

ROMANE IN WINE COUNTRY

by

Magnolia “Maggie” Rivers

Published by

Freeman Group, L.L.C.
Des Moines, IA

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Dedication

To: You.

Yes, you. You picked up my book and hopefully are right now sitting in your favorite place about to begin reading a story I created for your reading pleasure. So, yes, this book is dedicated to you.

It is my hope, once you start reading this story, you absolutely cannot put it down until you reach “The End.” You can hate me for that while you head off to work with no sleep (as I do when I write).

But really, I just appreciate the fact you’re reading one of my books. I appreciate you, my reader, whether this is the first book of mine or your fourth or fifth.

I hope you enjoy it!

Love,

Maggie

P.S. I hope to meet you all in person someday!



To my son, J.D.

As always, you are the “wind beneath my wings”.

From the first moment I saw you, you became the air I breathe. Without you, my world would cease to exist.

I love ya, babe! You are my hero.

I am so very, very proud of you!



To my daughter-in-law, Sheila

Thanks for making him happy.



In loving memory of my mother,
Vaudeen Freeman
(July 14, 1924 - November 5, 2009)
"Mama, I miss you daily."



CHAPTER ONE

Lizzie Malone sat alone at the quaint little sidewalk café engrossed in her latest novel. She glanced up as the waitress sat a glass of wine down on the table in front of her.

“Compliments of the gentleman in the blue shirt over there,” said April, her waitress, as she nodded in the man’s direction.

Lizzie glanced in the direction April indicated. The man held up a paperback in her direction.

Her breath caught momentarily.

“I know,” said the waitress. “He is gorgeous, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is. However, he’s reading the same romance book I have here.”

“He reads a lot of those romance books. Must be gay or something.”

A smile spread across Lizzie’s lips.

“Well, that’s nice. Does he come here often?”

“Uh, he’s been here the last few days but can’t say I remember him before then, but then I’m new myself.”

“I thought you were. I hadn’t seen you here before yesterday myself.”

April picked up the empty plate from the table and headed back into the café.

“Interesting,” said Lizzie as she again glanced in the man’s direction. She noticed he had returned to reading her latest book.

Trying to return to her own reading, her mind kept wondering back to the man in blue. He was definitely gorgeous with dark hair and green eyes. However, reading a romance book was not something she saw men ordinarily doing. That fact alone intrigued her but added to it the fact he was reading a book she had written was even more intriguing.

Maybe she would just go over and introduce herself and thank the man for the drink.

Lizzie again looked in his direction. Not seeing him, she glanced around the area. He was gone.

Her thoughts were interrupted as Jennifer Clark pulled out a chair and sat down at her table.

“Hey girl, you aren’t going to believe the beautiful stilettos I found. Just take a look at these babies,” said Jennifer as she pulled a pair of candy apple red stilettos from her shopping bag.

“Oh my gosh, those are hot!”

“I know and they’ll look just sexy as all get out on my feet.”

“I wouldn’t be able to stand up in those things.”

“Honey, you don’t have to stand up. Just put them on your feet, sit there and look good.” Jennifer laughed.

“Jenn, you are too much.” Lizzie laughed.

“So what kind of trouble did you get me into?”

“Well, before you do Phelps’ book signing, I have you doing an interview with two radio stations. One for this afternoon and one

tomorrow morning. Both of those we can do from the book store. Then later in the week, I have a newspaper reporter joining us for dinner. She's going to do a feature article on you for the Sunday paper."

"You are absolutely incredible. Have I told you that before?" Lizzie chuckled.

"Yes, you have but you can tell me again."

"Well, I mean it. The day I hired you was my lucky day."

"What else are friends for? Besides you can't get all famous without me. We've been friends for so long you'd be lost without me."

"You got that right. Hey, by the way, what do you think of a man who reads romance books?"

"You mean other than he's gay?"

"He's not necessarily gay just because he reads a romance book."

"Well, I can't see Mr. Macho Guy reading one."

"He wasn't obviously gay if he was."

"You mean you saw a man reading a romance book?"

"Yes. He was sitting over there reading my book. He sent a glass of wine over to me. Then the next time I looked, he was gone."

"Interesting. Do you think he knew you were the author?"

"I suppose he could have but it's highly unlikely. I mean, my picture isn't in any of my books. It's not on my website or anything. I've been on radio but not TV and as far as I know my picture hasn't been in any newspaper either. I was sitting here reading the same book though. So maybe he was just acknowledging that."

“Well, you are cute, but I don’t think you have to worry about a gay guy hitting on you. He was just being one of the girls and letting you know he liked your choice of books.”

“I suppose so. So what time is the first interview?”

“In just about thirty minutes so we need to scoot back over to the shop.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?”

Leaving money on the table for her tip, Lizzie picked up her book, iPad and purse and followed Jennifer.

Lizzie finished the radio interview and hung up the phone.

“Did you make arrangements to get us a copy of that?” she asked.

“Of course. I can pick it up tomorrow. They’ll have it at the front desk,” said Jennifer.

“Alrighty then. You want to relax and grab a bite to eat or a drink or something.”

“Nope. Actually, I have you scheduled for a massage the rest of the afternoon. I want your creative juices flowing for that next book and a massage ought to do the trick.”

“That’s what I like about you. You think of everything.”

“Well, I’ll think of everything. I’ll keep on managing your bookstore and being your marketing and promotions agent and you just keep on writing. That’s what you do best.”

Lizzie maneuvered her way through the tables at the café and chose an out-of-the-way one to plop down her purse and carry bag. Adjusting the chair into the right position, she sat down and glanced around at the variety of people already there. She loved to be outdoors when she worked, and she had found this little sidewalk café after she moved out of her parent's home in San Francisco. Moving to Napa Valley had been her dream. That was Jenn's fault, too, ever since Jenn had talked her into cutting school their senior year for a shopping trip in Napa. After her book signing tomorrow morning, she might just do some shopping.

She was so glad she had talked her childhood friend into being her manager. Although the pay wasn't much at the moment, it was growing, and they had put it all in writing to protect each other. Now they were working hard to get Lizzie's books to the number one position on the New York Times' Best Seller List.

"Hey again," said April as she approached Lizzie's table.

"Well, hey yourself. You working again today?"

"Yep, I do six days a week here. Gotta pay for college somehow." She laughed. "What can I get you today?"

"Just a White Zinfandel. Thank you."

"Coming right up," said April as she turned and headed back inside.

Opening her laptop, Lizzie pulled up her latest manuscript and began her work.

Minutes later, Lizzie looked up as April sat a beautiful plate of a fruit and nut salad, complete

with blue cheese and pomegranate dressing in front of her.

“Oh goodness is it lunch time already?”

Lizzie asked as she quickly looked at her watch.

“It’s well past lunch time. You’ve been working too hard says the gentleman over there in the mint green shirt. Said he didn’t see you eat lunch so he ordered this for you and hopes you like it. Personally, I think you have an admirer!”

Lizzie’s gaze followed to the gentleman April had indicated. She nodded her head in his direction. She noticed he was still reading her book, too.

“Thanks, April. Would you take him a glass of whatever he’s drinking along with a salad and tell him I said there’s an empty chair at my table if he’d like to join me for lunch?”

“Well, it’s about time.” April laughed. “He’s been watching you for hours.”

“I’m really not that interesting. Just sitting here working.”

“I’ll go get this order right in,” said April as she turned and headed back into the café.

Minutes later, April walked over to the gentleman and sat a glass of sparkling water down in front of him.

“The lady thanks you and has ordered a salad for you, too, in case you’d like to join her for lunch,” she said as she smiled a Cheshire cat smile.

“I think I’ll do just that.” He smiled up at April as he picked up his bookmark from the table, placed it in his book, picked up the glass and stood up.

He walked over to Lizzie’s table.

“I thank you for the drink,” he said as he stood beside her table.

“You’re quite welcome. I thank you for this wonderful salad. Do join me. I ordered another one for you.”

“Thank you. That was very nice of you.”

“And thank you for the drink yesterday. I didn’t get a chance to say thank you. You were gone so fast.”

“I had a business meeting I had to get to. I see we like the same author.”

“Apparently we do,” replied Lizzie. “It’s not often I find a male reading a romance.”

“Well, here’s my philosophy on that. If you want to learn about women, you know, what they want, how they want to be treated, the things to do that really please a woman, read what they read and I find most women read romance.”

“Why do you say that?”

“For the most part, it’s women writing the book. Am I correct?”

“Yes, more women than men write romances.”

“A writer, no matter what the genre, writes what they know about. It stands to reason women know about romance. I’m guessing they put how they want to be treated between the pages of romance books. So, if I read some of the better authors, I learn what women like, how they want to be treated, the little special things they like. More men should be reading these books.”

“Well, I agree with you there.” Lizzie laughed. “If you get all that information out of one of these, then by all means spread the word where it’ll do some good.”

“And blow it for myself.” He laughed. “I’ve got the market on this right now. If I let the word out to other males, and they start treating ladies the way they should be treated, then I’m no longer above average in that department.”

Lizzie laughed.

“My name is Lizzie Malone, by the way.”

“How do you do, Lizzie, I’m Nico Varrelli. Call me Nick.”

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Nick.”

April came up to the table carrying the salad and sat it down in front of Nick.

“Can I get you two anything else?” she asked.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” asked Nick.

“I’d love it,” said Lizzie.

“Bring us a bottle of Sassicaia,” said Nick.

“I’m not sure if we have it, but if we do I’ll bring it right out,” replied April.

“Just tell Alex it’s for Nick.”

“Sure,” said April as she turned and walked off.

“Now, tell me all about yourself,” said Nick as he picked up his fork and dug into his salad.

“Nothing to tell really. Born in San Francisco. Moved here a few years back. What about you?”

“Napa Valley has been my home. I grew up working at a vineyard.”

“That must have been fun.”

April sat the wine bucket down with the bottle of wine.

“I can take it from here,” said Nick, as he took the bottle and corkscrew from April.

“Sure thing,” April replied and left.

Nick opened the bottle and poured two glasses, handing one to Lizzie as he picked up his own.

“To romance writers everywhere,” said Nick. “Definitely. To romance writers.”

Lizzie lifted her glass to his and then took a sip.

“Oh my,” she said, “this is wonderful. Thank you for selecting it.”

“It’s my favorite. One of the best wines Italy has to offer.”

“I’m definitely not a wine aficionado. I’ll bet growing up around it though you probably know quite a bit.”

“Some,” he said as he watched her lips touch the glass again. “I know which wines I like and which ones I don’t.” He laughed.

Lizzie enjoyed his laugh. It was the kind of laugh people enjoyed hearing. A deep laugh that made his eyes twinkle.

“That’s good. You have very good taste. This is just excellent,” she said as she took another sip.

Nick watched the sparkle in Lizzie’s blue eyes.

“So what made you leave San Francisco?”

