

A Marriage She Didn't Ask For...

The door opened and in walked a delivery man. "This is for you. Will you sign here?" He handed her an electronic clipboard.

She hesitated for a moment but finally signed it.

"Thank you." He handed her the envelope.

After he left, she opened it.

"Who's it from?" Danielle wondered before sipping her coffee.

"Thompson & Thompson Law Firm."

Danielle's eyes grew wide and she straightened in her chair. "Is someone suing you?"

"I don't think so." Apprehensive, Amy pulled out the document and started reading it. Color drained from her face. "Oh no."

"What?" Danielle leaned forward, as if she were about to watch whether or not her winning team would get a touchdown.

"I can't believe he did this!" Amy jumped out of her seat, her heart racing in a mixture of anger and horror.

"Did what?!" She jumped up too. Though some coffee spilled from her cup, she didn't seem to notice.

"This can't be legal!"

"What? What can't be legal?"

Amy glanced from her friend to the document and flipped through the pages so she could make sure she understood it right. This couldn't be happening. It had to be a sick and twisted joke! "He just can't do this!"

Danielle finally put the cup down and loudly groaned. "Will you please tell me already? The suspense is killing me!"

"Mr. Rudolph married me by proxy."

What Nathan Wants

Ruth Ann Nordin

Ruth Ann Nordin's Books
Springfield, Nebraska

This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described herein are imagery and are not intended to refer to specific places or living persons. The opinions expressed in this manuscript are solely the opinions of the author and do not represent the opinions or thoughts of the publisher.

What Nathan Wants
All Rights Reserved.
Copyright 2010 Ruth Ann Nordin
V1.0

Cover Photo © Copyright istockPhoto LP. All rights reserved –
Used with permission. Front cover.

Cover Photo © Copyright Getty Images (www.photos.com). All rights reserved – used with permission. Spine and back cover images.

Cover made by Bonnie Steffens

This book may not be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in whole or in part by any means including graphic, electronic, or mechanical without expressed written consent of the publisher/author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Ruth Ann Nordin's Books
<http://www.ruthannnordin.com>

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Dedicated to Bonnie Steffens, Brenda Pratt,
Archana Vats, Tiffany Davis, and Evalina
Irish-Spencer for your encouragement and
help with this book.

Other books written by Ruth Ann Nordin

The Nebraska Romances (chronological order)

A Bride for Tom/A Husband for Margaret (two novellas in one book)

Eye of the Beholder

The Wrong Husband

His Redeeming Bride

Loving Eliza

Native American Romances

Restoring Hope

Brave Beginnings (coming soon)

Bound by Honor, Bound by Love (coming soon)

Contemporary Romances: Omaha Series

With This Ring, I Thee Dread

What Nathan Wants

Just Good Friends (coming soon)

Time Travel Romance

Meant To Be

A Chance In Time (novella inspired by Meant To Be: Penelope and Cole's story)

The Virginia Series

An Unlikely Place for Love

The Cold Wife

An Inconvenient Marriage

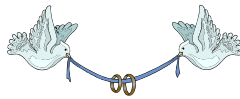
Falling In Love With Her Husband

Romancing Adrienne

Novellas

Montana Grooms series: #1 The Keeping of Greg Mitchell

Chapter One



“Are you sure you want to do this?”

Nathan Rudolph raised an eyebrow in Tyler Jackson’s direction. “You know me better than to ask that question. We’ve been friends for two decades.”

Tyler shook his head. “Yes, but you’ve never done anything this unexpected.”

Nathan ignored the younger man’s exasperation. Instead, his piercing blue eyes swept across his spacious office with windows stretching from the floor to the ceiling, giving him an ample view of downtown Omaha. Nathan, the owner and president of Rudolph Travel Agency, was proud of his accomplishments. However, despite all the fame and fortune he obtained over his forty years on Earth, one thing was missing: an heir, someone he could leave his company to when he died.

The telephone on his large mahogany desk buzzed. Swiveling in his leather chair which matched his desk and the two chairs in front of it, he lifted the receiver. “Yes?”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Miss Debra Raymond is here to see you,” Carmen Riles, his secretary, said.

“Good. Tyler will bring her in when we’re ready.” He set the phone down and shut his laptop. Standing up, he told Tyler, “Give me a quick glimpse of Miss Raymond.”

Tyler loudly sighed, shifting uncomfortably on the soft black carpet before reading the list on his clipboard. “Debra Raymond is twenty-nine. She’s been in advertising for eight years and has an impressive sales record-”

Nathan held up his hand to stop him. “I don’t care about her employment history. I want to know what she’s like, what her interests are, has she been married, does she have kids. Stuff like that.”

Groaning, Tyler went down the list. “She’s single. No kids. She likes biking, canoeing, and mountain climbing.”

He momentarily grimaced. His strength came from his mind, and he had no desire to explore the outdoors. His idea of roughing it was to fly coach.

“She occasionally reads fiction but prefers to live life rather than read about it,” Tyler continued. “Her parents are both alive and live in San Antonio. She has two brothers and a sister. She has a couple of ex-boyfriends but none were serious. Her longest relationship lasted for five months.”

“What caused the break ups?”

“All she would tell me is that they weren’t compatible.”

“Not compatible? What does that mean? Were her boyfriends not into camping?”

“I don’t know, Nate. I couldn’t get any more from her than that.” Tyler shot him a frustrated look. “It wasn’t easy to interview all these women without arousing their suspicion. They believe you are considering a promotion for one of them.”

He shrugged. “You’re the vice president. Sometimes you have to do the not-so-fun part of the job.”

What Nathan Wants

“If that’s what you can call this ridiculous rounding up of single women in your company,” he sourly replied. “Do you want me to continue?” He motioned to the clipboard.

“That’s enough. I get the picture. Bring her in. Oh,” he began before the blond man could leave the office, “may I remind you that even though you are a friend, you are my employee. I’d prefer it if you didn’t show your disgruntled attitude out there. I like to keep the atmosphere pleasant.” Though his words were firm, they were also kind.

“Yes, boss.” Tyler gave a mock salute, his smile betraying him.

Nathan chuckled. He liked the fact that Tyler wasn’t afraid to voice his opinion. In a world where people kissed up to him to get something, Tyler’s honesty was refreshing, which was why he hired him. After Veronica, he learned the value of honesty. He shook his head. His ex-wife was safely in the past.

When Debra came into the room, he stood up. “Miss Raymond, will you have a seat?”

The perky thin blond nodded and quickly complied. She was surprisingly stunning. Apparently, she knew it too, for when she crossed her legs, she wiggled so that her skirt was forced halfway up her thigh.

Nathan returned to his seat. “I have a few questions to ask you.” He picked up the piece of paper in front of him and read the questions he had written out ahead of time. “What was your childhood like?”

“Great.”

“Did anything happen that might have scarred you for life?”

She giggled. “No. Not unless you count that time I wrestled a rattler to the ground.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“You did what?” He didn’t mean to let his shock show, but it was unfathomable that anyone, let alone a female, would dare do such a thing.

“It was nothing. Right before college, I traveled through the Amazon with my father. There were more adventures there.”

He held the piece of paper in front of him and imagined what his life would be like with her. Confronting wild animals, risking his life along the way, and probably dying of anxiety...if one of those animals didn’t get him first. No, he decided. He was much better off living a nice, comfortable life safe at home where his biggest danger was his wife trying to talk him into changing a dirty diaper.

Standing up, he said, “Well, it sounds like you have a lot of excitement to look forward to.”

She jumped up and clapped her hands. “Really? Wow! I mean, I didn’t think it would be that easy.”

He blinked and stiffened. Did he miss something?

She leaned forward and winked. “I promise I won’t tell anyone else I got the promotion.”

As she giggled again and practically did a marathon run out of the room, he groaned. Right. She had no idea what he was really doing.

Tyler entered the office and shut the door. “She was unusually happy. Is she the one?”

Nathan cringed. “Hardly.” He sat back down and rubbed his eyes. Why did this have to be so hard? “Do we have a connection with a company that gives tours in an exotic location, like a volcano or something?”

“A volcano?”

He rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean. Somewhere dangerous.”

“Well, there is that African Safari package.”

What Nathan Wants

“Perfect.” With a nod, he quickly grabbed a piece of blank paper and wrote on it. “She’s just been promoted.”

As he handed the paper to Tyler, his friend raised an eyebrow. “You’re not really promoting anyone, remember?”

“Who owns this place?”

“Fine. You win.”

“Who’s next?”

Looking at his clipboard, he said, “Amy Watson. She’s a thirty-four-year-old widow--”

“A widow?” Nathan asked. This day and age, he expected either single or divorced for a woman in her thirties.

“Her husband was deployed over to the Middle East and didn’t make it back.”

“Oh. That’s sad. How long ago did it happen?”

“Three years ago. That’s when she started working here.”

“Any kids?”

“Nope.”

“What else do you have on her?” So far, she sounded good, but he’d found that there was usually a catch. “Is she living with someone or does she go clubbing?”

He caught a glint of amusement in Tyler’s eyes. “No. She’s utterly and completely boring. She grew up in the panhandle in Florida, got a bachelor’s degree in history, and met and married her husband who was stationed at Eglin Air Force Base. They were married for five years before they ended up here at Offutt Air Force Base. He got sent overseas and you know the rest. Her parents still live in Fort Walton Beach.”

Nathan’s eyebrows furrowed. “So what’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing as far as I can tell. She’s a travel agent, has a stellar rapport with customers, and gets along with her co-workers.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“There has to be something wrong with her.”

