that her latest boyfriend was actually her dear and completely gay friend, Stephen, he’d be back in action, pressing his unmarried employees to pursue her. And she planned to make sure that never happened again.

Ariana followed Grant through the cool, dim belly of the building into the parking garage, her sensible flats echoing against the concrete. With legs twice as long as hers, Grant slowed his gait to accommodate her much slower pace. Given the cargo she carried, the gesture warmed her, though she imagined Grant Lawson always did the proper thing in any situation.

“Here we are.” He raised a key ring and pointed. Security

system disengaged and locks snicked open on a gleaming bronze Lexus.

Ariana tried not to gape. She should have expected him to drive a fancy car, but she'd never ridden in one before. Neither her blue-collar roots, nor her current salary included such luxuries.

Grant proceeded her, opened the door, and gently settled her into the seat before pressing the door closed with a quiet click. Even if Benjy had remembered to open the door, he would have slammed her skirt in it. Or maybe her hand. And then grouched about how women wanted to be liberated, but still expected a man to wait on them hand and foot. Yeah, right. As if Benjy had ever brought her so much as a glass of water.

Her brain caught on the thought. Grant, only a workplace acquaintance, had instinctively brought her a drink of water and offered her a ride home. He'd shown her more kindness and courtesy in the last half hour than Benjy had in over a year of dating. What an idiot she'd been.

Keenly aware of her pathetic taste in the opposite sex, Ariana slithered down into the seat. She'd beaten herself up enough for one day, and so, for the moment, she forced the thought away and wallowed in the luxury of Grant's Lexus. Soft, luxurious ivory leather. Real walnut wood trim. And a dashboard with so many gadgets and computers, she'd almost swear the car could fly.

Grant slid into the driver's seat, subtly mixing his expensive sandalwood scent with the smell of fine leather. The engine



hummed to life at his touch and the glorious vehicle whispered out of the parking space.

As they pulled onto the crowded street, Grant slipped a pair of designer sunglasses into place, effectively covering his stunning blue eyes.

Though the seats were butter soft, Ariana squirmed to find a comfortable position. Having two babies in a space made for one didn't leave a mom much room.

She rubbed a hand down one side, pushing someone's foot out of the way as an upbeat country tune issued from the sound system. Alan Jackson sang about driving his first car.

"You're a country music fan?"

"Um-hmm." Grant maneuvered the car around an exhaust belching bus. "Why? Surprised?"

"Somehow you don't seem the type."

"I have fairly eclectic taste." He motioned to a CD case. "Take a look. Choose what you like."

She flipped through the stacks, finding every conceivable type of music. Classics, jazz, rock, country, Gaelic.

"This is quite a variety."

"I aim to please." He draped a wrist over the leather-clad steering wheel. A shaft of October sunlight reflected off his Rolex.

Ah. Now she understood. The variety was for his passengers' pleasure. Clients, she wondered? Or women?

Neither was one bit her business, but the idea of Grant

Lawson's women piqued her interest. What type did he like? Sophisticated? Intellectual? Naughty or nice? According to the office grapevine, Grant kept his private life to himself.

Ariana couldn't believe she was thinking such a thing. She was about to be a mother, for heaven's sakes. The opposite sex held no appeal for her at this juncture in life. And given her track record and the fact that she had no sense whatsoever concerning men, she would do well never to fall for another one.

Not that she had any such thoughts about Grant. He was doing her a favor out of kindness. She was not interested in him as a man. Only as an attorney.

"Well, which shall it be?"

Had he read her thoughts? She gulped, aware that a dark blush heated her neck.

"Excuse me?"

His lips quirked. "Have you selected your favorite music?"

"Oh." Flustered, she handed him the Gaelic CD.

He scanned the title, then lifted an eyebrow. "Good choice."

She smiled and slathered on a thick brogue. "What did ye expect from an Irish lass? We love our bonny fiddle music."

"What about your Latin half?"

"Ah, you should see me clog to a rumba."