“Actually a friend and I cut class our senior year and did a road trip to Napa. I fell in love with it and decided that someday I’d live here. So, here I am,” Lizzie said as she finished her salad.

Nick poured her another glass of wine.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to eat and run as they say. I have a meeting to get to. Would you have dinner with me this evening? Before you answer, let me say, I know you don’t know me

from any other weirdo here. But please bring your partner. I certainly don't mind him joining us. I'd just like some company."

"He's a she," Lizzie said.

"Even better. Two lovely ladies to keep me company over dinner would be wonderful and it's my treat."

"Alright, we'd love to join you."

"I'll send a car at seven." Nick stood. "It's been a pleasure. See you this evening."

Nick held out his hand toward Lizzie.

Lizzie extended hers.

"Here's the address," she said handing him a card. "It's been a nice work break," said Lizzie.

As Nick took her hand in his, he bent and placed a kiss on the back of her hand.

Surprised at such a gallant gesture, Lizzie smiled up at him.

"It's definitely been nice. Until this evening then."

"Jenn, Jenn, you here?" Lizzie deposited her computer bag on the couch and walked toward the balcony.

"In here," yelled Jennifer.

Lizzie turned and headed to the adjoining bedroom.

"Hey, girl. Just making last minute arrangements with the book store. Wanted to be sure everything was ready for tomorrow." Jennifer dropped her pen down onto the desk blotter.

"Is it all set?" Lizzie walked over to the edge of the desk and sat down in the chair beside it.

“Yep, everything’s all set. We’ll get there at nine, so we can have a little time to meet everyone and hand out the thank you gifts before you have to start signing. Get your hand limbered up. I’m hoping you sell out and have to take orders!” Jennifer laughed.

“So do I. So do I. Listen, we have a date for tonight.”

“Date. We?” Jennifer turned around in the chair so she could face Lizzie.

“Yes. Remember the guy I told you about who bought me a drink yesterday.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, he was back today. Actually sent a wonderful salad over to me. He sat down and ate with me and ordered a bottle of wine. It was the most delicious wine I think I’ve ever had. Anyway, we talked a bit about him reading romance books. Says he does it to learn about women. Anyway, he asked me to join him for dinner and told me to bring my associate with me. He thought my associate was a male until I corrected him. Said that was even better. He’d love to have dinner with two beautiful women. So he’s sending a car over at seven.”

“Sending a car?”

“That’s what he said. Probably a taxi or a company car or something. Anyway, you want to go to dinner? I don’t want to go alone.”

“Sure, why not. I’m always up for free food. So where we going? Do I need to dress up or what?”

“I have no idea. Maybe something like we wear for signings and stuff. A little bit dressy but not too dressy.”

“It’s a plan then. You need to wear the red dress. It makes you look like a million dollars.”

“Okay, I’m gonna go take my shower then do a little more writing before I have to get dressed.”

“Good. I like you writing. The more you write, the more books we have to sell. And the more books we sell, the quicker you make it to the New York Times Best Seller List.”

“And I can’t wait!”

Lizzie went into the bathroom closing the door behind her. Tonight would be fun. She needed a little down time, too. She’d been working hard at the bookstore these last few months. Business had slacked a little bit since the big chain store had come into town but her little bookstore was holding its own. She was bringing in more events to draw people into the store and that seemed to be helping. There were the local writers who came in on Tuesdays for their weekly writers’ meetings, complete with wine, she noticed and she loved having the children’s authors come in for story time. They’d read one of their own books and the children loved it and, of course, they’d want their very own copy of the book to take home. Very few moms or dads said no. It was a win-win for everybody.

Lizzie had also been writing hard and needed a slight break to replenish the creative well.

Stepping into the shower, she let the hot water beat against her skin. It felt good and her shoulder muscles needed a good hot water massage. After showering, Lizzie tossed on her robe and went out to the living room, picked up her laptop and began her work. A few hours later

she saved the draft on her computer and sat it down on the coffee table. She stretched then got up and headed into the bedroom.

“Jenn, you in here?” she called out.

There was no answer. Lizzie turned and headed out to the balcony. She spotted Jennifer in one of the deck lounges fast asleep.

“Oh my goodness, Jenn, Jenn, wake up. You look like a lobster!”

Jennifer stirred groggily.

“What?” Jennifer replied.

“You fell asleep out here in the sun. You’re toast.”

“Oh my goodness. This is going to blister big time if I don’t get some vinegar on it.”

Jennifer started to get out of the lounge.

“Ouch!” she said, “oh, this is so not good.”

“Here, let me help you up. You get inside and I’ll scout up some vinegar for you.”

Lizzie took Jennifer’s hand and pulled her up from the lounge.

“You go on into the bedroom and get out of those clothes and I’ll be in in a minute.”

Jennifer hurried into the bedroom her arms stretched away from her body.

Lizzie hurried to the kitchen for the vinegar and within minutes she hurried into the bedroom.

“You poor thing. Here, let me put some of this on your arms.”

“I don’t know what happened. I was just going to sit down out there for a minute and relax and the next thing I know, you’re waking me up.”

“Well, we’ll get you taken care of shortly.”

An hour later, Lizzie watched as a vinegared-up Jennifer tried to get comfortable.

“I’m sorry Lizzie, but I’m not going to be able to go to dinner with you. I’ll just have to fix something here.”

“That’s okay, sweetie. I can stay here with you. We’ll get something to eat and I can do more writing.”

“Absolutely not! You go out with Mr. whoever he is and I can stay here and relax. You’ve been working so hard lately and you have a big day tomorrow, too. You need the fun tonight.”

“Well, if you’re okay with it.”

“I’ll go fix myself something and just bring it in here,” said Jennifer as she tried to get up from the bed.

Lizzie grinned as Jennifer tried twisting and turning to get herself up with the least amount of pain.

“Stay right there. I’ll go fix you a sandwich and bring some snacks for you to have later. Here’s the remote and the phone. Now you just lay there and keep dousing yourself in vinegar.” Lizzie laughed.

Fifteen minutes later, Lizzie returned with a tray laden with two roast beef sandwiches, chips, pickles, and two brownies.

“Oh you are an angel, Lizzie, you brought me chocolate!”

“I’ve only known you all my life. I know what you like. Besides that’s what friends are for – to supply each other with chocolate!”

“You are so right!” Jennifer laughed. “Now you scoot and go get ready for your date.”

“If you’re sure you’ll be okay.”

“I’ll be fine. Go get gussied up.”

An hour later, Lizzie came out of the bathroom dressed in her red dress and the stilettos Jenn had insisted she wear.

“Wowzer,” said Jennifer, “that ought to knock him dead.”

“Is it overkill?”

“I don’t think so. It’s cute, a little dressy but not too much and it has sex appeal. You could get laid if you wanted.”

“Well, gee, thanks. I’ll have to think about that. He is mighty fine looking.” Lizzie laughed.

“See. Without me there you can just go for it! But, if he turns out to be a pervert, you know the code.”

“Yep and I’ll be sure and use it.”

Lizzie heard the doorbell and headed downstairs to answer it.

Opening the door, she saw a gentleman in a uniform and just beyond him a white limo.

“Hello,” she said.

“Your car, Miss.”

“Thank you. I’ll be right out.” She quickly shut the door and headed to the bottom of the stairs.

“The car’s here,” she yelled up to Jennifer. “You sure you don’t want to go.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’ll be fine here.”

“Okay, then, I’ll see you later. I won’t be too late. I know I have to get up early in the morning and look my best. No bags under the eyes or anything.” She laughed.

“Have fun!”

“Okay and I’ll lock the door behind me.”

“Great! See ya later!” Jennifer yelled.

Lizzie grabbed her purse and headed out the door.

Walking outside, Lizzie stood for a moment. The warm night air was just right for her, not too cool and not too hot although she preferred her climate on the hot side.

She watched as the driver extended his arm to her. Taking hold of his arm she walked out to the limo and waited as he opened it. Lizzie's heart beat a little faster as she saw Nick climb out. He had not mentioned the car he would be sending for her would be a limo. This had to set him back a few bucks.

"Hello again," he said as he walked up, took her fingers lightly in his, bent down and kissed the back of her hand before engulfing it in both of his. "Your carriage awaits, m'lady," he said as he stepped aside and took her elbow. "Shall we?"

The scent of Nick's cologne floated through the air. Lizzie wanted to take a deep breath and inhale the sheer fragrance of him.

"I wasn't expecting this," said Lizzie. "A taxi was more what I had in mind." Sitting down in the limo, she watched as Nick headed around to the other side while the driver closed the door and headed to the driver's side.

"I find this tends to get me where I want to go a little faster than a taxi and James is a much better driver."

"So this is your personal car?"

"Kind of. It belongs to my business."

"Just what kind of business are you in?"

"I manage a couple of rental places."

"The rental business must be good here."

"It has its days." Nick laughed.

“Well, it’s very nice. Thank you.”

“I hope you like Italian food.”

“I love it.”

“I have reservations for us at a little out of the way place that serves the best Italian anything. I think you’ll like it.”

“If it’s Italian, I’ll love it.”

Fifteen minutes later James pulled the limo in front of an older little building, sitting on the corner in an older part of the neighborhood. To Lizzie it looked as though it had been sitting right there for the last one hundred years. It looked a little tired and run down on the outside at least.

James opened the limo door for Nick.

“I’ll be right around to get the door for you,” said Nick as he climbed out. Lizzie glanced out the window at the restaurant. It looked every bit like an Italian villa as did some of the other businesses close by.

As the limo door opened, Lizzie turned and placed one long slender leg out. She knew her legs were her best feature and looked even better in Jenn’s new pair of red stilettos. The little red dress rose slightly revealing an extra inch of leg.

Glancing upward, she saw a look of appreciation cross Nick’s face. Standing up, she was within sheer inches of him. She looked upward and saw the fire ignite within his eyes. A tingle ran down her spine to her center core. For just a moment, she could see his indecision. He leaned forward ever so slightly as if to kiss her. Lizzie’s breath stopped. Then she watched as the indecision was replaced by a hesitation and finally he stepped aside, placing his hand on the small

of her back, she allowed him to guide her into the restaurant.

Inside the restaurant looked much better than the outside. It was very clean, and the tables were decorated with pristine white tablecloths with a flower vase on each table. Off to the side she could see a room which was obviously the bar area. People were relaxed back, talking with each other as they shared a bottle of wine. An unlit fireplace lined the wall.

“Mr. Varelli, how wonderful to see you again,” said a middle-aged woman who stood at the hostess stand. “Everything is ready for you. Right this way,” she said as she picked up two menus and walked toward the back of the restaurant. Entering a smaller room, she motioned them to a lone table sitting in the middle of the room.

Before they could reach the table, a short little grey-haired lady rushed in from the side.

“Nico, my bambino, it is so good to have you here,” she cooed as she threw her arms around Nick’s waist, her head fit against his chest.

“Mama Carlotta, I have missed you,” replied Nick as he pulled her into a bear hug and lifted her from the floor.