“If there is, you’ll have to figure out what it is. Are you ready to see her?”

Nathan snapped his fingers. “That’s it, isn’t it? She’s ugly.”

“She’s average. There’s nothing amazing or outwardly repulsive about her. She’s just average. Average personality, average background, average looks.”

Average didn’t sound so bad. Not after everything he’d been through. “Bring her in.”

“After this one, I’m going to lunch.”

“Fine. We can always sort through the next batch this afternoon.”

Though Tyler groaned, he nodded and opened the office door to tell Amy to enter.

Nathan stood and was pleasantly surprised by just how ‘average’ Ms. Watson was. She gave Tyler a nervous smile and entered the room. Her shoulder-length light brown hair was tucked behind her ears. She had a nice figure. It wouldn’t be difficult to slip into bed with her to have that child he wanted. She wore a pink long sleeve shirt and black slacks. The clothes didn’t cling to her, but they did accentuate her curves. Yes, he thought she would do just fine...as long as the interview played out as well as everything up to this point had.

“Please have a seat,” he said. He waited for her to sit before he sat down and picked up his paper. “Ms. Watson, I see that you grew up in Florida. What was it like when you were growing up?”

She frowned and shifted in her chair. “May I ask what this has to do with the promotion?”

“Well, since this is a travel agency, I thought that your background might make you better acquainted to travel.”

What Nathan Wants

It was a lie, but it was one that she seemed to buy, for she relaxed. “Is the position in relation to Florida?”

“Something like that.” Another lie.

“In that case, I’ll be happy to answer the question.”

He hid his grin. He liked that she didn’t jump in and answer his question without making it relevant to what the “job” would entail. She wasn’t one to back down, which meant she’d be a challenge, and if there was something he couldn’t resist, it was a challenge.

“Florida is a beautiful place,” Amy began, using a smile that he guessed she gave all of her customers. “The beaches can be as bright as snow at times, so I often recommend people take sunglasses along. The water is a clear blue with elements of green in it. That’s why the Fort Walton Beach area is called the Emerald Coast. Of course, the summers can be humid--”

He cleared his throat, intentionally interrupting her. “Thank you. It sounds like a wonderful place to visit. Did you go to the beach often?”

“Sure. There are restaurants and gift shops along the beaches, and for a small fee, you can rent a chair and umbrella. People can do lots of fun things there. They can build sandcastles, play in the water, or walk along the beach. There’s nothing quite like a romantic moonlit stroll. It’s really the kind of thing that would fit a getaway for couples.”

He noted the nostalgic look in her eyes and the wistful tone in her statement. Perhaps that was one of the things she had done with her husband. Well, he didn’t need to let her linger down memory lane. He picked up the paper and moved onto the next question. “What are your friends like? Do they know people who might like to travel?” He threw that last one in since she caught him earlier trying to sneak in a question that wasn’t relevant to her job.

Ruth Ann Nordin

She blinked, as if surprised by the change in topic. “To be honest, I don’t believe in asking my friends to send business my way.”

“Really? Why not?”

“Because I think it’s wrong to use people. If my friends want to refer someone my way, that is fine, but I never ask them to do that. Don’t you have an advertising department to handle the aspect of attracting customers?”

Her answer impressed him. He hadn’t figured that his question could be interpreted the way she did, but it told him more about her than he hoped to glean. And that information was all he needed to conclude that she would make an ideal wife. But turning his attention to her question, he decided to answer it. “Of course, I have an advertising department, but word of mouth is more effective. Friends happen to have a tremendous influence on where their other friends go for business.”

“My friends and I don’t use each other for a sales pitch. I have one friend who sells cosmetics, but I don’t like to wear makeup. She doesn’t try to convince me to buy her product, and when she went to a competing travel agency last year for her cruise, I didn’t stop her.”

He straightened in his chair. “She didn’t go through us?”

“Why should she? The other place offered a 20% discount.”

He laughed. “It’s too bad you don’t work for that company.”

“Well, you offer more pay and more vacation time.”

That made him laugh even harder. “It’s good to know I have one redeeming quality.”

She chuckled. “It’s not like I tell my friends not to do some travel through this company. Most of them do buy

What Nathan Wants

tickets through here. But I don't tell them to do it. They choose it."

"Because of your charming personality?" He sorted through his stack and pulled out her statistics. He glanced at her record as an employee. "You have a better customer service reputation compared to the other employees on your level. Are you aware of that?"

"No."

He looked back at the facts and figures written out on the paper that he had Tyler make up for him on all the single women in the company. In some ways, it would be a shame to lose her as an employee. If this was a business decision, she would get promoted. But this wasn't a business decision. It was a personal one. He needed a wife who would give him a child much more than he needed to move a hard working employee through the company ranks.

He collected another group of papers and handed them to her. "In case I decide to hire you, I will need your signature on a few pages. It's all minor technicalities, of course, but pertinent to the new position."

There was no need for her to read the ones underneath that would give him permission to marry her by proxy, should the case arise. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that, but he'd learned long ago to cover all his bases.

She took the papers and started reading the top one, which he purposely set up as a decoy. It was a detailed explanation of what the marketing supervisor did. He purposely made the font smaller in hopes it would slow her down, and by the way she squinted, his ruse was working.

He pressed the button on his phone which was his signal to Carmen. He tapped his fingers on the desk as he waited for his secretary to buzz for him. After a good thirty seconds, his intercom finally buzzed.

Ruth Ann Nordin

He pressed the button. "Yes, Carmen?"

In a bored tone, his secretary said, "Mr. Rudolph, there is something very important you need to do."

He got ready to reply but she beat him to it.

"No. It can't wait. You must hurry." Then he thought he heard her yawn. "There must be no delay. I—"

Irritated, he shut off the intercom but replied, "I'll be right there." Bolting to his feet, he rushed to Amy's side and handed her a pen. "I need your signature on these three pages." He lifted the papers enough for her to see the signature line. "I'll fill in the dates and all that."

"Well, I—" Amy began uncertainly.

"Please, Ms. Watson? I have a crucial meeting to attend." He gave her the best pleading expression he could muster and followed it up by what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"I..." She glanced back at the papers and then at him. With a shrug, she smiled and said, "Okay." Then she signed everything.

Before she could read anything else, he grabbed the papers. "Thank you for your time, Ms. Watson."

She frowned as she eased out of her seat. "Is that it?"

"Yes. I only need a few minutes to make a decision." Now that he knew what to look for. And thanks to his ex-wife, that was easy enough. He just needed someone who was the complete opposite of her, and Amy was a startling contrast to Veronica. Just their names alone signified how the great the gulf was between them. While Veronica was all things fancy and superficial, Amy struck him as simple and honest. And simple and honest suited him perfectly.

"Oh. Well, thank you."

He wondered if she'd be thanking him when she realized exactly what her new role would be, but then he

What Nathan Wants

decided he'd find out soon enough. There was no sense in making the announcement until he had time to select her ring. Instead, he led her out of his office. "Have a good day, Ms. Watson."

Tyler rose an eyebrow but waited until she made it to the elevator before turning to him. "You saw her out?"

"Yes." He glanced at his secretary. "Cancel the other appointments."

Tyler followed him as he went back to his desk. "So that's the one you want?"

"Yes. She's cute, don't you think?"

"Did you tell her what her promotion really is?"

He shrugged. "She'll find out soon enough." He retrieved his jacket and slipped it on. "May is a good month for a wedding."

Tyler sighed. "I'll get ready for lunch."

As he departed, Nathan quickly dug out his appointment book and sorted through it. A week ought to be enough time for Ms. Watson to get her things in order so she could marry him. He penciled in the 28th. There. It was Memorial Day weekend. Three days before he had to get back to work to meet with Jack Bently. Three days was plenty of time for him and Ms. Watson to enjoy a mini-honeymoon.

He exited his office and told his secretary to call a wedding receptionist, a florist, and to book the trip to Destin, Florida. He figured that his new wife might like to introduce him to her parents.

As he finished concluding the 'to do' list to the overwhelmed older woman, Tyler came up to him and shook his head and told her, "While you're at it, why don't you get him a clue."

"What woman wouldn't be happy marrying into money?" Nathan asked.

Ruth Ann Nordin

“One who didn’t ask for it,” the secretary stated, peering up at him through her bifocals.

“She’ll be fine. What I’ll offer her is better than a job.”

“That depends on who you ask.”

“Right,” Tyler added. “You can be a real ogre at times.”

The woman chuckled.

“Ha ha,” Nathan said, hiding his amusement. “Come on. I’m famished. Interviewing for a wife is hard work.” He pressed the elevator button and turned to Carmen. “Oh, I need you to also order a dozen roses and a wedding ring.”

She gave him an exasperated look.

“You have until five,” he replied. That should be plenty of time to make those phone calls.

Once he and Tyler stepped into the elevator, she called out, “You’re right. I’ll just wait for tomorrow to call your doctor about that fungus.”

He gasped.

Tyler laughed.

“It’s athletes foot,” Nathan clarified. “And I just need some cream to clear it up.”

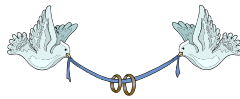
“That’ll teach you to mess with her.”

“Well, I guess she deserves one slip of the tongue. But she better not make it a habit,” he yelled so that she could hear him.

While the doors closed, she pretended to yawn.

He sighed. Considering how well she did her job, he figured he’d let her off the hook—just this one time. Besides, he had his future to think about, and he couldn’t wait until May 28th.