As soon as she said the words, they both glanced toward her middle, caught each other's eyes and laughed. Ariana knew how ridiculous she'd look doing any kind of energetic dance.

"Maybe I'll leave my clogging shoes on the shelf for a few

more weeks. Right now, the twins are doing enough clogging for all of us.”

“When is your due date?” he asked.

The personal question didn’t bother Ariana. After all, Grant was her attorney, ready to fight for her support from Benjy. He needed to know these things. And he was a nice guy, a man she instinctively trusted.

“Six more weeks. The babies are due right before Thanksgiving.” She fidgeted in the seat, turned sideways to face him and pointed to a panel on the dash. “Do you mind if I ask you what that is?”

“GPS. Navigation system.”

“How does it work?”

He pressed a button. “Give me your address and I’ll show you.”

As she quoted the street and number, he tapped in the information. “The computer will automatically map the route.”

“Amazing.”

“Interesting toy, but I seldom use it.”

“You never get lost?”

He shot her a look. “Never.”

Ariana suppressed a giggle. Men were so funny about that.

They rode along for a while without talking, the lively music filling the space between them. Outside the tinted windows, the New England autumn was showing off. Bright evening sunshine backlit a glorious display of orange, red and yellow foliage. Ariana breathed in a contented sigh. The radical change of

seasons was what she enjoyed most about living in Boston.

Then the car slowed and Ariana looked up to discover they were nowhere near her apartment. A touch of anxiety zipped up her arms. Protectively, she bracketed her belly with both arms.

“I thought you never got lost?”

Behind the sunglasses, his look was indulgent. “We aren’t lost. We’re at a quiet little restaurant that serves great food. You are hungry, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but this isn’t necessary. I can cook at home. In fact, I have to cook. I promised Roger.”

Grant killed the engine and turned in the seat, draping one arm over the steering wheel. His gaze flickered to her stomach. “You have a date?”

“Well, not a real date. Roger lives in my building and I cook for him a couple of nights a week.”

“Ah. I see.” Clearly he didn’t. “Tell you what.” He handed her a cell phone. “You call Roger and offer to bring him carry-out instead. Then, we’ll have a pleasant dinner while I gather some more information about your case.”

Ariana knew he was only being considerate and he did need more details to effectively represent her, but she was far more accustomed to giving than receiving. Besides, Roger looked forward to their time together. “I hate to disappoint him. He’s really a dear man.”

Seeing her hesitation, Grant said, “Give me his number. I’ll call and make certain he’s agreeable. Surely he’ll understand the

need for you to meet with your attorney.”

She reached for the cell phone with a resigned sigh. Obviously Grant Lawson was a man who liked to have his way. Given the ache in her back and the wobble in her knees, she'd go along with his wishes this once. “I'll let him know he has carry-out on the way.”

“That works for me.” Turning, he exited the car and came around to her side while she spoke on the phone, then escorted her into the restaurant.

“I hope you like Italian.” Grant pushed open the door to Gionni's, inhaling the rich spiced air as Ariana preceded him inside. He liked the quaint Italian restaurant snuggled into a space right off the alley where only the locals would find it. Checkered cloths on the tables, a breadboard and knife waiting for the fresh, hot loaf that would appear the moment they sat down, La Boheme playing softly in the background. The old-world atmosphere soothed him after a difficult day. He hoped the place would work its magic for Ariana as well. For all her pretense to the contrary, she was frazzled.

“Mmm. This is lovely.” Ariana gazed around, and Grant relaxed, pleased that she appreciated his choice.

The hostess showed them to a corner table, and Grant seated Ariana, once more catching the faint scent of gardenias.

She adjusted her chair to accommodate her enlarged stomach, and he marveled at a woman's ability to deal with the changes of pregnancy. Physically, financially, emotionally, the total burden

of childbearing rested on a single mother, a fact that disturbed his sense of fair play.

“This place smells delicious. What do you recommend?” she asked, smiling.