She laughed.

“Put me down, put me down.”

“Not before I get my kiss.”

Nick bent his head down so she could reach his cheek.

“There, that should hold you.”

“Only for a few minutes.” Nick returned her to a standing position. “Mama, I’d like you to

meet someone,” said Nick as he held out his hand for Lizzie to join him.

“And who is this beautiful young thing that has stolen my Nickie’s heart already?”

“Now stop playing matchmaker, Mama. This is Ms. Lizzie Malone. She actually liked our city enough to move here a few years back.”

“Well, I don’t blame you one little bit. Napa has everything. Sit, sit, let me get you some wine and something to eat.”

“You know what I like, now don’t you?” teased Nick.

“Oh you just hush now. I know how to take care of my bambino!” She turned and rushed back out through the door she had come from.

“I like her,” said Lizzie as she sat in the chair Nick had pulled out for her.

“She’s the mama I never had.”

“Well, when I think of an Italian mama, she’s it. May I ask about your own mom?”

“My mother died in childbirth. I never knew her.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. No child should have to go through life without their mother.”

“My grandmother and grandfather lived with us. It was a good childhood as far as I was concerned. But enough about me. So, I told you why I read romance books, now tell me, why do you read them?” He smiled.

“Oh that’s easy. It’s for the happy ever after! The feel good at the end. There’s so few happy ever afters in real life anymore. You read about somebody else’s troubles and how they manage to work through them and get to the happy ever after. I love a good happy ever after. Don’t you?”

“Yes, I do and you would be correct in that there are so few of those in real life.”

Mama Carlotta came scurrying back through the door with a bottle of wine.

“Now, bambino, I pour your lovely lady friend a glass of good wine and she’ll say yes before the night is over.”

“Here, let me do that and you go do what you do best,” he said.

“I feed you good, you wait.” After handing the wine to Nick, she turned and scurried away.

Nick opened the bottle.

“Sassicaia is an excellent wine,” he said.

“You asked for that one before. It must be your favorite.” Lizzie passed her wine glass to him.

“That it is. It’s a blend of four different reds and the best Italy has to offer.”

“The glass I had earlier was excellent.”

“I’m glad you liked it.”

“Do you always get this room to yourself like this?”

“Only when accompanied by a pretty lady like yourself.” He smiled.

Mama Carlotta hurried back into the room followed by two waitstaff. She stood aside as the waiters placed the plates of food onto the table.

“Now you eat up. I will fatten you up in no time,” she said. “You will like my osso bucco. I make it the traditional way. And, I accompany it with fresh broccoli. And for dessert there’s zabaglione. Now you eat, drink. I have work to do.” She turned and was gone before Lizzie could offer a thank you.

“This looks delicious,” said Lizzie.

“Taste it. You’re in for a treat.”

Lizzie took a bite.

“Oh my goodness, this is absolutely delicious,” she said.

“There’s none better. Mama knows her cooking.”

“This is definitely a treat. I never knew this place existed. I’ll have to tell everyone about it.”

“Tell me about back home. What was it like growing up in San Francisco?”

“Oh, it’s a big city.” She laughed. “I mean San Francisco is okay but I wanted something a little smaller, more picturesque. I wanted a place where people would get to know you. When you walk into stores, restaurants and places, I wanted it to be like when you walked in here. Everybody knows you, or knows your parents or somebody. It’s like you’re all family. I love it.”

“Well, one thing’s for sure, next time you visit this restaurant, Mama Carlotta will know you and she’ll most definitely make you feel at home.” He laughed.

“Now I can believe that.”

Nick let out a hearty laugh.

“You’re just always looking for that happy ending.”

“Yes, I am and it’s there if you really look for it.”

“You are right. There’s always a positive side to everything. Sometimes you just have to look harder than other times.”

Mama Carlotta swooshed into the room with two waiters trailing behind her.

“My bambino,” she said as she reached over and pinched Nick’s cheek. “You eat my zabaglione. I make it with the Marsala wine and you will like it.”

“Ah, Mama, you know the way to a man’s heart,” he replied as he took her hand in his. “When are you going to marry me?”

“Oh you, my Luigi will get you good.”

“When you’re ready to dump him you just let me know. I need a good-looking woman like yourself.”

“Oh bambino, you’re such a talker. Here you eat now.”

She motioned for the waiters to serve the dessert.

“Your lady friend will like. You eat.” She turned and followed the waiters out.

“You will definitely love this dessert. Mama makes the best zabaglione there is.”

“If it’s anything like the rest of her cooking, it’ll be awesome.”

Lizzie took a bite and closed her eyes as the sweet sensation took over her senses.

“Oh my gosh, that’s just heavenly!”

“Told you it’d be fantastic.”

Finishing up the last of the meal, Nick stood and held his hand out for Lizzie.

“Come with me and let me show you something.”

“Okay, what is it?” Lizzie said as she got up from the table.

“You’ll see,” he said as he led her down a hallway.

Opening the back door he guided Lizzie to the corner of the porch and pulled back the covering on the door of the dog house.

“Take a peek,” he said.

“Oh my gosh, what little cuties. Those are the cutest little things. Oh my gosh. What are they?”

“They’re chihuahuas.”

“Oh my gosh, I need one of those. They’re so cute. They’re as tiny as mice.”

“They’re only a week old. Mama showed them to me last time I was here.”

“They’re just so darling.”

“Mama Carlotta took them all in. The mommy showed up here. Her little belly almost dragging the ground so Mama fixed her a place here and she’s been here ever since. At first, Mama had her little house inside but the little mama didn’t like it. She kept going to the door wanting out. Carlotta would let her out and the little thing’d just stand there on the porch. Mama Carlotta finally got the idea. She wanted her bed out here. She didn’t like being inside. So Mama moved it out here and the little dog crawled right inside, laid down and went to sleep. She had the pups out here, too.”

“How sweet. They’re just so cute.”

“That little black one right there,” he said as he pointed to one of the little dogs, “she’s mine.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s the one I love! She’s such a cutie. What’s her name?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“She’s such an angel!”

“Angel, Angel. Yes, I like that name. I’ll name her Angel.”

Lizzie laughed. “That fits her perfectly. When do you get her?”

“In a few more weeks.”

“She’s so pretty.”

Lizzie turned to look at Nick. His gaze was directly on her.

“What?” she said as she tried to glance at herself. “Do I have food on my face or something?” she asked.

“Yes, let me get it for you,” he said as he leaned in toward her, his face so close she could feel his breath.

Nick leaned closer and she felt his lips touch hers, softly yet she could taste his desire.

“I have wanted to do that all night long,” he said as he slightly pulled away.

“I think I’ve wanted you to do that all night, too.”

“Could I try it again?” he asked with a slight grin.

“I was hoping you would,” Lizzie whispered.

Nick gently pulled her to him.

Tracing her lips with his fingers, he said, “I think you have something here.” He placed a kiss where his fingers were. “And here.” He placed another kiss. “And right here.” His lips covered hers.

She felt heat. Heat that ran down to her core and made her warm. It felt good. She didn’t believe in love at first sight. At least not until now.

CHAPTER TWO

"I have a long day tomorrow. I should take you back." Nick said as he released Lizzie.

"So do I."

Nick leaned over and replaced the cover in front of the dogs' bed. Taking Lizzie by the hand, he led her back through the hall and out toward the front.

"Mama," he said as he stuck his head into the kitchen.

"Bambino, did you enjoy your food?" Mama Carlotta asked.

"It was the best ever," he said. Every time I come here you outdo the last time. Divorce Luigi and come away with me," he said as he kissed Mama on the head.

"Oh you go on," Mama said. "You bring your lady friend with you next time, too."

"Thank you," said Lizzie. "The meal was wonderful."

"You come back and I fatten you up good, you hear."

"I will be back and I'll tell all my friends."

Nick placed his hand at Lizzie's waist and led her outside to the waiting car. The driver stood beside the open door and waited as Nick helped Lizzie inside. She could hear Nick talking with the driver before he joined her in the limo.

The driver shut Nick's door then took his place in the driver's seat. Lizzie watched as he closed the window between the front and back seats allowing them privacy.

"Thank you for a wonderful supper, Nick. That was just fabulous."

"I'm glad you liked it. It's one of my favorite places."

"I can see why."

"Would you care to have a nightcap before I take you home?" asked Nick as he opened the wine compartment and took out a bottle.

"I would love one more, thank you."

Nick opened the bottle and poured them both a glass.

"May I make a toast?"

"Certainly."

"To the most beautiful woman I've met in quite some time." Nick held his glass toward Lizzie.

"Oh my goodness. That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

Nick laid his fingers against her cheek turning her face slightly toward him.

"I meant every word. You are beautiful. How can I say this? You are pretty on the outside. You have the most beautiful blue eyes and your hair is striking. You're a beautiful lady outside but inside, inside I see the real you. You shine. It's like your halo is inside. You're the most beautiful person inside and you fascinate me."

"Oh my, I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything," said Nick as he leaned into her.

Lizzie anticipated the kiss she knew was coming. Her insides melted with desire. She

wanted this man and yet she'd only met him. What was it about him that drew her to him? Could she call it love? She'd never felt quite like this before.

There had been a few other men in her life but nothing had felt quite like this. It was familiar and yet not quite the feeling she recognized as love. She was comfortable with Nick, as though they had been long lost friends who had been apart for years and yet picked up where they left off. At the same time, he was tantalizing and exciting. He was new and intriguing but still there was a familiarity. It seemed as though she'd known him all her life.

Nick's lips touched hers, soft at first, then demanding. He wanted entrance to her mouth and she opened to him, allowing him time to explore before their tongues danced a song as old as time itself.

Lizzie's heart beat faster and she could hear the blood coursing through her veins. Her breathing seemed to stop and time evaporated into nothing but sensations.

Nick pulled back ending the most passionate kiss she had ever had. She didn't want it to stop, didn't want the cold she felt without him. She pleaded with her eyes for it to continue and Nick gave to her. His lips covered hers, the kiss passionate with fire. He kissed her neck, his hand sliding down her arm to her thigh. She felt the heat of his lips as he kissed across her collarbone and up the other side of her neck, back to her lips.

She wanted this man. But her mind screamed at her. This was only a one-night stand and she was not the kind of woman to be

satisfied with just one night. One night with this man was not enough. It would never be enough.

This man was different. This man made her want.

She wanted to feel his skin pressed against hers. Hot and sweaty in a dance as old as time itself. She needed this man. She wanted this man. There was something deep within her that yearned for this man and this man alone.

If she gave in to her own desires, would she forever regret it? She would go home at the end of the night and leave him here. He came from a world of limos at his beck and call. She came from a world of working hard to keep a roof over her head. Sure, he knew all the right words to say and all the right things to do. After all, he read her romance books. He knew her heart and soul. But she would be just another conquest. That was the reason he read the books in the first place. He knew exactly how to wrap women around his finger and he could have as many as he wanted.