Chapter Two



“How did it go?” Danielle Pearce asked as Amy entered the travel agency which was a good six blocks from the Rudolph headquarters.

Amy put her purse on her desk and sat in her chair. Tucking her hair behind her ear, she shrugged, “I don’t know. I think it went alright, but part of me thinks that my answers were dumb.”

“You always think you do poorly and end up getting what you’re striving for.”

“That’s the strange thing. I mean, I didn’t even apply for this promotion.”

“I guess the higher ups saw your excellent customer service report.” Danielle sighed and took a sip from her bottled water. “Lucky me. I let PMS get in the way of being pleasant all the time.”

Amy laughed. “Oh come on. You do fine.”

“I don’t know. There was Murphy.”

“Yeah, but Murphy was crazy. It’s not like you can go into the system and magically change the price of an airline

Ruth Ann Nordin

ticket.” She logged into her computer. “What was the price he wanted to pay?”

“\$100 for a roundtrip ticket to Mexico.”

“Like I said, he was crazy.”

Danielle giggled. “Yeah, I guess he was. He had me rattled up so bad that it took my husband giving me a back rub, a foot rub, and a hot bubble bath before I was able to calm down.”

Amy smiled and shook her head. “And here I thought the two day shopping spree we did at the mall did the trick.”

“Well, I admit that helped a teeny tiny bit.”

A woman with two children walked into the agency.

“Go on to lunch. I grabbed a bite to eat on my way back,” Amy told her best friend. “I’ll take care of them.”

Danielle eagerly picked up her purse. “Who am I to argue with the one who was interviewed for the new job?”

Amy playfully rolled her eyes. The ordeal would have meant more if she knew exactly what this new job was. All she’d gotten was an email from Tyler Jackson stating that the board members—whoever they were—had taken a look at her job performance and thought she might qualify for a job promotion. It didn’t say what the promotion was for, but there were rumors floating around that a position in marketing had just opened up and that seemed to fall in line with what little she’d read on the papers Nathan had her sign. Amy thought a marketing job could be fun.

Pushing her questions aside, she stood up and approached them. “Good afternoon. May I help you?”

The mother nodded. “Yes. My husband and I want to go on a cruise.” She glanced at her children. “The grandparents said they’d watch these two guys.”

What Nathan Wants

“Then it really is a vacation,” Amy teased. “Alright. If you come this way, I’ll see what I can do for you.” She led the woman to her desk and got down to business.

The afternoon passed by uneventfully, and just as Danielle and Amy were about to close the agency for the day, Mr. Rudolph walked into the place, followed by Mr. Jackson.

Danielle’s eyes widened as she met Amy’s startled gaze.

Amy knew what the look her friend was giving her meant, and Amy’s heart did crazy flip flops. She must have gotten the job. After all, the president of the company didn’t pay a personal visit just to tell the interviewee that he wouldn’t hire her. But still, why would Mr. Rudolph come? Shouldn’t he send her an email or have Tyler do that?

Mr. Rudolph walked up to Amy, a pleasant smile on his handsome face. He extended his hand to her, and despite her surprise, she shook it. “Congratulations, Amy. You should clear out your desk since you no longer work here. You have been chosen.”

Danielle gave her a thumbs up sign.

Amy smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Rudolph. Exactly what is the new job?” She couldn’t accept it until she knew what she’d be getting herself into.

“You will be my wife.”

Danielle’s jaw dropped and Mr. Jackson winced.

Amy stood there in shock, just shaking his hand.

“Take this week to pretty yourself up for the wedding.” He released her hand and pulled out his business card. “If you need to ask me any questions before the 28th, you can reach me at that number.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Don’t forget the email address,” Mr. Jackson dryly added.

“Oh, right. Yes. Amy, you are certainly welcome to email me too. Now, I don’t want you to worry about a thing, so I took care of all the wedding arrangements, including the ring. There is one thing you’ll need to do though, and that is getting the dress. Just tell whatever bridal shop you go to that I sent you and they’ll send the bill to me. I don’t want to make this a big to do, so I will send a limo to your apartment and we’ll get married at my house. Feel free to invite whoever you want. I will have my secretary give you more details in a package she’s putting together. Hopefully, that will be on your doorstep tomorrow before noon.”

Danielle, who hadn’t budged from her spot, still had her jaw lowered in shock.

Mr. Jackson just shook his head as if he couldn’t believe this was happening.

And when Amy returned her gaze to Mr. Rudolph, she realized that he wasn’t joking. Nope. He was as serious as could be. And not only was he serious, but he was grinning at her as if he had just announced that she won the lottery. Well, she was going to put a stop to this before it got out of hand.

“No,” she said.

He blinked. “No what?”

“I’m keeping my job here.”

“But it’s against company policy for me to marry you if you work for me.”

“Which is a good reason why you can’t do this.”

“Of course, I can. In case you aren’t aware of the implications of marrying me, I have to fire you.”

“Fire me?”

What Nathan Wants

“Or you can quit. Either way, I think you’ll find your unemployment package to your liking. You’ll have access to my checking account and everything.”

Her cheeks grew hot. “I don’t want your checking account.”

Danielle finally closed her jaw and mouthed the words, *He’s rich.*

Amy already knew that, but she didn’t care. “We do not have an agreement. I will not marry you. I will keep working here.”

His eyebrows rose in surprise. “Why?”

“Because I don’t like being told what to do, that’s why. I’m an adult. I’m not a child who needs my decisions made for me.”

“But you can’t do better than me.”

Behind him, Tyler groaned, took off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes.

Amy glared at Nathan. Tall, dark, good looking...and an ego to boot! “I’m surprised you don’t just club me on the head and drag me back to your cave.”

“Do you really prefer such hostile treatment?”

“I don’t see how what you’re doing is much better.”

His eyes grew wide. “I just offered you a good deal.”

Crossing her arms, she said, “I’m not marrying you, and there’s nothing you can do that will make me.”

“But the arrangements are being made as we speak. I even got tickets to visit your parents.”

“My parents are in on this?” she asked in horror.

“No. They don’t know yet. I meant that we’ll go see them on our honeymoon.”

“Feel free to go, but I won’t be joining you.” In a huff, she grabbed her purse and stomped past him. “Come on, Danielle. Let’s get out of here before I shove something up his

Ruth Ann Nordin

butt.” *Like my foot.* Really. The nerve! How dare he treat her as if she were an object he could purchase from a store? Congratulations, indeed! The man was a big oaf! She reached the door, turned and realized that Danielle hadn’t budged from her spot. “Danielle!”

Danielle bit her lower lip and shrugged. “Are you sure you don’t want to at least think about it?”

“Danielle,” Amy growled.

“Okay. I’m coming.” Danielle gave Mr. Rudolph and Mr. Jackson a timid smile before she took her purse and joined her friend.

“This is ridiculous,” Nathan called out, looking bewildered. “I’ve chosen you, Ms. Watson, and I have every intention of marrying you.”

Fighting the urge to scream, Amy threw the door open and hurried outside. *I’ve chosen you, Ms. Watson, and I have every intention of marrying you.* He had a lot of nerve!

Danielle had to run to keep up with her. “You know, I don’t mean to pry—”

“Good. Then don’t.” Amy reached her car and shoved her key into the lock.

“But he is rich...and gorgeous.”

“There’s more to a man than how much he makes or how he looks.”

“True. But you could have your own house with all the money he makes. Think of all the shopping sprees you can have, and you don’t even have to work for it.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Danielle shrugged. “If it were me, I’d take him up on it.”

She rolled her eyes and yanked her car door open. “And I thought you had standards.”

What Nathan Wants

“I do. I have plenty of standards. Like, a real diamond instead of a cubic zirconium. Real gold instead of the fake stuff. Spas, clothes that have labels I could actually show the public, fancy restaurants... What more could a woman ask for?”

Amy jumped into her seat and slammed the door. Rolling down her window, she shook her head. “You disappoint me, Danielle.”

“What? Why? Do you really want to spend the rest of your life from paycheck to paycheck?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Alright. Try not to get into an accident.”

Amy caught sight of Mr. Rudolph talking to Mr. Jackson as they left the agency. She resisted the urge to run the rat over and sped away in the opposite direction.

The next day, Amy returned to work, relieved when she saw that her stuff was still there on her desk. Good.

“Hey, girl,” Danielle called out as she stepped out of the backroom with a coffee cup in her hand. “Feeling better?”

“Yeah.” Amy placed her purse on her desk and sat down. She turned on her computer. “I still can’t believe the nerve of our boss.”

She shrugged and sat down, still holding the cup in her hands. “You know, you should be flattered. I heard he interviewed almost every single woman in his company, and he picked you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yay for me.”

Giggling, she added, “That says a lot about you and you know it. You’re still attractive.”

“Like I said, ‘Yay for me.’”

Ruth Ann Nordin

"Must you be so negative? If nothing else, you could spend the rest of your life enjoying his money. I bet you could buy a car for each day of the week. Why, you could probably head out to Paris just because you wanted to have lunch there."

"Too bad you married a teacher."

"You know I wouldn't give up Randy for anyone."

"Yeah. I know, but I also know you'd marry Mr. Rudolph in a heartbeat if you were single."

She didn't deny it, which only proved Amy's point.

The door opened and in walked a delivery man. He held an envelope and looked at their nameplates. Then he went over to Amy. "Are you Amy Watson?"

Amy could tell that Danielle was biting back a sarcastic retort. How could the man look at her nameplate and then ask her that question? But Amy decided to ignore her friend's amused expression and nodded. "Yes, I'm Amy Watson."