Grant noted how full and soft her lips appeared. She had a beautiful smile, brilliant white against her dark complexion. Orthodontia must have cost her family a fortune.

He opened his menu. “If you like Italian, there are no bad choices. I’m having linguini with pesto sauce.”

“That sounds good. I’ll have that, too.”

“And antipasto. You need the vegetables.”

Closing her menu with a soft wap, she tilted her head appraisingly. “Are you always so bossy?”

He smiled, liking the way her hazel eyes flashed. “Yes.”

She laughed, a warm melody, and he liked that, too. “All right. Antipasto.”

“Mineral water or milk?”

She stuck out her tongue and grimaced. “Plain water.”

The waiter, who appeared to have enjoyed more than his share of Gionni’s fine cooking, took their order and moved away.

Lacing his fingers, Grant propped both forearms on the table and leaned forward. As long as he had Ariana in his company, he might as well make the most of their time. “Will you be uncomfortable if we discuss your case during dinner?”

“Of course not. I thought that was the purpose for stopping here.”

It was, wasn't it? The fact that he enjoyed her company and liked looking at a pretty face was an added bonus. And she certainly had no business standing on her feet cooking for this Roger person. The very idea annoyed him. Roger annoyed him. And Ariana's devotion to the man annoyed him even more. He'd heard the sweet tone of her voice when she'd made that phone call—the sincere apology, and the promise of tomorrow night. If he had his way, she wouldn't go out with the loser at all. Hadn't she learned anything from her experience with that mutt, Benjy?

"Have you considered that your ex-fiancé may deny paternity?"

Ariana's eyes widened. "Could he do such a thing?"

Grant opened his palms in a questioning gesture. "You know him better than I do."

She lay a protective hand over her abdomen. "Benjy does whatever makes him happy at the moment. And spending money on anyone except himself does not make him happy."

"We're likely looking at a court case, then."

Ariana frowned, gnawing at her lush bottom lip. "Isn't there another way? Benjy's been out of rehab less than a year. I wouldn't want to be the cause of a relapse."

Grant couldn't believe this woman. Her fiancé had left her in dire straits and she was concerned about upsetting him? "Taking responsibility for one's actions is a part of adulthood."

"I know." She took a deep breath and nodded. "You're right. My babies deserve that much."

“Is there any chance that he might file for custody?”

“Benjy?” The light came back on in her face. “He wouldn’t take custody of a parakeet if it required any sacrifice.”

He hoped she was right. Men had a way of behaving strangely when a woman pressed them for support.

“Okay. We’ll file the paternity suit and ask for full custody with child support. But what are your plans in the meantime? The case may take a while, depending on how quickly we locate your ex. Financially speaking, can you afford medical care? Child care? Do you have family here in Boston that can help you after the twins are delivered?”

She shook her head, shiny hair dancing around her shoulders. “My family lives in Florida.”

“All of them? You’re completely alone in this?” He didn’t much like the sound of that. “Would your mother consider coming to Boston for a few weeks until you adjust to some sort of schedule?”

“Oh, no. Absolutely not. I have friends who will help out, but I can’t let Mama come here.”

He frowned at that. “I take it you and your family are not close.”

His own family was small—Mom, Dad and a married sister in Connecticut, but if he needed them—which he never did—they’d be here as fast as Dad’s Lincoln would go.

“But that’s the problem. We’re very close. That’s why I haven’t told them.”



The idea shocked him. He leaned back in his chair and stared at her fragile little face. “Your family doesn’t know about your pregnancy?”

“No. It would break Mama’s heart.”

“To be a grandmother?”

“Of course not. Mama loves kids, but she already has enough grandchildren. My brother has two and my sister has three.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Their meal arrived. Ariana gave the waiter a warm smile and thanked him while Grant waited patiently for her answer. She might be trying to avoid the subject, but he was an attorney and never forgot the question.

The pungent smell of pesto wrapped around the table. From the depths of the restaurant came the low murmur of voices—some in Italian—and the gentle strains of an Italian aria.