She would always have the memory but would that be enough. If she didn't give in to those desires, she knew she would regret it forever. This was her one chance to feel total love. She wanted that feeling but would it be enough to last a lifetime?

Nick reached for the limo's phone.

"Home, James."

CHAPTER THREE

Hanging the phone back on its hook, Nick pulled her tight in his arms and planted kisses on her temple.

Twenty minutes later, the limo pulled to a stop and Lizzie heard the driver's door open and seconds later Nick's door.

"Sit tight," he said as he stepped outside the car.

A moment later, James opened her door with Nick standing ready to help her. He extended his hand and she took it. Watching Nick's expression, she extended one leg as the dress opened slightly to reveal her slender thigh. The look of hot, molten passion on his face did not go unnoticed. She liked it when a man appreciated her attributes and her legs were the joy of any leg man. Adding to those legs her red stilettos only made them appreciate her even more. Nick was no exception.

Placing his hand at the small of her back, Nick led her to the door. She could tell the house was surrounded by vineyards as far as she could see. Nick opened the door and dim lights came on instantly. He guided her inside.

"Welcome home, Mr. Varelli," came a voice seemingly out of the blue.

Lizzie looked at Nick.

“It’s my house.” Nick smiled. “My house talks to me.”

“I see you have a guest, Mr. Varelli, shall I light a fire?”

“Yes, please,” Nick replied.

“Your house talks to you,” said Lizzie.

“Yes, it’s all computerized.”

“Oh my gosh,” whispered Lizzie, “I’m not sure I could ever get used to that.”

“Actually, when you live alone, it’s kind of nice. Celeste, some mood music please.”

“Yes, sir. Will the instrumental *Love is Blue* fit your mood for the evening, sir?”

“Yes, Celeste, that will do nicely, thank you.”

Lizzie heard the soft music begin to play.

“That’s nice.”

Nick took her by the hand.

“Come with me.”

He led her down a short hallway and into the room with the waiting fire. Even though it was warm outside, the house was cool enough to make the warmth from the fire just right.

Nick led her to a wide sofa.

“Sit here and I’ll get us a glass of wine.”

Lizzie watched as he opened the chilled bottle and poured two glasses.

Handing her one, he sat down beside her.

“To a wonderful evening, with an awesome lady,” he said.

“To a very wonderful evening.”

After taking a sip, Nick sat his glass on the end table, leaned over and softly touched his lips to Lizzie’s.

She wanted the kiss. His lips were intoxicating and she felt drunk with passion. This

man did things to her without even trying. Her skin tingled, her core ached with desire. She wanted more. So much more.

Nick kissed her lips and nuzzled at her ear.

“Do you want me to stop?” he whispered.

It took a moment for what he was asking to register in her thoughts.

“No, I don’t think I do.” Lizzie knew she would regret this later and yet she also knew she would regret it if she didn’t.

“That’s good because I don’t want to,” he said as he continued kissing her ear lobe. His hands plunged into her hair pulling her closer. His lips demanding. She could taste the wine on his lips and she wanted to drink in the very essence of him. Wave after wave of sheer pleasure danced through her body as he kissed and licked his way down the side of her neck.

Lizzie’s hands found their way to his hair and her fingers clutched at the strands.

Nick pulled back and stared into her eyes. Her thoughts plunged into the luscious dark emerald color of his. Her senses heightened. This man was gorgeous and sexy all rolled into one. The ruggedness of his five o’clock shadow turned her on even more.

Standing, Nick reached down and picked her up off the couch. With quick strides, he headed down the hallway and with one foot shoved the bedroom door open. Moments later she lay on the oversized king bed with Nick standing beside it. He quickly undid his jeans and grabbing hold of either side of his shirt, he tore it open as buttons flew across the room. Lizzie’s breath caught as she let out a guttural

moan. She wanted to grab hold of the curly hair that grew on his muscled chest.

Nick shoved his jeans over his hips and let them drop to the floor.

Lizzie's thoughts halted at the sheer beauty of his manliness. Broad shoulders, narrowed hips, muscled thighs all made her quiver inside.

Prying off his shoes with his feet, he stepped out of the jeans and crawled onto the bed with her. Covering her body with his, he kissed her lips. She moaned. Her arms wrapped around him and her hands pulled his head harder into the kiss. She felt his chest pressed tightly against her breast, the hair teasing her nipples. He smelled of male flesh and it drove her wild. Her hands rubbed his back and grabbed at his flesh. She wanted to devour him completely.

"Let's get you undressed," he said as he pulled away from her. Pulling her to her feet, he unzipped the back of her red dress and let it drop to the floor. She stood there in her red stilettos and red lace bra and panties. She watched as desire darkened his eyes even more.

"You are the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on," he said, his voice heavy with desire. He trailed his hands around her and undid her bra pulling it from her shoulders and letting it fall. Ducking his head, he kissed the tops of her breasts and kneaded them with his hands.

Just his touch ignited every fiber of her being. She was on fire. She moaned as he continued kissing her breast, licking and nibbling as he went. His breathing was harsh, uneven and knowing she was causing it sent her flames higher. Kissing his way down her ribcage, he hooked his thumbs into her panties and slid them

down her legs, trailing kisses as he went. Reaching the core of her, he nuzzled the hair and teased at her clit with his fingers. He sat back on his feet and watched her as he ruthlessly thrust his fingers inside. One hand nipping and kneading at her breast, his thumb pressing against her clit and his fingers bringing her to the edge of madness. She heard herself moaning and she rode the wave of pleasure as he expertly took her over the edge. Her legs, too weak to hold her any longer, collapsed and she fell into his strong arms.

Again, Nick placed her on the bed and crawled in with her.

“Turn about’s fair play,” she said as she rolled over on top of him, kissing his mouth, his neck and down onto his chest. She flicked at his nipples with her red nails and listened as his breath caught.

His hands found her hair and he clenched fistfuls of long curls.

She continued working her way down his chest and across his belly. She stopped at his bellybutton and stuck her tongue in and out. He groaned loudly and she could feel his manhood harden even more against her breasts. Continuing her journey downward, she licked slightly at his shaft, his breath coming in short bursts. It gave her pleasure knowing she could make him lose control and she intended to do just that.

CHAPTER FOUR

She licked slightly across the top, her tongue swirled around the outside ridge and she nipped lightly with her teeth.

His groans filled the air.

Her mouth covered the top of his shaft and she hummed softly. He tried to thrust further into her mouth but she held him at bay with both hands on either thigh. She listened as his breathing became even more ragged. She slid her mouth over the top of him, holding his sack in one hand, taking him deep into the recesses of her mouth. She moved slowly at first, up and down, then faster as she felt his pleasure, his sack seemingly tightening with each thrust. He bucked against her onslaught. Carefully, she slid one finger to his back door and rubbed momentarily, applying just the slightest of pressure. At that precise moment his juices filled her mouth and he let out a gut-wrenching groan of pure pleasure. Lizzie drank in the essence of him until her mouth overflowed.

“Dang woman, you’re astonishing!” he said once he regained some semblance of composure.

“You aren’t bad yourself,” she said.

“Give me a couple of minutes and I’ll show you just how bad I can be.”

He pulled her up by his side and snuggled her close, caressing her skin.

"I'm hoping you can be really, really bad," she said.

Her fingers curled through his chest hair and she felt him kiss the top of her head.

"You definitely bring out the worst in me," he said with a laugh.

"I certainly hope so."

"You are insatiable woman!"

"Have I met my match?"

"You just might have," he said as he rolled her over onto her back and stuck a knee between her legs separating them.

Lowering himself onto her, he kissed at her breasts, then thrust his already hardening shaft into her hot spot. She took all of him inside her and felt her muscles clench around him. Slowly at first, heating her insides with each plunge. Lizzie kissed at his shoulder bones biting into muscles, her fingers scratching against his back. Skin slapped against skin in a dance as old as time itself. Her pleasure grew with each thrust, each breath more ragged than the last.

His fingers teased at her nipples and kneaded her breasts. She could feel the waves of her orgasm building and she was torn between wanting it to last a few seconds longer and needing that blessed release of pure pleasure. He thrust into her core as hard as he could and she plunged over the edge as he caught her scream in his kiss. She felt the moment her muscles squeezed his shaft in the crashing waves of her orgasm. He spilled himself inside her and she felt the wet, hotness of his juices flowing into her, soothing every hot, raw crevice. She lay there,

her lungs grasping at the air for breath. Both sated, she wrapped her arms around him as he lay against her side. Closing her eyes she listened to his ragged breathing until it had resumed a gentle relaxed rhythm.

“This could be a very long night,” he whispered in her ear.

“Oh how I wish it could be but I do have someplace to be at nine in the morning.”

“Can you rearrange that someplace?”

“I’m afraid I can’t. It’s business and it’s been scheduled for months in advance,” she said.

“That’s too bad. Tell you what, we can take a shower, get dressed and I’ll take you back to your place. I won’t like it but you’ll need some sleep.”

“A shower sounds good.”

Nick crawled out of bed and pulled Lizzie with him.

“Celeste, shower please,” he said.

He led Lizzie to the bathroom, where water was already pouring from all three shower heads. They waited a moment as the shower doors opened.

“Water temperature is now to your liking,” said Celeste.

“I have never been inside a talking house. This is definitely a first for me.”

“I’m glad you like it. I’d seen similar things done so I incorporated a lot of it into mine. Celeste pretty much controls the entire house.”

“Very impressive.”

“Be careful stepping into the shower. I like my showers hot.”

“So do I,” said Lizzie as she held her hand out testing the water. “Perfect.” She stepped into the shower with Nick following.

Nick reached around her and grabbed the bar of soap.

“Let me soap you up,” he said as he wet the bar and started rubbing it onto Lizzie’s shoulders and arms. Turning her around, he soaped her back before turning her back around to face him. “Now the part I really like to soap,” he said as he began to slide the soap over her breasts. Time and time again, he circled her breasts with the soap, paying close attention to each nipple as it hardened under his hands.

Nick leaned down and kissed her mouth, running his tongue inside. She knew he had to taste the male muskiness of himself lingering there. It excited her more. She felt the soap sliding between her legs as his hand pushed back and forth. His tongue danced with hers and she heard the soap drop to the shower floor as she felt his fingers slide inside her. She sensed the pressure of his thumb against her clit as his fingers thrust in and out. She widened her stance to give him more freedom and he thrust even faster. Her pleasure rose with each movement.

Her orgasm grabbed her by surprise and she rode the wave as he gave her what she wanted.

Nick caught her in his arms as her legs weakened from the force of her orgasm as it overtook her senses. He pressed her back against the shower wall and lifted her to his waist.

Lizzie wrapped her legs around him and felt the erotic sensations as he thrust himself into her over and over. Her breathing quickened into

short bursts. She bit into his shoulder as he again took her to the heights of another orgasm. She felt the force of him as he released himself into her and she buried her moan into the flesh of his shoulder. Sated, he completed her.