"This is for you. Will you sign here?" He handed her an electronic clipboard.

She hesitated for a moment but finally signed it.

"Thank you." He handed her the envelope.

After he left, she opened it.

"Who's it from?" Danielle wondered before sipping her coffee.

"Thompson & Thompson Law Firm."

Danielle's eyes grew wide and she straightened in her chair. "Is someone suing you?"

"I don't think so." Apprehensive, Amy pulled out the document and started reading it. Color drained from her face. "Oh no."

"What?" Danielle leaned forward, as if she were about to watch whether or not her winning team would get a touchdown.

What Nathan Wants

"I can't believe he did this!" Amy jumped out of her seat, her heart racing in a mixture of anger and horror.

"Did what?!" She jumped up too. Though some coffee spilled from her cup, she didn't seem to notice.

"This can't be legal!"

"What? What can't be legal?"

Amy glanced from her friend to the document and flipped through the pages so she could make sure she understood it right. This couldn't be happening. It had to be a sick and twisted joke! "He just can't do this!"

Danielle finally put the cup down and loudly groaned. "Will you please tell me already? The suspense is killing me!"

"Mr. Rudolph married me by proxy."

She gasped, her eyes bulging out even more, which Amy didn't think was possible. "Nathan Rudolph?"

"Is there another Rudolph?"

"But how did he do that?"

"I don't know, but he did!"

"Wow!" Danielle took the license and stared at it. "Wow!"

"Wow? Is that all you can say?"

"Well...I mean...This is just so...Wow!"

Amy groaned and rubbed her eyes. How could her day get any worse?

As if on cue, two men came into the agency.

"Is there an Amy Rudolph in the room?" one of them asked.

"Amy what?" she nearly screamed.

Danielle—the traitor—pointed at her.

The men approached her, making her take a step back. They were tall and strong. What did Mr. Rudolph do? Hire goons to drag her to his home?

"Ma'am, here's your notice."

Ruth Ann Nordin

"Notice for what?" she demanded, unwilling to take the envelope he held out.

"You're fired."

The color drained from her face. "Fired?"

"As of eight o'clock this morning. It's against company policy for you to work for Mr. Rudolph if you're married to him. We've been ordered to clear your desk."

"Wow," Danielle said again, sounding shocked.

The walls were closing in on Amy. It was getting hard to breathe. She shook her head, unable to believe this was really happening. She pinched herself. Nope. She wasn't having a nightmare.

"We'll take these things to your new residence," the man said as he started putting her things into an empty cardboard box.

Amy stamped her foot on the floor. "I'm not married to him!"

The other man shrugged as he took her name plate and threw it into the trash can. "We just work for him. If you want to work this out, you'll have to deal with him personally."

"I'd just as soon take a walk on broken glass!" She grabbed her purse before the goons could take it and took the marriage license from Danielle. Then she stormed out of the building.

Danielle ran after her. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going straight into Rudolph's office so I can rip this up right in front of his face."

"Wait!" Danielle grabbed her arm and turned her around. "Let's think this through."

"I'm not staying married to him...if this is even legit."

"Oh, of course, you won't. Though I would if I were in your shoes."

"Danielle." Her voice held a hint of warning in it.

What Nathan Wants

Danielle shot her an apologetic smile. “No. What I meant was that while you are the very wealthy Mrs. Rudolph, you should do what rich wives do.”

“Sorry. I’m not interested in having an affair.”

“No. Not that. Look, what fun is having money if you can’t spend it?”

“You want me to go shopping?”

“Sure. That’ll show him! And to add insult to injury, I’ll be happy to come and help you blow as much of his money as possible.” Danielle clapped her hands, her eyes twinkling. “And think of all the damage we can do in one day.”

“That’s exactly what he wants me to do. Once I spend his money, he’ll take that to mean I want to be his wife.”

“Oh come on, Amy. I really need a hot tub.”

“You do not *need* a hot tub.”

“Fine.” She rolled her eyes. “I want a hot tub.”

“Well, you’ll have to keep saving for it. I’m not staying married to him.” Amy glanced at the document. “He can’t bind me to this!”

Her friend groaned, her shoulders slumped. “You don’t have enough fun. Ever.”

“I’m not touching a cent of Mr. Rudolph’s dirty money.”

“Who do you think pays your wages?”

“Paid. In case you haven’t noticed, I now qualify for unemployment checks.” Amy reached her car and unlocked the door.

“At least get a new car first. I mean, that thing is on its last leg.”

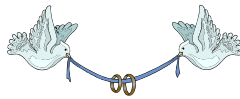
Amy glanced at her rusty Toyota. “Hey, these things were made to last.” She ignored her friend’s eye roll and slipped into her seat. “I’ll call you once I get everything straightened out.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

Danielle sighed. “Alright. Though we could have some serious fun first.”

Pretending she didn’t hear her, Amy closed the door and headed for Mr. Rudolph’s office.

Chapter Three



“Well, we’re certainly glad to see that she’s found love again,” Amy’s mother said.

Nathan smiled into the phone. “I hope you’ll forgive us for not telling you sooner.”

“That’s how Amy is. She doesn’t like big social gatherings, so it’s not a surprise that she chose to elope with you. We’re just surprised she never said anything about you.”

“She didn’t?” He feigned shock as he leaned back in his office chair.

She chuckled. “Who’s to blame her though? She’s always been a private person. But are you sure you want to pay for our tickets? We can afford it.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t think of it. We married without telling you. It’s the least we can do, especially since you’ve been gracious about it.”

“Well, alright.”

The door to his office flung open and there stood an irate Amy, holding the document that could only be their marriage license.

Ruth Ann Nordin

"I just got a business call," he told Amy's mother. "I'll send you an email about the tickets."

"Okay. Tell Amy that her parents can't wait to see her."

He glanced up uneasily as Amy stormed over to him, looking like a bull heading for the red cloth. "Will do. Bye." He quickly hung up and smiled at her. "Hello, honey. Is there something bothering you?"

"How could you?" she yelled, waving the paper in front of him. "I'm not something you can buy, Mr. Rudolph!"

He glanced out the doorway where his secretary grinned knowingly at him. So much for loyalty! He turned his attention back to his annoyed bride. "Did anyone ever tell you that you're cute when you're angry?"

Amy's face became red, and if she could, she'd have smoke coming out of her ears. "This can't be legal!"

"Oh, it is. I went to Colorado yesterday and made it happen."

"But I didn't go with you."

"I don't need you to go with me. Someone stood in your place."

"But you need my permission. I never gave you permission to marry me by proxy!"

He pulled out the papers he had her sign when she'd been there before. "See for yourself."

She gasped as she read the contents of what she really signed. "You...! I was told I was signing up for a job!"

"You did. You signed up to be my wife."

"No, I didn't! I signed up for something that had to do with marketing!"

"Oh that. Somehow, that particular paper got mixed in there."

She grunted and tore the papers up. "I don't care what these say. It can't be legal!"

What Nathan Wants

“It doesn’t matter what you say. Those documents will hold up in court.” He pulled out his desk drawer and took out more papers. “I have my own copies, so feel free to tear these up too.” Then he held them out to her.

She stamped her foot on the floor and grunted.

He blinked. “I didn’t realize you were so stressed out about this whole thing. You know what you need? A day at the spa. It’ll relax you.” He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and handed her a credit card. “You have access to my accounts. Go out and treat yourself. Take along that friend of yours too if you want. Make a day of it.”

She screamed, threw the card on the floor and stomped on it.

His eyebrows rose. He thought she might be upset, but he didn’t realize she’d go ballistic.

Tyler came to his doorway, looking panicked. “Is someone dying?”

“No,” Nathan called out. “My wife is having newlywed jitters.”

She stopped stomping on the card and glared at him. “Newlywed jitters?”

“Look, you just need to give this marriage time. You’ll learn to like me. I promise I’m not that bad.”

“Believe me, Mr. Rudolph, you don’t want to know my opinion of you.”

“Nathan.”

She looked startled. “What?”

“My name is Nathan. Mr. Rudolph is what people under me call me. However, you are now my equal. Therefore, you may address me as Nathan.”

Tyler groaned and rolled his eyes. “Smooth, Nate. Real smooth.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“What?” Nathan didn’t understand what the problem was. It wasn’t like he married her and then set her in a dark, cold dungeon somewhere. It wasn’t like he hit her over the head and told her she was now his slave. He was lifting her from the low level job she had and exalting her to the position of his wife. What was wrong with that?

She glanced at Tyler. “You were in on this too.”

“And I warned him that this would happen,” his friend said.

“There’s no need to get him involved,” Nathan told her. “I’m his boss. Tyler has to do what I say.”

She huffed. “And I suppose that I have to do what you say too?”

“Well, it would be nice,” he admitted. “At the very least, it would make things easier.”

“Let’s get one thing straight. I’m not your wife.”

“The document proves otherwise.”

“That’s a simple fix. I’ll request an annulment.”

He gasped and straightened in his chair. “What? Why?”

After rolling her eyes, she turned to leave.

He leaned forward and pressed a button on his phone. “Get security up here.”

She spun on her heel and turned back to him. “What are you doing?”

“Keeping you from making a big mistake.”

Tyler looked at the amused secretary and said, “Help me get rid of all the sharp objects in his office.”

The woman shook her head. “She has every right to do whatever she will.”

“Without him, there’s no check.”

She loudly sighed and stood up. As she passed Amy, she placed a hand on her shoulder and whispered something.