Ariana adjusted her napkin and took a bite of the linguini. With a deep sigh, she briefly closed her eyes. “Wonderful,” she breathed.

He concurred, savoring the rich flavor while appreciating Ariana’s impeccable manners, and the dainty way her fingers tore the bread into small chunks. She popped a piece into her mouth and chewed, making a soft moaning sound. A thought filtered through his mind that had nothing whatsoever to do with Italian food.

Good grief. The woman was pregnant. Explosively so.

He swallowed, eager to escape his wicked thoughts. “And your

reasons for keeping the secret would be?"

"You're very persistent, aren't you?"

"Bossy, persistent, stubborn. Any of those adjectives apply. Answer the question, please." There. He felt much more like an attorney. "Why haven't you told your family about the babies? Are you ashamed of them?"

"No!" Changeable hazel eyes darkened with anger. "My twins are the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I won't allow anyone to look down on them because their father is a loser and their mother is a bad judge of character."

"I beg your pardon." Without thinking, Grant reached across the table and wrapped his hand around hers. The warm velvet skin jolted him, but he held on, determined to make amends. He'd brought her here to help, not to hurt her. "Please. I was in no way demeaning your situation. Children are a gift, no matter the particulars of their conception."

God knew how much he'd once wanted such a gift in his life.

Ariana glanced down at their touching hands, then carefully slipped her fingers from beneath his. "Apology accepted."

Eyes downcast, she busied herself with a sip of water.

"So, are you going to tell me why you haven't informed your family about the imminent arrival of two new grandchildren that you clearly treasure? Children aren't something you can hide forever."

Her lips twitched, lips that glistened from the oil and vinegar dressing. His gut reacted. She had a beautiful mouth that drew a

man's attention. Stupid Benjy. How had he resisted her?

"All right. If you insist." She dabbed those sensational lips with the cheery red napkin. "But it's a long story."

"I'm in no hurry." He'd left work much earlier than usual because of Ariana, but had no previous plans for tonight other than spending an hour or so at the health club. Other than the occasional date or dinners with his family, most weekdays found him chained to a desk until well into the evening.

"Mama and her brother, Uncle Ernesto, escaped Cuba as teenagers. They arrived here in a boat, tired, hungry, scared, and speaking only Spanish."

"Your mother is an illegal?"

Ariana laughed. "Don't ever say that to Mama. She is the proudest naturalized citizen in the entire state of Florida. And whatever you do, don't get into an American history quiz with her. She'll wax you."

Though he doubted he'd ever meet the woman, Grant admired that kind of strength and determination. Having grown up in a very comfortable home, he'd never considered how blessed he was to live in the land of the free. He couldn't imagine the difficulties of coming to a strange country to begin a new life.

"But how does her immigration relate to your pregnancy?"

"I'm getting there." With a little wait-a-minute wave of dainty hands, Ariana sipped her water again, then continued. "Daddy is a fishing guide. Mama worked for many years as a domestic. With three children, finances were always tight, but Mama held

on to the dream that her children would go to college and climb the ladder to success. Sean and Marisa had no such interest, so it fell to me as the oldest to make Mama's dream come true."

The music drifting through the restaurant changed to an accordion beat. Dishes clattered somewhere in the background, but all Grant's attention focused on Ariana. There was more to her than a pretty face and a pregnant body. He knew about family expectations, having fallen far short of the dream his father had had for him. Even now, he continued to disappoint, a truth that wore away at his conscience as aggressively as his flamboyant father wore away at a jury.

"Didn't you want to attend college?" Waiting for her reply he took a bite of the antipasto, the garlic flavor invigorating his taste buds, even as the conversation with Ariana invigorated his other senses.

"For as long as I can remember. And you should have seen Mama's face on the day I graduated. She was so beautiful, absolutely radiant with joy." Ariana's eyes lit up in remembrance. "She gave a party for everyone in our neighborhood and spent the entire day showing off my diploma and saying, 'Look, my Ariana, she is so smart. She will be somebody.'"