“You are amazing,” he whispered into her ear when his voice returned.

Slowly he lowered her back to the shower floor and she stood wrapped in his arms.

“I know you have to be up early in the morning,” he said, “and if you want, James can drive us to your place tonight or in the morning, whichever is easiest for you. Although I’d like it if you stayed but I understand if you can’t,” he said.

“I’d like to stay, too, but I really can’t,” she replied. “Listen, I went into this with my eyes wide open. I don’t normally do one night things but I made an exception and it’s okay.”

Lizzie tried to keep her voice steady so he wouldn’t catch the trembling she was trying to control. She already knew she had fallen head over heels for a man she didn’t even know and more than likely would never see again. Love at first sight had never been something she believed in. All the other men she’d known had taken time to get to know and most never got to the love-making stage.

Once she really got to know them most weren’t worth the effort. One turned out married, another turned out to have a girlfriend in every city but most just didn’t fit with her idea of a soul mate. Nick did. He obviously had some money but that wasn’t what drew her to him. He was kind, considerate and she felt completely at ease with him. He knew all her hot buttons without having to tell him. He made her feel alive.

“Okay, then, we’ll get dressed and I’ll have James bring the car around. But, call me when you’re done with your meeting. I really want to see you again, okay? I’ll give you my card so you can reach me.”

“Alright, I’ll call when I’m done.”

Nick kissed her lips and Lizzie clung to him wanting so much more.

“Think there might be just enough time for a repeat before we go?” asked Nick as he pulled back slightly, his forehead resting against hers.

“You know, I was just thinking that same thing myself. I think I could make time if you can.”

“Oh I know I can,” he said as he picked her up and headed back toward the bed.

Placing her gently on the bed, Nick crawled in beside her.

CHAPTER FIVE

The line for autographed copies of Lizzie's latest book continued around the corner of the aisle. Lizzie continued smiling, talking and autographing as fast as she could. It was nice to have so many fans show up at her book store for her first signing in Napa and she was so excited. Jenn had done an excellent promotion and marketing job and now it was Lizzie's job to entertain her fans. She'd already had signings in the cities surrounding Napa but this was the first time the customers who frequented her bookstore would learn that she was also a writer herself.

The line finally slowed and Lizzie took a much needed break and headed to the ladies room while Jennifer waited at the table for any fans who might show up at the last minute. Even though the advertised time was up, they always hung around for at least thirty minutes just in case. That had proven worthwhile more times than not.

Finally, boxes packed and stored in the back room again, Lizzie caught sight of Nick standing at the front of the store talking with a lady. She watched as he placed his hand to her elbow and guided her out of the store and into the waiting limousine. She was smiling as James

opened the door of the limo and Nick helped her inside before walking to his own side and climbing in.

“What’s wrong?” asked Jennifer as she saw the look on Lizzie’s face.

“What?” asked Lizzie as it finally registered that Jennifer was speaking to her.

“I said, what’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost or something.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just thought I recognized someone, but I was mistaken,” she said, as she bent to load the last box onto her rolling cart.

Lizzie’s heart hurt. She knew she had no right to be jealous. After all, she had gone into a one-night stand knowing that was exactly what it was. Nothing more. But still, the idea of Nick with someone else wasn’t pleasant. The woman was young and beautiful.

It had been a good day. Lizzie and Jenn had both been working hard the last few months and now they had scheduled the rest of the day off to do some sightseeing and a little shopping.

Lizzie sat in the passenger seat of Jenn’s car and took her cell phone out of her purse. She wanted to call Nick as she’d promised but the memory of him with someone else got in the way. She sat for a while and stared at the phone wishing she had given him her number instead. What if she called and that girl answered? What if she called and he answered but the girl could be heard in the background? She didn’t like those thoughts at all. Stuffing her cell phone back into her purse she watched as Napa Valley slowly disappeared as they made their way to San Francisco.

The rest of the day would be fun. They had tickets to see Alcatraz and had planned to drive down Lombard Street and be typical tourists for a few hours.

Getting Nick out of her mind would be difficult but maybe a relaxing afternoon would help.

CHAPTER SIX

Months passed with thoughts of Nick not very far from Lizzie's mind. She busied herself with creating more stories and trying hard to forget.

"I just got off the net," said Jennifer as she walked into Lizzie's office, "are you ready for this? Your latest hit the New York Times Best Seller list!"

"Oh my gosh, that's awesome," squealed Lizzie, "I can't believe it! This is just fantastic!"

"This is the best thing that could happen. I mean you have the big Women's Expo signing tomorrow and this book hits the big time!"

"I knew it was selling like hotcakes but I didn't dream it was that good."

"It's the most poignant thing I think you've ever written. I mean this girl was really in love with this guy. I could feel her pain when she left. It's not a happy ever after but it's one of those it'll have to do for now kind of stories. You've never done one of those before but I liked it. It's abso-freaking-lutely awesome. You are writing the sequel next aren't you?"

"I guess I'll have to but I don't have any ideas about it. Maybe I can come up with something," said Lizzie. "Now, we need to grab something to eat and pack up stuff so we can

head out in the morning to the Expo. We can load the van tonight and not have to get up so early in the morning.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” said Jennifer. “How about if I make us some BLTs and you start with the packing. After we eat we can load it all in the van and we’ll be ready.”

“Alrighty then. I’m a packing!”

“Oh by the way, we have another meeting with the lawyers tomorrow afternoon.”

“I don’t understand why? I’m not selling my bookstore. I don’t care how much money these people offer.”

“I’m with you. I wish they’d never come here in the first place. Napa doesn’t need a chain bookstore. It just needs your little place. We serve our customers. We know their likes and dislikes. A chain store is so impersonal. I don’t like it one little bit.”

“Well, this Board of Directors or whatever they are can just go look elsewhere. I’m not selling and that’s my final answer.”

A few hours later, dinner eaten and the van loaded, Lizzie closed the van door and locked it.

“Well, we’re all set. I’m going to go take a shower and head to bed. Six a.m. will come way too early for me.” Lizzie laughed.

“Yeah, I’m not going to be far behind you. Tomorrow will be a very long trying day.”

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Morning came early but Lizzie was up, dressed and ready to go.

“You ready yet,” yelled Jennifer through the door to Lizzie’s bedroom.

“Be right out there.”

Two hours later they pulled into the parking lot and began unloading their gear. Having done this many times before, each knew exactly what to do and within an hour had their display table set up for business.

“Okay, now you take your seat and catch your breath,” said Jennifer. “I’ll go scout out some water and coffee and be back in a few.”

“Great, I could use the coffee.” Lizzie laughed.

Lizzie watched as other vendors set up their tables and readied their areas for business. She hoped today would be a good day for all of them as well as herself.

It wasn’t long before the doors were opened to the public and little by little the place began to fill with women shoppers. A line began to form in front of her table and three hours later it hadn’t slowed a bit.

“Ms. Masters,” said one fan, calling her by her pseudonym. “I’m such a fan of your books.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your loyalty,” said Lizzie as she autographed the book and handed it to the young lady.

“I have every one of them. I already have a copy of this one and I’ve read it from cover to cover but I gave it to a friend so I could come and get an autographed one.” She laughed nervously.

“Well, I certainly appreciate that. Did you like this one?” asked Lizzie.

“Oh, I think it’s the best one yet and I can’t wait to see what happens. You are writing the sequel aren’t you?” The young lady seemed so excited.

“It looks like I’m going to have to.” Lizzie laughed.

“Oh, yes, you absolutely have to. I can’t wait to see what happens.”

“I’ll do my best,” said Lizzie.

The young lady took her book and moved on and was quickly replaced by another fan.

Lizzie saw a delivery man pushing to the front of the line.

“Excuse me, Miss,” he said as he looked at the card. “Delivery for Ms. Lizzie Masters.” He sat the flower vase down in front of Lizzie.

“Thank you,” said Lizzie as she reached into her cash box to hand him a tip.

“No ma’am, no tip. It’s already been taken care of,” he said. “Enjoy your flowers.”

The delivery man turned and walked away.

“Excuse me just a minute,” Lizzie said to the fan waiting next in line to have a book autographed, “let me see who these are from.”

Lizzie took the card and quickly opened it. She read the inscription and placed it back in the envelope and continued with her signing.

Jennifer arrived with more coffee and a soda.

“Oh flowers again?”

“Yep,” said Lizzie, “just like before though. There’s no name. Just the same inscription, ‘flowers for a beautiful lady’ and that’s it.”

“Wow! Somebody has it bad for you. Roses are expensive and this must be the eighth bouquet you’ve gotten now. This is just weird,” said Jennifer.

“I know. I have no idea who would send them. It’s probably some pervert!”

“Well, we need to keep an eye out just in case. But, they are beautiful. And the smell is wonderful!”

“You mean you get these and don’t know who they’re from?” asked the next fan in line.

“Yes, I haven’t figured it out yet.”

“Oh that’s so sweet. Did you hear that, Norma Jean?” she said to the lady waiting in line behind her.

“Oh honey, that’s just so sweet. Some guy has it bad for you. You just let him keep right on sending you those flowers, too. You deserve them just for these books you write. Honey those are some hot little numbers.”

Lizzie laughed, “Thank you. I appreciate both you ladies reading my books. I enjoy writing them and it’s nice to hear when someone enjoys reading them.”

“Well, I won’t go to sleep tonight until I’ve read this one all the way through.” She hugged the book closer to her.

Lizzie signed both books and handed them to the women. The rest of the morning was just as busy with a continual procession of people asking for an autograph. Lizzie’s signing hand ached. She chitchatted with each person. That was the part she really enjoyed.

“Wow,” said Jennifer after the doors were finally closed and they could pack up to go home. “I can’t believe we sold every last book we brought.”

“I know. I can’t either. It had to be because the announcement of the New York Times came out. That was just perfect.”

“Girl, you did it yourself. That story was just awesome. I was listening to the women in

line and they were all talking about it. You did good on that one. You did real good!”

“Thanks.”

“Okay, now we have to get back to the lawyers office and tell those people you are not selling.”

Lizzie’s head snapped up from gathering her things.

“Yeah, that’s for certain!” she said. “I’m not selling my bookstore. It took me long enough to get it and now that it’s making money I’m not about to give it up. Wonder what makes these big companies think they can just waltz into a town and buy whatever they want, whether the people want to sell to them or not. We need the small mom and pop businesses. These huge conglomerates are not the answer.”

”I couldn’t agree with you more! I like the personalization of the small independent stores. But, I’m afraid it won’t be too many more years until all the small stores are gone and that’ll be a sad day.”

“That it will, Jenn, that it will.”

Two hours later the women sat in the conference room of Smith & Smith waiting for the people who had insisted on meeting her face-to-face to talk about buying her little bookstore.

The conference room door opened and Mr. Smith stood aside as two men walked in.

Lizzie’s breath caught in her throat at the sight of the third man.