What Nathan Wants

Nathan frowned. "What are you telling her?"

She shrugged and innocently said, "Nothing."

Right. Nothing. As if he believed that one. But for the moment, he couldn't afford to waste his time. "There's no need to remove anything from my office. I'm going home early to celebrate the day with my wife."

"What?" Amy screamed.

"Celebrate?" the secretary asked.

"You're nuts," Tyler added.

He waved his hand. "There's nothing to worry about."

"I'm not going anywhere with you." Amy crossed her arms in open defiance. Her jaw jutted out and she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Oh, that's a shame since your parents will be arriving here tomorrow." He logged off his computer and grabbed his briefcase.

"My parents?" Her face grew red. "You contacted my parents?"

"Yes. They sound like lovely people. Well, they did from the time I spent on the phone with them."

She gasped. "You were talking to them when I came in here?"

"Of course. You know, they were shocked to learn that you were married. They wonder why you didn't tell them you were dating again."

Tyler groaned and left the office. "I give up. Carmen, arrange for Nate's funeral."

The secretary nodded and ran to the phone.

Nathan sighed. "There's not going to be a funeral."

Carmen glanced at Amy who practically had steam coming out of her ears. "That's what you think." Then she picked up the phone.

Ruth Ann Nordin

The elevator door opened and the security guard emerged from it. "Is there a problem, Mr. Rudolph?"

Nathan turned to Amy. "I need to explain things to you, but I'd rather do it at home."

"I'm not going home with you. I have my own place."

"You *had* your own place."

Carmen spoke into the phone. "Yes, I'd like to purchase a burial plot by the city dump."

"What do you mean I *had* my own place?" Amy demanded.

"I took the liberties of hiring a moving company as soon as the agency opened this morning," Nathan said. "I didn't want you to worry about paying movers or trying to lug all your stuff by yourself. There's no need to thank me."

"Thank you?" she snapped.

Carmen drummed her fingers on her desk. "I don't know. Do you have a tombstone in the shape of a rat?"

"I'm not going home with you," Amy said. She stared at the guard. "Are you going to make me go with him?"

The guard winced and shot a pleading look at Nathan.

Nathan sighed. Obviously, Amy had a slight aversion to this marriage. "Alright. Let her go. I guess I'll explain everything when her parents come in. And they sounded excited too. I really hate to disappoint parents, especially since mine are no longer alive."

"Why don't you just call them and cancel?" she asked.

"They're excited to see you. I figure the least I can do is let them see their only child. Besides, I can't refund the tickets. I'm not thrilled with the idea of losing money."

"Then I'll call them and cancel."

His eyebrows rose. By the way her parents talked, he knew they were close to her, and he didn't think she'd have the

What Nathan Wants

heart to tell them to stay in Florida. "Alright." He stepped aside and motioned to the phone.

She marched over to it and picked it up. "Don't think I won't do it."

"Oh, I have no doubt you'll call." He crossed his arms and watched in amusement. She really was cute. In a lot of ways, she was pretty, especially when her cheeks were flushed and her hair slightly out of place.

She narrowed her eyes at him, as if gauging whether he mocked her or not. Then she dialed the number and stared straight ahead at the wall.

He glanced at his secretary who also waited to see what she'd do. His gaze fell to the security guard, and he indicated that the man could go, which he did.

Amy cleared her throat. "Hi, Mom." She paused. "Oh, yes. Well, you see... What?"

The corner of Nathan's mouth twitched upward. He liked her parents and wanted to meet them.

After a moment, Amy said, "We'll be there." She hung up.

He glanced at Carmen whose eyes nearly bugged out of her head. And his secretary didn't think he understood women! He shot her a triumphant look, but she rolled her eyes and returned to the phone.

"So we are going to be at the airport tomorrow?" he asked his new wife in interest.

Amy spun around and shot him a glaring look. "Don't think for a minute this means we're married."

"I don't need to think it. I know it."

"I mean, don't think we're staying married."

"Of course not."

"I don't care much for the tone in your voice."

His eyes widened innocently. "What tone?"

Ruth Ann Nordin

She stormed up to him and placed her hands on her hips, not seeming to be disturbed by the fact that he stood nearly a foot taller than her. "The tone that says that you've won. You haven't won. This isn't over."

"That remains to be seen."

She grunted and brushed past him.

"Remember, all your things are on their way to my home. If you feel inclined, you may take my limo. I can call if you wish."

She pressed the elevator button. "I'm not going to your home."

"Not today then."

She loudly groaned as the elevator doors opened. She stepped into it and pressed the button to go down.

"I hope you have a good night. I'll see you at the airport tomorrow afternoon," he called out.

The doors closed as she scowled at him.

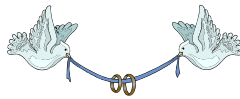
His secretary hung up the phone and muttered, "You are asking for it."

"She'll get over it. I'm not that bad."

"That depends on who you ask."

Deciding to ignore the remark, he returned to his office and shut the door.

Chapter Four



Amy grumbled as she pulled on Danielle's long nightshirt. She never felt so miserable in her entire life. Her parents were due to come into town tomorrow, thinking that she wanted to be married, and to add insult to injury, she was homeless. Nathan, she learned, didn't play fair. Well, she'd beat him at his own game. She'd find a way out of this mess if it was the last thing she did.

Groaning, she left the bathroom and passed the two screaming kids—one two and one four—in the hallway until she reached the spare bedroom.

Danielle fluffed a pillow on the bed and smiled at her. "Don't let it get you down."

"How can I not? I'm homeless and unemployed. I don't know how I'm going to tell my parents the truth." She took off her watch and placed it on the nightstand. "Why did this have to happen to me?"

Danielle stood up straight and placed a hand on her hip. "You're not that bad off. You're married to one of the richest men in Nebraska."

Ruth Ann Nordin

She rolled her eyes. "Don't remind me."

"Oh come on, Amy. It's not going to be that bad. If you insist on getting out of the marriage, turn your parents against him. No man wants in-laws he can't stand. Trust me. Randy was miserable before I told my mom that she'd better start treating him right."

"I guess that'd be worth a try."

"You mean, you're going to try it?"

"Why not? What have I got to lose? There's nothing else he can do to me."

Danielle shrugged. "I guess not, though it is a shame to waste all that money. Are you sure you don't want to try the whole 'spend as much of his money as you can in one afternoon' idea?"

"Money won't faze him. He makes so much of it, it doesn't even matter. But the in-law thing might work." She pulled back the sheet and comforter and slipped into the bed as some ideas came to her. "This might really work! Danielle, I'll need your help."

She blinked in surprise. "My help? What for?"

"You can help me convince my parents that he's a real jerk. Here." She patted the spot in front of her. "Let's make a plan!"

"Does this plan involve a hot tub?"

Realizing that a bargain would solidify the deal, Amy relented. "Alright. It includes a hot tub."

She squealed and sat down.

Nathan arrived early at the airport and wondered if Amy would come. He didn't know enough about her to know where she stayed the previous night, nor did he want to snoop on her. In

What Nathan Wants

time, she'd come around. He was sure of it. Sometimes women needed time to absorb a shock. And she, obviously, just needed time. That's all. And surely, she'd want to see her parents. During that time, he could find a way to smooth out the rough patches in their marriage.

Yep, it was just a matter of time before she admitted she was glad he picked her.

People began emerging out of the gate. He straightened as he and the others who expected loved ones to come off the plane waited down the corridor past the security personnel who manned the scanners. It'd been a long time since he had to deal with parents. From talking to Amy's mother and father on the phone, he was confident that he'd get along with them. They seemed like nice, normal people. He glanced around the airport again, wondering if Amy wasn't going to welcome her parents after all.

Turning his attention back to the sea of passengers, he caught sight of a man wearing a Hawaiian shirt and straw hat. He had a white mustache and a big smile. A chuckle rose in his throat. That had to be her father. Her mother said he always wore those clothes when he traveled anywhere. He claimed it made him feel young. Surprisingly, her mother wore a nice light green pant suit. She wore her light blond hair back with a clip at the nape of her neck.

In Nathan's opinion, the pair couldn't be more mismatched. They didn't look like they belonged together at all, though by the way they talked to each other, they looked like two newlyweds in love. A flicker of envy swept over him. What was it like to experience that kind of love? One not built on possessions or service but on mutual respect and friendship.

Pushing aside the longing, he stepped forward and extended his hand as they approached him. "Hi. I'm Nathan."

Ruth Ann Nordin

Her father was the first to shake it. “Good to put a name with a face. Marge and I are glad to meet you. If our little girl chose you, then you ought to be something special.”

Her mother laughed and nudged her husband in the side before she reached out to shake Nathan’s hand. “Now Terry, don’t embarrass him. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Nathan.”

“The pleasure is all mine.” Just as Nathan thought, he liked them already.

“Where’s Amy?” Terry looked around the crowded area.

“Well, you see—” Nathan began.

“Mom! Dad!”

Nathan stopped and turned his attention to Amy who appeared as if she’d just run a mile.

She was out of breath with her hair in disarray around her shoulders. She hugged her parents. “I didn’t know you were due in at four.”

“What?” Nathan remembered telling her what time her parents would be in.

Amy turned to him and shook her head. “Why didn’t you return any of my phone calls? I asked you when I needed to come. I know your meeting ran long, but these are my parents.”