A faint Spanish lilt crept into Ariana's voice as she imitated her mother. Grant smiled, enjoying the sound.

"And even though she didn't want me to move so far away, she was thrilled when I landed the job at Wintersoft. And she is absolutely certain that someday I will be the public relations

consultant for some movie star or maybe even the president.”

“Is that what you want?”

Ariana’s slender shoulders rolled forward in a shrug. “I love my job, and I want Mama to be proud. That’s what really matters.”

“I don’t see how your pregnancy interferes with any of that. Women with children continue to succeed in today’s business world. Surely your mother understands that.”

“Ah, but there’s more. You see, Mama’s younger sister, Lily, had a stroke last year. Since most of Mama’s relatives are still in Cuba, she and Lily are very close. Doctors wanted to put her in a nursing home, but Mama wouldn’t hear of such a thing. So she and Daddy took Lily into their home, and Mama provides total care for her. The stress is enormous, but to Mama, caring for Lily is a labor of love. She has to do it.”

“And you don’t want to add to your mother’s worry?”

“Exactly. Mama would be torn between her need to be with Lily and her maternal desire to help her unwed, very pregnant and alone, daughter.” Ariana’s animated expression disappeared. She twisted a strand of linguini with her fork, stirring the food around the plate. “It’s bad enough that my children won’t have a father, but now I will be a single mother struggling to make ends meet, instead of working my way up the ladder. I can’t add that load of worry onto my already overburdened mother.”

Grant took a bite of his pasta and savored the spicy flavor as he mulled over Ariana Fitzpatrick’s dilemma. She not only had

the total responsibility of two unborn children, but all the hopes and dreams and concerns of her family rested on her fragile shoulders. And she believed she'd failed them.

"Ariana," he said gently. "Sooner or later, your family will have to be told. You can't keep two babies a secret forever."

"I know." She pulled in a ragged sigh. "I know. In fact, I really meant to all along, but first I wanted to get married—Mama's old-fashioned about that. I'd told the entire family about the engagement, but Benjy was always vague about the wedding date, not making a commitment until three days before the courthouse fiasco. I'd planned to let them know about the babies once we married. When that never happened and I had to tell them about the breakup, I couldn't bring myself to reveal the pregnancy at the same time. One shock was enough. But the longer I put off telling them, the harder it became."

"Procrastination's hell." He should know. Hadn't he said he'd "think about" that high-profile position with his dad's law firm instead of refusing straight off the way he'd wanted to?

"No kidding. But once the babies come and I have my life under control again, everything will be fine and I'll announce them to the world. Oh, Grant, I love these babies so much. My soul sings every time I think of watching them grow from perfect babies into beautiful, unique individuals. I can't wait to hold them and count their fingers and kiss their noses and—" One nail-chewed hand flew to her mouth. "I'm sorry. You didn't ask for all that motherly gushing."

Some odd emotion caught in his chest at Ariana's passionate speech. He'd dreamed of seeing that expression on Tiffany's face, of sharing the unbridled joy of pregnancy and childbirth with the woman he loved. But Tiffany had put an end to such foolish fantasies.

Carefully, deliberately, he shifted his attention back to a woman who did want children. As an attorney he empathized to a certain point with all his clients, but Ariana didn't appear to want his sympathy. Though she'd made some mistakes, she didn't wallow in self-pity, and, unlike her ex-fiancé, Ariana took full responsibility for her life, embracing the good parts of a difficult situation. He admired that. Yes, that was it. He admired her grit and determination. And he'd darn well find a way to see her through this difficult period.

He was still contemplating the particulars of such action, when the rotund waiter approached the table. "Sir, would you and the wife care for some dessert?"

Not wanting to embarrass the waiter, Grant ignored the mistake and shook his head. "None for me. Ariana?"