“Ladies,” said Mr. Smith, “this is Ms. Mann, Mr. Jones and Mr. Varrelli.

Nick’s gaze landed on Lizzie.

Mr. Smith continued, “Mr. Varrelli is the gentleman hoping to buy your property, Ms. Malone.”

Lizzie stood and motioned for Jennifer to follow.

“I don’t know what kind of game you’re trying to play here, Nick, but my business is not for sale. And bedding me does not make it for sale either. Did you really think that would help your case?” Lizzie said as she headed for the door with Jennifer following close behind.

“Lizzie --” Nick began.

“No, don’t bother. My answer is no. The bookstore is not for sale and even if it were, I wouldn’t be selling it to you. We’re finished.” Her stilettos clicked her anger as she marched down the hallway.

“Oh my gosh, Lizzie, is that the guy you were with?” asked Jennifer as they waited for the elevator.

“Yes, that’s Nick. Now I know why he was sitting there reading my book. What a slime bucket!”

The elevator arrived and the doors opened just as Nick came out of the conference room.

“Lizzie wait,” he called out.

“Go to hell,” she yelled back as she stepped on the elevator and Jenn pushed the button closing the door.

Lizzie shook, her breath coming in fast gulps.

“I can’t believe that guy,” she said. “He must have thought it’d be easier for him to snatch my shop if he bedded me first. Typical male, always thinking with the little head instead of the big one! And that woman, that was the

woman I saw him with that day at the bookstore!
The nerve!”

Lizzie paced back and forth as the elevator continued its journey down to the first floor. The door opened and Lizzie exited with Jennifer close behind.

“I can’t believe he’d try something like that. I mean, hasn’t he caught up with the women’s movement? He obviously doesn’t think I’m smart enough to see what he was trying to do. Yeah, like I’d be so enamored with his sexual prowess I wouldn’t be able to say no to him. What an ass!”

“Men,” said Jennifer, “you can’t trust them any farther than you could throw them.”

“You can say that again! Are you hungry? I’m famished.”

“Yeah, me, too. It’s been a long day.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lizzie watched as Jennifer bubbled over with excitement.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Why on earth would they do that?”

“Well, they were looking for speakers who were on the New York Times Bestseller list and since you are in the top twenty-five they wanted to know if you would agree to be one.”

“Well, now that’s the most exciting news I’ve gotten. If you don’t count the news of selling out of books.” Lizzie grinned at Jennifer.

“Well, they’re both pretty good news if you ask me. I mean Dallas has a big romance chapter with lots of members.” Jennifer laughed.

“So when are we scheduled to go. I know you’ve already taken care of that.”

“You bet I have! I’m not going to let any moss grow under our feet. Didn’t even hang up the phone until we had the date nailed down.”

“Have I told you lately I’m so glad you took my offer of very little pay to do a lot of work?”

“Yes, I believe you do after every book signing. We’re scheduled to go next month.”

“Well, there’s a lot to do between now and then so let’s go home and get some rest and we can start out bright and early tomorrow morning

planning the trip. We'll definitely need more books for one thing."

"Yeah, I know! Isn't that just great?"

"It definitely is!"

"Once you become rich and famous, maybe we could have a winter house here," said Jennifer as she and Lizzie walked down the hallway toward the hotel's convention room. They had been met the night before by the romance chapter's welcoming committee and gotten squared away into their room and shown where they were to be that morning.

"We can put that at the top of the list. I love it here. There's just so much excitement going on."

"Okay, well, I'm going to talk with the president again and get everything squared away. You can go ahead and start setting up."

"I can handle that," said Lizzie.

An hour later, both women sat at the head of the convention table with the other guests and ready for the workshop to begin.

Lizzie saw the delivery boy first as he made his way to the registration desk. He spoke to the lady behind the desk who pointed him in Lizzie's direction. She knew before the man pointed toward her the flowers would be for her. A dozen red roses seemed to follow her wherever she was these days and now she knew who they were from.

The cards with each bouquet kept asking to talk to her so he could explain.

Lizzie wanted so bad to see Nick but she knew he had used her not only as a one night stand as far as he was concerned but also to try to soften her up in order to take her bookstore away from her. She tried not to think about him but he was always there walking across the pages of her mind.

She could smell his scent everywhere. She could taste his lips on hers and she wanted him to make love to her again and again.

Sometimes she let her imagination remember and other times she remembered him walking into the conference room as though he already owned her store. She would have to keep trying to push him out of her thoughts as best she could. Besides, it wasn't her he wanted, it was her bookstore.

Lizzie spoke and answered questions from the audience throughout the morning. Her portion of the program would be over with at two and she was looking forward to it. It was hard being here with her mind so caught up with thoughts of Nick. She wanted to feel him making love to her and yet she was so furious with him at the same time. She just needed to get him out of her mind and she knew the only way to do that was to talk with him and settle this once and for all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On the plane ride home, Lizzie promised to take Jennifer to the little Italian restaurant Nick had taken her to but she wasn't looking forward to it at all. It had come up in conversation while they waited for the plane to take off and now Jennifer really wanted to go and experience some of Mama Carlotta's wonderful Italian cooking.

From the outside, Mama Carlotta's looked the same. The building itself wasn't something most people would take a second look at.

"Are you sure this is the right place," asked Jennifer.

"Yes. I told you it was just a little hole in the wall place. I mean the outside doesn't look like much but it's the food inside that makes the place."

"Well, if it's anywhere close to being as good as you described, it'll be great."

"Trust me. It's good."

Lizzie opened the door and went inside with Jennifer following close behind.

"May I help you?" asked the hostess.

"Yes, we have reservations. Malone," said Lizzie.

"Ah, yes, there you are. Follow me please."

Lizzie and Jennifer followed close behind as the hostess took them to a table in the center of the big dining area.

“Ladies,” said the hostess as she indicated chairs for them.

Lizzie and Jennifer sat down opposite each other as a waiter appeared at their table.

“Good evening, ladies. My name is Alex and I’m going to be serving you this evening. May I start you out with a nice glass of wine.”

“That would be wonderful,” said Lizzie. “Would you like to share a bottle, Jen?”

“Sure, you pick.”

“Okay, how about a White Zinfandel?”

“Sounds wonderful,” said Jennifer.

“Then bring us a bottle of White Zinfandel, please.”

“Good choice. The special tonight is Mama Carlotta’s osso bucco. It’s very delicious. I highly recommend it. I’ll be right back with that Zinfandel.”

The waiter turned and disappeared.

“That’s the stuff I had when I was here,” said Lizzie.

“Then I’m in luck. I’ll have that.”

“So will I. And if we can get it, her zabaglione for dessert!”

Moments later the waiter returned with the wine and poured a glass for each before he took their order and was gone again.

An hour later, as they finished the osso bucco, the waiter returned and began to clear the dishes.

“May I offer you beautiful ladies some dessert?” he asked.

“I don’t know about you, Lizzie, but I’m just about stuffed.”

“I am, too. Guess we’ll skip dessert this time.” Lizzie smiled up at the waiter.

“Alright, I’ll just take these dishes and get your bill. I’ll be right back.”

“Thank you,” said Lizzie.

“You know, I really hated for the Dallas trip to end. It was fun,” said Jennifer.

“I know. I’m just so thrilled they asked me to speak.”

“I was, too. They’re nice people.”

The waiter returned carrying a bottle of wine and two long-stemmed red roses.

“Ladies, your bill has been taken care of and these are compliments of a secret admirer.”

He sat the bottle on the table and presented each lady with a rose.

“Who, where?” asked Lizzie as she glanced around the room.

“Oh, he said to give you this, too,” said the waiter as he reached into his pocket and took out an envelope and handed it to Lizzie.

Lizzie took the envelope and ripped open the flap.

“I can just imagine who this is from,” said Lizzie. “I don’t know how he knows where I am all the time but this is just getting ridiculous.”

She quickly scanned the note as tears began to form in the corners of her eyes.

“Well, who is it?” asked Jennifer.

“It’s Nick, of course. I just don’t know what to do.”

“What does it say?”

“Says he didn’t know I was the owner. But if I was agreeable to just talking and clearing up

this mess James is waiting outside. James is his driver. It was just a one night thing. I saw Nick the next morning there at the bookstore. Remember. You said I looked like I'd seen a ghost. Well, I had. I saw Nick with his next conquest or what I thought was his next conquest. It was that woman with him at Smith's office. Oh, Jenn, I'm so confused. I just don't know what to do."

"Well, go have some fun if that's what you want."

"You don't understand. It's not fun I want. Well, I do, but I want Nick. God help me, but I fell in love with that man the first time I saw him. He was sitting there reading one of my novels and I fell in love with him. God help me. I can't get him out of my mind. I never ever believed in love at first sight. At least not until I saw Nick. Then we had a whole night of mind blowing sex and that just added to it. I don't know what to do. Do I believe him? Do I trust him? I'm afraid I might be blowing the best thing I've ever known and yet it may turn out to be the worst thing that's ever happened to me, too. I don't know if my heart can handle the worst thing."

"Was it just a one night stand with him?"

"Listen, honey. This could be the last time you ever have to see this man. Or, it could be the proverbial first day of the rest of your life. Make it count. If you really do love him you owe it to yourself to let him explain if he can. And if he doesn't love you, there's nothing you can do about it but make the best of the situation. Make yourself some memories for the old folks' home. Go, go on now and screw the man like a rabbit if that's what you need. And when you're done, just

come back home and you can get on with your life.”

“I just don’t –“

“Get out of here. Let the man explain. It might be a simple explanation. Who knows? If you like the explanation or not doesn’t matter. Go have some sex. Maybe he won’t be as good this time.”

“Okay, then I’ll go make some memories I can tell you about at the old folks’ home and that’ll keep us both entertained.”

Lizzie stood up, grabbed the bottle of wine and handed it to Jennifer.

“Take this to keep you entertained until I get back home.” Lizzie smiled.

“Get. I’ll be fine.” Jennifer laughed.

CHAPTER NINE

“Hello again,” Nick said as he walked up to Lizzie and handed her another red rose as she exited the restaurant, and took her fingers lightly in his, bent down and kissed the back of her hand before engulfing it in both of his. “Your carriage awaits, m’lady,” he said as he stepped aside and took her elbow. “Shall we?”

His cologne floated through the air and Lizzie took a deep breath and inhaled the sheer fragrance of him.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” said Lizzie. “The note said James was waiting.”

“He is, and he’ll take us wherever you want to go. I’m hoping you’d like to go back to my place.”

“Could we just sit and talk first? You owe me an explanation.”

“And I really want to explain,” he said as he helped her into the limo. “How about a glass of wine?” he asked as he sat down beside her.

“I’d love one, thank you.”

Nick opened the bottle pouring them both a glass.

“May I make a toast?”

“Certainly.”

“Again may I toast,” he said as he held his glass toward Lizzie, “to the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.”

“Thank you, but I’m not sure I can actually believe that.”