In that instant, he understood her ploy. Yes, she was still mad that he forced her to marry him. Well, he didn’t get in the position he was in by letting these curveballs throw him off guard. Putting on a contrite expression, he said, “I thought I did, honey.” He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and slapped his forehead. “I forgot to turn this back on. I’m sorry, sweetheart.” Looking at her parents with a ‘please forgive me’ expression, he added, “They don’t like cell phones going off when you’re in a meeting.”

Amy’s jaw dropped.

What Nathan Wants

Her father patted him on the shoulder. "No harm in that, son. It was an honest mistake." He smiled at Nathan and Amy. "The point is you're both here."

Her mother clapped her hands and sighed. "Oh, Terry, don't they make such a wonderful couple?"

"They sure do. A fine looking one."

Crisis averted, Nathan smiled and put his arm around Amy's shoulders. "Well, I'm thankful to have her. She's an incredible woman. You two did a great job of raising her."

Her parents grinned at each other.

Nathan turned his gaze to Amy and smiled.

She, in turn, scowled at him before she flung his arm off her shoulders and took her parents by the arms. "We should get your luggage and take you to your hotel. I'm sure you're exhausted after the long flight here."

"Actually, honey, your parents are staying with us," Nathan cheerfully announced, waiting to see if she could wiggle her way out of coming to live with him—at least while her parents were around.

"Oh, we don't want to impose," her mother argued.

"Right," Amy agreed.

"Who's imposing? I have five bedrooms, and four aren't even being used. It'll be good to air one of them out." There, Nathan decided, that settled it. Not only would she have to stay in his house but she'd also be sleeping in his bed.

"Oh, well, if you're sure," her mother hesitantly said.

"Of course, we're sure," he replied. "We're all family, and there's no reason why we shouldn't act like one."

"I can't argue with that logic," her father replied.

Amy's face grew red as she shot a glaring look in Nathan's direction, but he ignored it and motioned for the escalators. "The baggage claim is downstairs."

Ruth Ann Nordin

He led the way, content to listen to her parents telling Amy things like, "It's good to see you again", "We missed you", "You're looking good.", and "We've never been to Omaha before. What is there to do here?"

Since Amy seemed to be at a loss for words, Nathan decided to answer their last question. As they stepped off the escalator, he said, "Omaha has many fine attractions, depending on what you like to do. Do you prefer anything like museums, golf courses, nature trails, shows?"

"Oooh, I'd love to do some golfing," her father eagerly stated.

"I do quite a bit of golfing. We should play. Are you any good?"

Her mother laughed. "Good? He may wear clothes so bright you need sunglasses, but he can hold his own."

"What's wrong with my clothes?" he asked.

"Your special golfing clothes? Nothing if you don't mind bright orange with yellow stripes and pea green soup pants."

"Those are lucky colors."

She rolled her eyes but chuckled. As they neared the luggage, she told Nathan, "I'd like to check out museums or the zoo. Amy mentioned the zoo. She went there when she first got here."

"They have an IMAX there, don't they?" her father asked.

"They do," Nathan said. He doubted Amy was going to contribute anything. She looked much too upset to add anything to the conversation.

"I want to see something at the IMAX. It doesn't matter what it is. That Bernie Phillips got to see the aquarium show at an IMAX and said it was an amazing experience. I want to know what all the hoopla is about."

What Nathan Wants

They reached the conveyer belt and waited for the buzzing sound to announce the luggage was ready to come their way.

“Well, there’s plenty of time to decide on things to do,” Nathan said. “I collected some brochures.”

“Oh hey, you’re in the travel business anyway.” Her father laughed and tapped his wife on the arm. “Who better to have as a guide through Omaha than our son-in-law?”

Nathan couldn’t be sure but he thought he heard a low grumble come from Amy’s throat. He placed his hand on the small of her back and whispered, “Your parents are great. You have nothing to worry about. We’ll all get along just fine.”

Amy refused to make eye contact with him so he gave her a quick pat on the behind before he directed his attention to the suitcases, pretending he didn’t notice the way she jerked in surprise.

“Which ones are yours?” Nathan called out.

“My suitcase is dark blue with black trim,” her mother replied. “And his is a big red one.”

“Red is easy to pick out,” her father added, looking proud of his choice in suitcases.

Nathan found both pieces of luggage and grabbed them as they passed by on the conveyer belt. “Are you two hungry?”

“Famished.” Terry patted his stomach.

“Great,” Amy suddenly spoke up. “I’ll take them out to eat while you get back to work.” Looking at her parents, she explained, “He’s tied to his work. In fact, he’s rarely ever at home. Sometimes he doesn’t even come home at all. He just stays in his office doing office things.”

Office things? Nathan shook his head. Boy, she was really reaching for things to make him offensive to her parents. Fortunately, he had the perfect rebuttal. “That was before you came into my life, honey. Now I have a reason to come home.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

Then he took her hand in his and said, "I made reservations at my favorite restaurant. I hope you don't mind."

"You made reservations?" her father asked. "For us?"

"Of course, I did." Nathan held onto her hand and stepped forward. He took her mom's suitcase and picked it up with his free hand. "My car is in the parking garage."

Amy practically dug her heels into the floor, but he managed to pull her along. "I brought my own car."

"You're still driving that thing?" He stopped and gave her a good look.

"It's not *that thing*. It's my car."

"But you have access to my bank account. Why didn't you get another one?"

"I've had Old Snoopy for twelve years."

He blinked. "Old Snoopy?"

Her mother shot Amy a knowing grin. "Ever since she learned to drive, she's made it a habit of naming her vehicles."

"She gets that from me," her father admitted.

Nathan couldn't imagine why anyone would want to hold onto a car that long if they didn't have to. Maybe she was worse off than he thought. He figured that he just did her a big favor by marrying her. Now she could get a decent car. It was definitely time she got a *New Snoopy*.

"I'm going in my car," Amy insisted, still trying to pry her hand from his.

He finally relented and let her hand go, though it pained him to do so. He liked touching her. "Then you'll meet up with us?"

"My parents can ride with me."

Her mother wrinkled her nose. "No offense, Amy, but your car is small. I could barely fit my suitcase in there the last time I visited you."

What Nathan Wants

Nathan took that as his cue. There was no way he was going to let Amy get a hold of her parents without him around...at least not yet. Who knew what she'd tell them? He turned to her parents. "I have plenty of room in my car. It can fit your luggage and three more the same size in the trunk."

"That sounds much more feasible," her father agreed.

With a huff and a roll of her eyes, she said, "Fine. So nobody likes my car."

"It's not that we don't like it," her mother quickly began. "It's just... Well..." She glanced at Terry and shrugged. "It's easier to fit luggage into a trunk that can hold more than two sacks of groceries." Then she hugged Amy. "We love you, honey. We just don't love your car."

Nathan told her the restaurant he and her parents were going to. "The reservation is for six. I hope you'll join us."

"Why?" her father asked, raising his eyebrows and looked at his daughter. "Is there somewhere else you planned to be?"

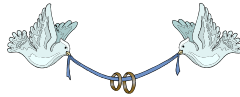
Amy glanced from Nathan to her mother and then to her dad. She let out a defeated sigh. "No."

"Great! We'll see you there," Terry said. "That is, if Old Snoopy makes it." He laughed to show her he was joking.

"Ha ha," she sarcastically replied.

Nathan thought he noted a trace of a grin on her face. That was good. Her parents were just the thing to ease her into the transition of their marriage. Yep, inviting them up there was the best thing he ever did. "We'll meet you there, honey." He kissed her on the cheek, noting how nice she smelled. Whatever perfume she wore, it had a gentle, unassuming scent. That was so much like how he thought she'd be when he interviewed her. Now, the key was to convince her that being married to him was a good thing.

Chapter Five



Amy stormed back to her car which wasn't on the same level of the garage that Nathan had parked his. As she neared her dear, sweet car, Danielle looked up from her book and quickly got out.

"What happened?"

"Forget it. My parents aren't coming in my car. They'd rather go in his." Amy crossed her arms and frowned.

Danielle adjusted her shirt which left little to the imagination since she'd purposely chosen a size too small. Her tattered shorts and heels completed the horrendous look that she and Amy had carefully planned the night before. Danielle popped her gum and shrugged. "Maybe I can play the jealous lover next time there's something going on."

"It's all his fault," Amy complained, not paying much attention as Danielle opened Amy's purse and dug out hand wipes from it. "I didn't ask to be interviewed, and I certainly didn't ask to be married."

"Yeah, married to a guy who's loaded and wants to meet your parents. What a curse. I should have such luck." Looking

What Nathan Wants

into the rearview mirror, she began rubbing the bright blush off her cheeks. "This make-up is a pain to take off. I don't know if these wipes are strong enough to remove this blue eye shadow...or this bright red lipstick. I don't feel like a lover. I feel like a deranged clown."

"It doesn't matter. The plan backfired."

"Maybe, but I still have to live with this face. I hope this cheap make-up won't make me break out."

"You did it for the hot tub, remember?"

"Oh right!" She stood up and turned to Amy. "Did you order the one I wanted? You know, the one in the shape of a heart?"

Amy rolled her eyes. "Yes. It'll be at your house by this time next week."

"Yay!"

A car slowed as it neared them.

Amy glanced over her shoulder and groaned.

Nathan stopped his car and rolled down the windows where her parents stared at her and Danielle in obvious shock.

Danielle cleared her throat and waved. "Hi. You must be Amy's parents."

"Uh...yes," her mother, being the first to recover, finally said.

Amy knew she had to get this over with as soon as possible. The moment was bad enough as it was without dragging it out. "Mom, Dad, this is my best friend, Danielle."

"This is the person you work with?" her father asked.