"No, thank you." He could see that she was disconcerted by the waiter's presumption that they were married. She dipped her head and fiddled with the remaining linguini, a pose he found both lovely and alluring. Long, dark eyelashes curved over the crests of her delicate, pink-tinged cheekbones.

For a moment he let his mind slide into the thought planted by the hapless waiter and the memories of Tiffany's cruelty. What if

Ariana were his wife? What if those were his babies she carried beneath her heart? Regardless of Tiffany's taunts, he'd yearned to be a father, a good one. To take his children to the Cape and teach them to sail. Or to deep-sea fish and dig clams. Ariana would look beautiful walking barefoot along a sun-kissed beach with her rich, dark hair blowing in the breeze.

"Your check, sir." The waiter's voice pulled him out of his reverie. Swallowing thickly, he forced his gaze away from Ariana's lovely profile and reached for his wallet.

Teeth clenched, he reminded himself that the case against marriage was settled long ago. As much as the truth pained him, there would be no children for Grant Lawson. And certainly no wife. Never, never, never a wife.



## Chapter Three

Ariana shuffled work from the in-box to the out-box, wondering if she'd ever find the bottom of her desk. Exhausted, she wasn't sure how much longer she could handle the stress of the job, the stress of her situation, and the physical overload of carrying two championship wrestlers around her middle. Last night's quiet dinner had been an oasis, a momentary relief, that she'd needed badly. More than once today she'd wanted to cross the hallway to Grant Lawson's office and express her appreciation. Discretion and work held her back. Grant was a good guy, willing to do a fellow employee a huge favor. End of story. Never mind that she couldn't stop thinking about how much she'd enjoyed his company last evening.

A shadow fell across Ariana's desk. A tall shadow that smelled like expensive sandalwood. Peeking from beneath her eyelashes, she glimpsed well-groomed nails, a Rolex watch, and immaculate cuffs. She lifted her head, up, up, up, to find a pair of blue eyes boring into her. The babies reacted, shooting a karate chop to her backbone. What was it about blue eyes that made them behave that way?

"Are you ready?"

"For what?"

Grant tilted an eyebrow toward the clock hanging over the water cooler. "It's after five. Time to go home."

“So it is.” One of the other girls in the department hadn’t felt well this afternoon, and Ariana had taken over a project for her. She went back to proofreading the copy she’d spent the last hour and half writing, expecting Grant to go away.

He didn’t.

Laying her yellow pencil aside, she asked, “Did you need something?”

“Go ahead and finish up.” He crossed one arm over his middle and gripped his chin, stroking a thumb over his bottom lip. “I’ll wait.”

“For what?”

He tilted his thumb toward her. “For you to finish so I can drive you to your apartment.”

Ariana lay both palms against her desk and rolled backward. “Are we going to have this argument again?”

It wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate the ride home. She did. The ride didn’t disturb her. Grant did. He smelled too good, looked too perfect, and was far too thoughtful. And right now, her life was too much of a mess to think such things.

“No argument required. Since I drive near your neighborhood on my way home, dropping you off makes perfect sense. A crowded and noisy subway can’t be healthy for unborn children.”

“And what would you know about the needs of babies?” She was sorry the moment she spoke. A flicker of some pained emotion flashed in Grant’s eyes and disappeared, leaving blue ice behind. She’d hurt his feelings. And Ariana would rather lie to

the Supreme Court than hurt anyone.

"I'll need to drop this by Mr. Winter's office on the way out, but I accept your kind offer—on one condition."

He straightened in surprise. "And that would be...?"

"Dinner. At my place." She smiled, feeling much more in control of the situation and the funny twinges that occurred whenever Grant appeared. "I don't take favors without returning them."

"I took you to Gionni's because I wanted to."

"And I want to fix dinner for you."

"All right." He returned the smile, and darn if those tilted lips and crinkled eyes didn't cause another set of funny twinges. "You have discovered my weakness. Since I mostly eat out, I never pass up a home-cooked meal."

Ariana was aghast. He always ate out? "How does lasagna sound?"