Nick laid his fingers against her cheek turning her face in his direction.

“I mean every word of it. Beautiful blue eyes, beautiful lady inside and out.”

“Tell me, Nick, when did you decide to buy my bookstore? Before or after you seduced me?”

“Actually, I didn’t know it was your bookstore.”

“You didn’t know it was mine?” she said as she tried to read the expression on his face.

“No. I happened to pass by it one day. It’s a nice little mom and pop type bookstore and I knew with me building a chain bookstore it would probably run that little shop out of business. I really didn’t want that. So I sent Ms. Mann, who is my real estate agent, to the bookstore to see if it was for sale.”

“And?”

“Well, I picked her up that day and took her back to her office. She told me it wasn’t for sale but that we might be able to persuade the owner into selling once we explained I was building the chain and how the business itself would eventually die a slow death. Lizzie, honestly, the first time I had any idea you were the owner was when I walked into that conference room and saw you sitting there.”

“How can I believe you?”

“Anybody who knows me will tell you that Nico Varrelli is honest. I don’t pull any punches, Lizzie. Trust me.”

Nick leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on her lips.

She wanted this man. He made her wet with desire. No other man had made her feel like this. He was tantalizing and exciting.

Again Nick's lips touched hers, soft at first, then demanding. He demanded entrance to her mouth and she opened freely to him.

Lizzie's heart beat faster, the blood coursing through her veins, her breathing seemed to stop as the sensations overtook her mind. He ignited a fire deep within her core which she knew only he could extinguish.

He kissed her neck, and she felt the heat of his lips as he kissed across her collarbone and up the other side of her neck, returning at last to her lips.

She needed this man. She would deal with her emotions tomorrow. One night with this man would never be enough.

She would go back home when the night was over. Her heart was in too much danger here. Nick came from money. She would never fit into his world. He bought and sold businesses like she bought books. She could make the memories tonight and remember them when she was old.

Twenty minutes later, the limo pulled to a stop and Lizzie heard the driver's door open and seconds later Nick's door.

Nick stepped outside the car and, moments later, opened her door as he extended his hand to help her out and she took it. Placing his hand at the small of her back, Nick led her to the door and guided her inside.

“Welcome home, Mr. Varelli,” came Celeste’s voice. Soft music began to play. “Would you like a fire?”

“Yes, Celeste. Thank you,” Nick replied.

Lizzie recognized the soft music.

Taking her by the hand, Nick said, “Come with me,” as he led her down the hallway.

“I’m sorry, Lizzie,” he said about halfway down the hall, “I’ve wanted to make love to you again since that first night. I want you. I want you now. I’ve waited so long,” he said as he pushed her softly against the wall, his hands holding hers and raising them above her head.

His lips found hers and she gave in to him. She felt his desire as he pressed himself against her. His lips slipped to her neck and the top of her breasts. Nick did things to her. Her skin tingled and she ached with desire. She could feel the moisture between her legs and she wanted to feel him there.

“I’ll stop if you want me to, Lizzie, but God help me I don’t want to.”

“Don’t stop, please, don’t ever stop,” she begged.

His hands plunged into her hair pulling her closer. His lips demanding as he ravaged her neck, her breasts, and his lips slid down her stomach. Reaching underneath her dress, he slid the soft wisp of silk down her legs and his tongue found the center of her.

Her orgasm hit and she moaned out in pleasure as wave after wave of sinful sensation overtook her. Sheer pleasure danced through her body as he kissed and licked. He made her feel so alive.

She clutched at the strands of his hair and arched under his touch. Her senses heightened. Her breathing raced. Her knees weakened.

Quickly standing, Nick picked her up and carried her as he headed down the hallway. With one foot, he shoved the bedroom door open and moments later she lay across his bed. He removed her dress and bra and she lay naked to him.

Nick quickly shoved his jeans over his hips, letting them drop to the floor. Covering her body with his, he kissed her lips hard. She moaned as her desire hit her core. Her legs wrapped around him and her hands grabbed at his back. He drove her wild. She felt her nails dig into his back. She couldn't get enough of him. She wanted him closer. She wanted him to quench the thirst inside her.

He kissed the tops of her breasts and kneaded them with his hands. His touch ignited every fiber of her being.

Nick pulled away long enough to flip her over to her stomach and pull her backside up to him. In one swift move, he thrust into her as he grabbed her breasts in his hands. She felt her muscles tighten around him. She drew him in deeper. He slowly pulled back until the tip of his shaft remained at her opening. Again he thrust hard into her.

His breathing was harsh and uneven. Nick kissed his way up her back to her shoulders and gently bit into her hot flesh. He slid one hand around her and found her clit, kneading it with his fingers until she was at the edge of madness. She could hear her moans and a wave of pleasure overtook her as he drove her over the edge. She

pushed backwards toward him with each thrust he made until his pleasure erupted soothing her fire until she lay exhausted with him by her side.

CHAPTER TEN

When Lizzie awoke, Nick was sound asleep next to her. She reached over and caressed his chest playing with the hair he grew there. She wanted more of this man and she knew he was willing to give to her. Sliding her hand down his stomach, she took hold of his silky shaft and watched as he opened one eye and grinned at her.

“Woman, you’re insatiable and I love it.” He threw the covers off them. “Climb on and ride to your heart’s content, m’lady.”

“Oh I intend to,” Lizzie said as she threw one leg over his body and climbed on top.

She rubbed his nipples with her fingers and listened as his breath caught.

He groaned loudly, his breath coming in short bursts. It gave her pleasure knowing she could make him lose control like this.

She lowered herself onto his shaft and felt its hardness grow inside her.

His groans filled the air.

She raised and lowered herself in a slow rhythm, and she leaned over him with her breasts dangling just out of reach of his mouth. She enjoyed the sound of his breathing as it became more ragged. He reached up with his hands to take her breasts and she stopped him.

“No, you can’t have them yet,” she said.
“You can look at them but they’re off limits.”

“Oh woman, you’re going to kill me now.”

She moved slowly at first, up and down, then faster as she felt his pleasure. With one hand she reached behind her and took his sack in her hand and lightly squeezed with each thrust. He bucked against her onslaught trying to shove himself deeper and deeper into her. She felt his moment of release and he flooded her core. She thrust again releasing her own pleasure as her muscles tightened and released around him pulling him into her being.

“Dang woman, you’re going to wear me out in no time at all if you keep this up!” he said.

“I intend to wear you out completely,” she said, smiling down at him.

“Wanna try the shower again?”

He pulled her down to him and placed a kiss on her lips.

“I’ll race you,” she said as she jumped off the bed and ran toward the shower.

“Oh no you don’t,” said Nick, as he followed close behind her. He quickly grabbed her and threw her over his shoulders, his hand spanked her butt cheek.

“That’s not fair,” she squealed. “Put me down, put me down.”

He playfully slapped her butt cheek again.

“You’ve been a very bad girl. You need a good spanking first.”

“No, no, I’ll be good, I’ll be good!” She laughed.

“I think that pretty little butt of yours needs a good spanking first.”

“Oh, please don’t. I’ll be good. I promise.”

“Well, I may let you slide by this time, we’ll see,” he said as he lowered her to the shower floor.

“Celeste, shower please.”

The water came on at just the right temperature and Nick grabbed the soap.

“Oh heck with this,” he said as he dropped it to the floor and picked her up and pressed her against the shower wall.

Lizzie tightened her legs around his waist as he lowered her onto his already hardening shaft. For a moment she hung there impaled on his hard shaft, her muscles tight around him. Slowly he pushed into her, pressing her against the wall even harder, heating her insides with each plunge. Lizzie clung to his neck wanting every inch of him. She kissed and nipped at his shoulders, her fingers scratching against his back. He pushed again and again into her. Her passion grew and lit a fire that only he could extinguish. Waves of pleasure began to roll over her, slowly at first and then faster until one wave hit against another and she cried out with pure pleasure.

He spilled himself inside her and she felt the wet, hotness of his juices flowing into her, soothing every hot, raw crevice. Her lungs gasped for air as her pleasure subsided.

“You are most definitely amazing, woman,” he whispered into her ear.

Lowering her to the shower floor he stood with her wrapped in his arms.

“What time’s your store open in the morning,” he asked.

“Nine,” Lizzie replied.

“Seems like we’ve done this before,” he said as he bent down and kissed the top of her head. “I really want you to stay.”

“And I’d really like to but I can’t,” she replied. “Lizzie and I have a plane to catch. We have a readers and writers convention we’re going to and our plane leaves at eight in the morning. One of the girls is running the store for us while we’re gone.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Just the weekend.”

“Listen, how about this. You stay with me tonight. James will take you and Jennifer to the airport in the morning. You can call Jennifer and let her know we’ll pick her up.”

“But there’s no need for that. Really, I just need to go home and Jenn and I can drive ourselves. There’s no need to make James get up and take us.”

“Don’t worry about James. He’s up early every morning. Lizzie, I really need you to stay the night with me, please.”

“When you put it that way, what’s a girl to do?” She smiled.

Morning would come early and leaving Nick would be the hardest thing she’d ever have to do.

Nothing felt quite like this. Nick was her soul mate. It was cruel the way life had given her something she could never really have. It was as though she had known him her entire life. He seemed so familiar and yet at the same time she knew very little about him. It was as though they had been long lost friends separated for a time and yet who had picked up where they left off.

Nick’s lips touched hers, soft at first, then demanding. He wanted entrance to her mouth

and she allowed him in. Nick finally pulled back ending the kiss.

“Let me get you dried off,” he said as he reached for a towel.

Wrapping her in it he rubbed her body briskly. The towel rubbing against her nipples made them harden. Nick bent down and suckled one into his mouth, nipping at first one and then the other.

“I’m never going to get dry this way.”

“Wet or dry, doesn’t matter to me. I’m going to make love to you all night long. You can sleep tomorrow.”

“That sounds good to me,” she said as she put her arms around his neck.

Moments later she was on the bed lost in the sensations Nick gave her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Morning arrived early and Lizzie sat in the limo while Nick went to get Jennifer. James took her bags and placed them in the trunk while Nick helped Jennifer into the limo.

“Good morning,” said Lizzie as Jennifer got in.

“Hey yourself. Nice wheels,” she said with a smile.

Nick crawled in beside Lizzie.

“Jenn I’m not sure you’ve actually been introduced. This is Nico Varrelli.”

Nick reached out and took Jennifer’s hand and kissed the back of it.

“It’s very nice meeting you,” said Jennifer

“The pleasure is all mine,” said Nick. “I’d offer you ladies a glass of wine but it’s a little early.”

“Way too early for me,” laughed Jennifer. “By the way, the food at Mama Carlotta’s is just to die for.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. Maybe you two ladies will allow me to take you there again sometime.”

“That would be nice,” said Jennifer.

“So where is this convention you ladies are off to?” he asked looking at Lizzie.

“San Antonio,” she replied.

“That’s a fun city. Did you schedule in some sightseeing while you’re there?”