"Used to," Nathan corrected. "Amy no longer works."

At that announcement, her parents looked relieved.

Probably because they worried that Danielle might pose a bad influence on me, Amy thought.

"Well, it was nice...seeing you, Danielle," her mother said, sounding uncertain. "Amy, we'll talk later."

Ruth Ann Nordin

As Nathan rolled up the automatic windows, Amy heard her father tell him, "Boy, it sure is good you came along."

Once the car was safely out of sight, Danielle pouted. "Oh great. You're parents just met me, and they already hate me. This sucks."

"I didn't know he parked in the surface parking area. I thought he had some guy right out front waiting for him."

Danielle returned her attention to wiping the gunk off her face. "This stuff doesn't want to come off. I'm going to look like a freak."

"You just need to use make-up remover."

"I hope you're right."

"Well, I better go the restaurant. I'll drive you home."

"Okay."

After they got into the car, Amy inserted the key into the ignition and turned it. The car sputtered and stalled out. She tried again with the same results.

"Seriously, when are you going to get a new car?" Danielle asked.

"I don't need a new car!"

Danielle's eyes grew wide. "Hey, there's no need to yell."

"I'm sorry. It's just that Nathan is winning my parents over."

"And?"

"That's the problem. They barely know him, but I can tell that they're already in love with him. It's disgusting."

"No. That's not disgusting. This is." She pointed to her splotchy red cheeks and smeared blue eye shadow. "This will give my kids nightmares for the next two weeks."

"Well, thanks for helping."

"You think you can have any fun with your parents here? It has been since the funeral when you last saw them."

What Nathan Wants

Amy nodded. "I hope so. With any luck, they're not *that* devoted to Nathan yet." She turned the ignition again and was relieved when the car finally cooperated with her.

She drove Danielle home where her husband was playing with their two kids on the front lawn. She winced when Danielle's two-year-old son screamed and ran up to his dad. Okay. So maybe the make-up had been a bad choice. Danielle's husband burst out laughing, and Amy reluctantly drove off, wondering how she could make this up to her friend.

As her car neared the restaurant, the sense of dread building in her gut got stronger. Nathan was going to keep winning her parents over. She just knew it! And there was no way she could stop him. She was trapped like an animal in a cage. Just how was she supposed to act? She couldn't pretend that this arrangement—that being *forced* into this marriage—was something she condoned. And yet, she couldn't go on a screaming rampage with her parents right there.

Trapped. She was utterly and hopelessly trapped.

She groaned and turned into the full parking lot of the restaurant. She made her rounds a couple of times before she found a free spot. Once she pulled the key out of the ignition, she debated whether or not she could stomach a meal with him, pretending that she was his wife. Never mind what the horrid marriage license said. She was not his wife!

She banged her steering wheel in frustration. "Why me? Of all the women who work for him, why did it have to be me?"

It wasn't fair. She was happy with her life. Sure, some of her nights got lonely, but she'd dealt with that when Sean had gone overseas. So she knew how to be alone and like it. If she'd wanted to marry again, she'd have made an effort to do that. But no. She went to what she thought was a simple job

Ruth Ann Nordin

interview and got stuck with a husband. As if anyone could take Sean's place.

Someone tapped on her window.

Jerking, she snapped her attention to her dad who waved at her. "You coming in?"

She peered through her window and saw her mother and Nathan who waited at the front entrance. Nathan said something and her mom laughed. She grunted. It was sickening. Just plain sickening to watch her parents drool all over him as if he was the greatest thing that ever happened to their daughter.

Forcing aside her sudden urge to puke, she stepped out of the car and shut the door. "Why didn't you get started without me?" she asked, joining her father as he made his way to the entrance.

"Nathan paid the host to hold our reservation so that we could wait."

Yippee, she sourly thought. Another bonus point for him.

"It's good to see you again."

For a moment, her mind switched back to her dad. She smiled. "It's good to see you too."

"You know, your mom and I worried about you being here all by yourself. It's good to see you met a nice man."

She bit her lip so she wouldn't say anything. After all, telling her parents the whole sordid story in the middle of a crowded parking lot wasn't a wise idea. No. It'd be best if she found a private moment with them.

When they reached Nathan and her mom, Nathan opened the door and they looked expectantly at her, as if they assumed she'd go in first. Fighting the urge to resist, since this whole marriage was a farce, she stepped into the building.

What Nathan Wants

Soon enough she could tell them the truth. Then they'd insist that he get an annulment and this whole thing could be done away with. He wouldn't listen to her, but he'd probably listen to them.

Once they were seated at a table set up for four people, she reluctantly picked up the menu. How was she supposed to eat? She didn't have an appetite, especially not with the way Nathan let his knee brush hers. Irritated, she sat back in her chair and crossed her legs, accidentally kicking her mom in the shin. She immediately straightened and apologized.

"It's alright," her mom said, laughing. "I've survived worse."

And so she was back to Nathan brushing his knee with hers. She glanced warily at him. She knew he did that on purpose—just like he snuck in physical contact at the airport. It wouldn't have been so annoying if a part of her didn't like it. The only reason she did like it at all was because she hadn't had any meaningful contact with a man since she said good-bye to Sean before he got on the airplane.

Inwardly groaning, she turned her attention back to the menu. Her eyes grew wide when she saw the prices. This place even charged for a glass of water! She pressed her hand to her chin to make sure her jaw wasn't hanging down in shock. Shifting her gaze from one person to another, she realized she was the only one who seemed alarmed that the main course cost enough to fill up most of her gas tank.

But then, she shouldn't be surprised. After all, Nathan was loaded. To him, this was equivalent to her buying a hamburger from a fast food joint. *Man, oh man, Danielle would love to come here.* That was it! She could babysit Danielle's kids so Danielle and her husband could have a romantic dinner here—all due to Nathan's grossly inflated bank account. Amy relaxed,

Ruth Ann Nordin

feeling much better about talking her friend into putting on that hideous make-up.

"I think I'll have the salmon," her dad said.

Her mom rolled her eyes. "Why don't you have something different for a change?"

His eyebrows rose and he shrugged. "Why mess with something that's tried and true?"

"You can afford some variety once in awhile."

"I'm eating it in a different restaurant. That's variety."

"Oh sure."

Despite the sour situation, Amy felt a smile tug at her lips.

Her father turned his attention to her. "What are you going to have?"

She glanced at her menu. She didn't even have an appetite. How was she supposed to eat?

"The prime rib is excellent here," Nathan said.

Her gaze shot in his direction and her skin bristled. He had a lot of nerve, talking to her as if they belonged together. Wasn't it enough that he kept brushing his knee against hers?

His eyebrows rose and he innocently asked, "Not in the mood for steak?"

"No, I'm not." Though it was hard—and painfully so—she managed to keep her tone civil. "I think I'll have salmon, like my dad."

"Really?" her mother asked. "Since when did you turn down the chance to eat a steak dinner?"

Since I 'married' a control freak! Rather than yell out those words, she took a deep breath and shrugged. "I thought I'd give the salmon a go."

"That a girl." Her dad winked at her. "She's developing some fine taste."

"She certainly is," her mother agreed and also winked.

What Nathan Wants

Amy tensed. Oh no. Her mother was sending her a secret signal. *The* secret signal. The one that told her whether or not her mother approved of the boys she'd dated in high school and college. And God help her now because her mother liked Nathan. That spelled trouble. It would make her case of getting away from him that much harder. She *hated* this!

"The salmon here is excellent," Nathan said, "but I think I'll stick with the steak."

"It does look tempting," her mother replied, biting her lower lip and studying the menu. "However, I think I'll try the pork chops this time."

This time? Her mother wasn't implying that them all eating together, as if they were a real family, was going to happen again, was she? Amy glanced at Nathan and he smiled at her. Amy was going to be ill. Seriously, how was she supposed to handle more meals like this? If only her parents had come in her car from the airport. Then they'd be giving Nathan his walking papers.

The meal was hard to get through. Her parents laughed at Nathan's jokes and seemed most impressed by him. And even though she tried not to enjoy the food, she had to admit the chef did a fantastic job. Deciding to wallow in her misery, she ordered a chocolate dessert. Hey, desperate times called for desperate measures. And nothing soothed the soul like chocolate. Plus, it gave her an excuse to keep her mouth full so she couldn't participate in the conversation.

By the time the meal was over, her father looked at her and nodded. "Marriage has done you good. I haven't seen you eat that well in a long time."

"Well, love does wonderful things for the appetite," her mother added, glancing from Amy to Nathan as if they were a match made in heaven.

Ruth Ann Nordin

Amy didn't even look at Nathan. She already knew what she'd find. He'd be wearing that satisfied smirk on his face. The rat. This was all his fault. And here he was, enjoying her misery.

The server came by with the check, and Nathan took it before Amy could see what the total came to. Whatever it was, she was sure it'd make her faint. The entire dinner probably made up the sum of her week's wages.

Nathan handed the server his card and the bill and smiled at them. "I'm sure you're exhausted after a long flight here. We can go to my house and get you settled in."

Amy had to bite down on her tongue so she wouldn't gasp when he placed his hand on her knee and gave it a slight squeeze. Who did he think he was? First, patting her butt in the airport, then brushing his knee against hers during the entire meal, and now this? It was obvious what he had in mind for the night, and there was no way she was going to give it to him. Absolutely not! She reached under the table and slapped his hand away. There. That should be enough of a warning.

The server returned and handed Nathan his card and two receipts.

She breathed a sigh of relief. At least he couldn't grope her while he was signing the bill.