"Perfect. And afterward, I have something to discuss with you."

"About my case?" Ariana gathered the copy and slipped the papers into a manila folder marked, Global Sales Ads. Locking her desk, she took her purse and came around to where Grant stood. "Did you locate Benjy?"

"Yes." Grant lightly placed two fingers against her back and guided her down the hallway, slowing his steps so she could take her time.

A feeling of foreboding sent goose bumps over Ariana's arms.

The fact that he didn't elaborate bothered her some. If Grant's hand hadn't felt so good against her back, she'd have worried. But what was there to worry about? A part of her really didn't want anything from Benjy. Sure, he had a responsibility to the twins, but if she could afford to support them on her own, she would. Benjy and the word responsibility didn't quite go together.

The sleek Lexus wound through the city past roaring buses and honking cabbies. Ariana relaxed against the smooth interior, grateful to be in the climate controlled confines of Grant's car once again. She was tired. Her back hurt. Tilting her head against the headrest, she closed her eyes. The calming strains of "Für Elise" filtered from the CD player. Her last memory was of turning onto Beacon Street.

"Ariana." A gentle, masculine voice sounded close to her ear. A strong hand touched her shoulder. "Ariana. Wake up."

Such a nice dream. She inclined her head, capturing the hand between her cheek and shoulder. Such a nice hand, so strong and tender.

"We're here."

Ariana roused then, aware of her surroundings and of Grant Lawson's warm scent inches from her nose. Her eyes fluttered open. Sure enough. Grant's blue eyes glittered in amusement.

"Did I fall asleep?" she asked, sitting up straighter though she could no more escape his nearness than she could run a hundred yard dash. From this distance she noted his five o'clock shadow, a rather appealing darkness along his upper lip.

He tilted away, and she breathed a sigh, whether of relief or pleasure, she didn't know. Catlike, she arched her shoulders and stretched, refreshed from the brief nap.

Grant opened her door and she stepped out of the car. A gentle breeze tugged at her hair and rattled the tree leaves overhead.

Inside the first floor of the brownstone, as they started up the stairs, a door to the right opened. A curly gray head popped out.

"Is that you, Ariana?"

"Hello, Mrs. Porter. Yes, it's me."

Her landlady bustled out into the entryway. "That Benjy fellow came by today."

Ariana's stomach lurched. What she didn't need right now was a confrontation with Benjy. "What did he want?"

"How should I know? I never liked that man." Mrs. Porter fluttered her hands. "I told him you moved."

With a laugh, Ariana wrapped the older woman in a hug. "You are my guardian angel."

"You need one." Mrs. Porter patted Ariana's belly. "And so do these babies." She caught sight of Grant then, standing quietly behind Ariana. Pointing one birdlike finger she asked, "And who is this?"

"This is my attorney. Grant Lawson meet Mrs. Pearl Porter, my landlady and unofficial watchdog."

Mrs. Porter pshawed as Grant took her tiny spotted hand in his long, lean one. "It's a pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Porter."

"High time this girl had someone to stand up for her." Her

gray curls bobbed. "Always doing for everyone else, but never a thought for herself."

"Oh, Mrs. Porter." Once her landlady began extolling her virtues, the situation could get downright embarrassing.

"Don't 'oh' me. I'm telling the truth, and you know it." Her black eyes focused on Grant. "Last spring a bunch of hoodlums started hanging out at our neighborhood park. And what did Ariana do? She went down there every evening to watch the children, sat on the bench until dark, and every time one of those thugs showed up, she'd call the police. Pretty soon they decided our park wasn't worth the effort and went somewhere else. Can you imagine? A little thing like Ariana taking on a gang of hoodlums?"

Heat crept up Ariana's neck. "Really, Mrs. Porter. Anyone would have done the same."

"But 'anyone' didn't. You did. And what about that halfway house?" Mrs. Porter slowed long enough to shudder, and Ariana jumped at the opportunity to make an escape before she bored Grant to death. The halfway house was not a good subject right now.

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