“Actually, we did.”

“That’s always a fun thing to do.”

A few minutes later they pulled into the unloading zone at the airport. James took the bags from the trunk and handed them over to the porter and Nick walked with Lizzie and Jennifer as far as the security checkpoint.

“Well, this looks like as far as I can go with you ladies. Jennifer, it was indeed a pleasure meeting you,” he said as he offered his hand.

Taking his hand in hers, she replied, “It was a pleasure meeting you, too.”

Jennifer stepped into the line as Nick turned to Lizzie.

“I don’t know what to say to you,” he said as he put his arms around her and pulled her close.

“I guess goodbye will have to do.”

Nick leaned down and kissed her lips.

Finally, he pulled away.

“Go.”

Lizzie smiled at him and turned and walked into the line.

Jennifer stood waiting for her on the other side of the security checkpoint.

“Well, guess that’s that,” said Lizzie when she got through the checkpoint and caught up to Jennifer.

“What do you mean, that’s that?”

“Well, I probably won’t see him again unless we just happen to run into each other some place. I mean, I’ve accepted the fact that this is just a

one-night stand kind of thing. I mean, he drives around in a limo for gosh sakes.”

“Man, he looked as though he didn’t want to turn loose of you.”

“Well, he did and that’s that.”

Lizzie took a seat in the Southwest Airlines waiting area. The flight didn’t leave for another thirty minutes but it wouldn’t be long before they would start boarding.

“Would you like something to drink?” asked Jennifer.

“Thanks, but I don’t think so.”

“Okay, we’ll just sit here then. It shouldn’t be too long before we can board and then we’ll be on our way. This should be a great conference.”

Lizzie shook her head in acknowledgment but she couldn’t fight back the tears any longer.

“Oh, honey,” said Jennifer, “come here. You can cry on my shoulder.”

Lizzie leaned into her trying to control her sobbing.

“Flight 1654 now boarding,” came the female voice over the intercom.

“Come on, Lizzie, that’s us. Let’s get you settled onto the plane and maybe you can get some sleep and you’ll feel better when you wake up.”

“Okay,” Lizzie said, her voice trembling.

Walking toward the boarding gate, they got in line behind those allowed to board first.

“Hold that plane, hold that plane,” came a voice yelling from down the hall coming from the security checkpoint. “Hold up, hold up.”

“Wonder what’s going on?” said Jennifer as she stood looking in the direction of the commotion.

People stood aside as a man ran through the crowd trying to dodge people as he ran.

“Lizzie, honey, did you forget something?”

“No, why?”

“Oh my gosh,” said Jennifer. “I think you better look at this honey.”

“What?” asked Lizzie as she turned to glance in the direction Jennifer was pointing.

“Isn’t that Nick?” asked Jennifer.

“Where? Where?”

“There,” said Jennifer.

“Oh my gosh,” said Lizzie as she jumped up and started running in Nick’s direction.

The crowd moved aside as the two ran toward each other.

As Nick reached Lizzie, he threw his arms around her and pulled her close.

“Lizzie, I can’t let you go, I can’t,” he said as he held her tighter. “Not without telling you I love you.”

“I thought -”

“Never mind what you thought,” he said as he dropped down on one knee. “I’ve carried this around with me since you left the first time. It was my grandmother’s. Lizzie Malone, will you marry me?”

The crowd in the airport had gathered around them and now they burst into applause and cat calls.

“Go ahead, girlie,” yelled one old man, “give him an answer. I gotta get home sometime today.” He laughed.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” came the voice over the intercom, “Flight 1654 has been delayed for just a few moments while one of our passengers answers a proposal. As soon as she makes up her mind, I’ll let you know her decision.”

“Oh my gosh, yes, yes, yes! I will most definitely marry you,” she said as Nick stood to his feet and she threw her arms around his neck, kissing him full on the lips.

“And ladies and gentlemen,” came the voice, “I believe you have an answer. And it seems that would be a yes! And thank you for flying Southwest.”

The crowd applauded.

“Sorry to interrupt, ladies and gentlemen, but we do have to get this plane in the air. All those flying Southwest Flight 1654 we are now boarding.”

“Go sweetheart, you have a flight to catch and when you get back here, I’ll be waiting. I love you, honey, and that’s all that matters.”

“I love you, Nick.”

“I hate to break this up you two, but Lizzie we’ve got to get on that plane,” said Jennifer.

“Okay,” Lizzie said as she quickly placed another kiss on Nick’s lips and then rushed to catch up with Jennifer and boarded the plane only seconds before the door closed behind her.

The day was beautiful and Lizzie was more than a little nervous. She and Jennifer had planned every part of the wedding with Nick’s help and now the big day had arrived.

They were actually getting married at the little sidewalk café where they had met. There would be a few close family and friends in attendance. Then, Nick had set up a huge reception at one of his hotels for all his business acquaintances and the rest of the world.

“Here,” said Jennifer, “don’t forget the shoes. You can’t walk down the aisle in flip flops.”

“I know, but they may be a little more comfortable than stilettos.”

“Yeah, but they don’t have the same effect on the male libido, if you get my drift.”

“I don’t think I need to worry about that.” Lizzie laughed.

“Oh, there goes the music. Time to get this show on the road,” said Jennifer. “Give me a few minutes head start then you’re on.”

Jennifer stepped out of the café’s ladies room and walked slowly amongst the tables and out the door to the outside café where the rest of the bridal party was already lined up. She took her place as Maid of Honor and turned to watch as Lizzie appeared in the doorway.

April held the café door. She grinned at Lizzie and whispered, “Thank you. I just can’t thank you enough!”

“Well, you’ll have to thank Nick. All you have to do is make us both proud of you.”

“You two are the best and you make a beautiful bride.”

“Thank you, now I guess I’ve kept Nick waiting long enough.”

“Yes, go.”

Lizzie stepped outside and continued the wedding march. She saw Nick standing with the

rest of the wedding party waiting for her. She wanted to rip the clothes off him and make love right there but she knew there'd be plenty of time for that later on.

Lizzie was so proud of Nick and his idea of paying it forward. He'd been blessed with family who had taught him well and he now owned a few hotels and other businesses including the café. He liked treating his employees well and they in turn were loyal employees.

The thing she really liked was the wedding present he had given her. He'd made a toast to her at the rehearsal dinner and then handed her a set of keys.

"The keys," he said, "goes along with something every writer should have."

She had absolutely no idea what he could have been talking about but he reached into his pocket and took out a folded up piece of paper and handed it to her. It took a minute for what she was reading to actually soak in but the moment she realized she was now the sole owner of the new chain bookstore, too, she screamed and cried altogether. She'd thrown her arms around Nick's neck and he'd hugged her tight. So tight she could feel him harden against her.

"We're going to have to stay like this for a minute or two while I think of something else besides putting that item as deep inside you as I can," he whispered.

"Well, maybe we can just go upstairs and do something about that," she'd whispered back.

Now, today, reaching the rest of the wedding party, she took Nick's hand and in a few moments she became Mrs. Nico Varrelli of the wine country Varrelli's.

A HUGE THANK YOU!

I would like to thank you to each and every one of you who purchased my books over the years.

You picked one up, bought it and are right now sitting in your favorite place about to begin reading a story I created for your reading pleasure. So, yes, thank you from the bottom of my heart!

It is my hope, once you start reading this story, you absolutely cannot put it down until you reach “The End.”

But really, I just appreciate the fact you’ve spent your hard-earned dollars purchasing one of my books. I appreciate you, my readers, whether this is the first book of mine you’ve purchased or your fourth or fifth.

So, yes, a gigantic thank you. I hope you enjoy it reading as much as I enjoyed writing it for you!

Love,

Maggie

P.S. I hope to meet you all in person someday!

BIOGRAPHY

MAGNOLIA “MAGGIE” RIVERS

A Southern girl born and bred, I began writing as a child, and sold my first piece of writing at the age of twenty-one.

Growing up, I spent as much of my time with books as I could. I still love that first smell of a book as you open its pages and the wonderful feel of it in your hands. Like most writers, my house is filled with books I've read countless times. I could open my own library!

I collect stilettos of all kinds and have them sitting on every available space in my office. They tend to show up in a lot of my novels as does my micro-mini teacup Chihuahua named “Mouse”. Believe me though, she's no mouse. I should have named her “Killer” instead!

I write hot, sexy, sizzling romances where the hero is just what my heroine needs. He's strong and confident with broad shoulders, six-pack abs and a pleasure trail that just won't quit. His face is more rugged than handsome, but he has a heart of gold hidden underneath all his protective armor.

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To order a personally autographed copy of any of Maggie's books contact Maggie through any of the above.

If you'd like Maggie to come to your town for a book signing, a book club meeting, a festival or any other event you might be planning, just call (515-299-5100) or email for details.

Help Maggie Make the Best Seller Lists!

Just how can you help Maggie Rivers make the best seller lists without going bankrupt yourself? Here are a few suggestions.

1. Post reviews to major retail sites.

One of the best and easiest things you can do after purchasing a novel is to leave a review. Not just one but many on different sites. The reviews on Goodreads are seen by the super-passionate-uber-book-fans which is fantastic but your average everyday online book shopper heads to a place to actually “buy” the book like Amazon or B&N. So when you leave a review on Amazon or B&N, you are increasing the book’s chance of being bought by those shoppers. By leaving reviews on as many sites as you can find, you increase the book’s *‘you may also like’* algorithms. Those algorithms consider a book’s popularity when making suggestions to potential consumers. Therefore, the more reviews a book has simply gives more potential for exposure. Also, what is more enticing to you: a book with three reviews or the book with three-hundred? So help your team by posting reviews on numerous sites.

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Mention the books to everyone—friends, family, your social media. Word-of-mouth is huge and just talking about a title you loved can have a ripple effect. Someone picks it up because you were so enthusiastic about it. It’s said that each person knows 250 people. You tell your 250, they tell their 250 who then tell their 250. And so on and so forth!

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Books make wonderful gifts and you have the opportunity to have them autographed which makes them extra special! Keep several copies on hand to give for a birthday/holiday or just an “I thought of you.” Authors are always grateful for extra sales!

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What do you do with your copy once it’s read? If it’s not something you intend to read again donate it to your local library or women’s shelter. Leave a copy at your doctor’s/dentist’s office. If you loved the book so much you can’t part with it (which we certainly hope is the case with our books), then consider buying a second copy specifically for your library. Either way ensures new readers will continue to find the title! If they like it, they’ll head out to find more books by that same author.

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While you're out shopping, let your car do the advertising. Place your copies of an author's book across your car's dashboard. Back into the parking space so people walking by will see the display!

9. Place a copy on your desk at work.

Purchase a book stand and place it on your work desk. Showcase a different book each day. Co-workers may stop by each morning to see what's new.

Help support Maggie and together, we can make the New York Times' Best Seller list!

Thanks to all who leave reviews. I appreciate each and every one!

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