"It'll be nice to sit and relax," her father said as he patted his stomach.

Her mother shook her head but smiled good-naturedly. "You spent all day sitting on the plane."

"Now, Marge, you know I can't relax on an airplane. I need to spread my legs and sit back."

Nathan returned his pen to his breast pocket, and Amy turned to glance at the check to see just how much the bill came to when she noticed how much he left for a tip. Good grief!

What Nathan Wants

This guy had so much money he didn't know what to do with it. Now she didn't feel bad for giving Danielle the hot tub.

Nathan turned to her and pulled her chair out. "Will you be following us home or should we send someone to tow your car there?"

"Tow my car?" she snapped, jerking to her feet so she could face him.

He blinked. "I thought you might like to ride with us." Then he grinned. "Did you think I meant to imply that it won't start? That's not what I meant, sweetie." He looked at her parents and sighed. "She's really attached to Old Snoop, isn't she?"

"More than she should be," her father replied as he helped her mother to her feet and stretched. "Thanks for tipping the hostess so I didn't have to wear a jacket and tie. Those things always make me feel like I'm being strangled. I don't know how you handle a suit, but you make my little girl happy."

Her mother nodded in agreement and collected her purse.

Amy frowned. What planet were her parents living on? Who in their right mind would take one look at her and think she was happy?

Nathan put his arm around her shoulders and said, "I aim to be the best husband I can possibly be."

When her joyful parents turned to walk out of the place, she jabbed him in the side with her elbow.

"Ow." He furrowed his eyebrows at her. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were really opposed to this whole thing." Then he smiled and took her by the hand. "Well, come along, honey. Your parents are waiting for us."

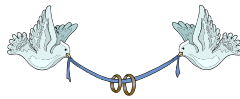
She snatched her hand from his. "You got me backed into a corner, so I'll go to your house, but I'm taking my car."

Ruth Ann Nordin

“I’ll drive slow so I won’t lose you. That way in case the car stalls out, you won’t be stranded.”

Hiding her irritation as much as she could, she reluctantly walked out of the restaurant with him.

Chapter Six



How did I end up here? No matter how many times Amy asked herself this question, she couldn't answer it. Nathan's bedroom walls pressed in on her from all sides.

He's sneaky. That's how you got conned into staying here!

He purposely had her parents stay in the bedroom right next to theirs and refused to say good-night to them until she went into his bedroom. Trapped. The rat had her trapped, and she couldn't do anything about it. She crossed her arms, sat in the chair by his desk, and glared at him.

Smiling, he shut the bedroom door and smiled at her. "You have terrific parents. I really like them."

She grumbled. They liked him too, and that wasn't helping her cause at all. How was she supposed to get out of this travesty of a marriage? He hadn't let her out of his sight once she pulled up into his driveway.

"You shouldn't stress out so much," he casually admonished as he loosened his tie. "You'll end up with an ulcer or high blood pressure."

Ruth Ann Nordin

"You can't go through with this," she said, not hiding her irritation.

He sighed as if he couldn't believe his ears. "Did you take the time to actually look at this house?"

"It's so big, it's hard to miss."

"Exactly." He made a waving motion with his hand. "You now have access to Rudolph estates. The pool, the hot tub, the home theatre, the spacious kitchen, and the large walk-in closet." He opened a door to reveal her clothes neatly hung in what looked like it went on forever from where she sat. "There's even room for more clothes, and here are shelves for purses and shoes. Go crazy and buy some things to wear. Take that friend of yours with you." He momentarily shivered. "Lord knows she could use a better wardrobe. I can't have my employees looking like that at work. She doesn't dress like that at work, does she?"

"She was right there when you ordered me to marry you."

His eyebrows furrowed. "Someone else was there?"

She rolled her eyes.

He shrugged. "I believe you. It's just that with all the activity, it was easy to forget the small details. I had a lot to do that day."

"I'm sure." She didn't hide her sarcasm.

"I don't understand your resistance. I saw your old place. You're much better off here where you're not holed up in a one bedroom apartment. However did you manage without feeling like you weren't going to suffocate in a space that small?"

"I feel like I'm going to suffocate right now."

His eyes widened. "This bedroom is the size of your entire apartment."

What Nathan Wants

“And you have other bedrooms. How many is it? Five or six? I demand to stay in one of them since I can’t leave here until my parents go home.”

He laughed as if that were the funniest thing he ever heard.

Huffing, she crossed her arms. “I don’t see what’s so amusing. I’m a hostage here!”

“You’re my wife. Wives and husbands sleep in the same bedroom.” Raising an eyebrow at her and with a knowing grin, he added, “In the same bed.”

Her face grew red with a sudden burst of anger. “You better not think of raping me because I’ll scream so loud my parents will come in here.”

He gasped. “Please. I would never do something so horrible to a woman. Your opinion can’t be that poor when it comes to me.”

She groaned. No, it wasn’t. “Fine. I don’t get that vibe from you. But you better not think that I’m having sex with you.”

He went into the closet and came out with her pajamas which he gave her. “If I thought something was going to happen, I would be handing you a negligee. But see what I have. Flannel blue and white checkered pajamas.”

She reluctantly took them but gave him a skeptical look.

Looking amused, he returned to the closet and pulled out a drawer and showed her his black pajamas. Then he tossed them on the small table by the closet. He took off his tie and hung it on the hook by his suit jackets. “I absolutely refuse to have sex with you tonight.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What?”

“I won’t be ready until you insist on it.” He slipped off his suit jacket and hung it up on a hanger.

“Until I insist on it?”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Now, I know it’s not going to happen tonight, but mark my words: one of these days, you’re going to find me irresistible and throw yourself at me in wild abandon. That’s when we’ll consummate the marriage.”

This time it was she who burst out laughing. “Dream on, pal. I’m not one of your fantasy women. I’ll never throw myself at you.”

“So you say.” He unbuttoned his shirt.

She straightened in her chair. “You’re going to undress in the bathroom, right?”

He glanced her way and gave her a look that told her she had lost her marbles. “Why would I do that? The laundry hamper is right here.” He pointed to the space inside the closet that was clear of clothes.

“Because I’m here.”

“So?”

He shrugged off his shirt and tossed it into the hamper.

“So?” she repeated, her cheeks flushing.

“Yeah. So? You’ve been married before. You know what a man looks like naked. Not that I’m going to get completely naked, but still, come on. You’re not a virgin. There’s no need for modesty.”

He took his undershirt off, and she quickly averted her gaze. Maybe she wasn’t a stranger to a man’s naked body, but she hadn’t seen *him* naked, nor did she care to—ever. Despite what he thought, this sham was over once her parents were on the plane!

Grunting, she stood up and clutched her pajamas to her chest. Without a look in his direction, she hurried to the bathroom. She reached the door in time to hear him unzip his pants. Startled, she slammed the door behind her and locked it. She heard him chuckle but ignored it.

What Nathan Wants

Placing her pajamas on the counter, she placed her face in her hands. This couldn't be happening. It just couldn't be real! She was having a nightmare. Surely, she was going to wake up in her apartment and laugh this whole thing off.

Turning on the water at the sink in front of her, she willed herself to wake up. She leaned forward and wiped her face with the water, but when she opened her eyes, she was staring at her bewildered reflection in the mirror. This was no dream, and the Neanderthal on the other side of the door did, in fact, knock her over the head and drag her back to his cave. Even if it was a very nice cave, it was still a prison.

Well, there was nothing she could do tonight. What she needed was another game plan. There had to be some way out of this marriage. As she changed into her pajamas, she brainstormed her options. The first thing she needed was a job. A job would be her method for getting another apartment. Nathan Rudolph wasn't the only employer in town. Granted, he offered some of the sweetest benefits for employees, but she'd learn to go without the extra vacation time and Christmas bonus. Her freedom was worth some sacrifices.

Once she was ready for bed and couldn't think of a single thing to delay her exit from the safety of the bathroom, she quietly opened the door and peered into the room. He was lying on his back in the bed, the silver comforter up to the middle of his chest, and his eyes closed. She gritted her teeth. There was nowhere else to sleep, and one look at the four indents in the off white carpet showed her that there had been a chair, perhaps a recliner, in here recently.

Shaking her head in disgust, she made her way to the closet and threw her things on the floor, purposely missing the laundry basket. His world was so neat. Everything in his room was carefully placed in order. The bookcase to the side of the bed had books that were alphabetized and sectioned off by

Ruth Ann Nordin

subject matter. The dresser had been dusted with only a small round clock that sat in the center of it. The mirror above the dresser didn't have a single streak on it. The two ivory lamps, one on each side of the large bed, had been wiped down as well. The silver curtains were neatly drawn and matched the comforter and the rug by the bed. The mirrors on the wall had been cut to form a boat, an airplane, a train, and a car.

She rolled her eyes. The man didn't sleep in a bedroom. He slept in a museum. No other place she'd ever seen, not even his office, was carefully preserved like this room.

Well, she wasn't going to sleep in that bed with him. She knew better than to think he'd sleep on the floor if she asked. He'd obviously removed the chair from this room so they'd have to share a bed. It was amazing how much he'd do to get her to stay married to him. Not that she was in the slightest bit tempted to have sex with him. But who knew what he'd try to do?

She walked into the closet and searched for a blanket but couldn't find one. There was a spot along the top of the shelves that was empty. She wondered if blankets used to be there. Probably.

Wow. He really thought of everything. She stood in the middle of the closet for a moment, trying to think of her next plan of action when she saw that her bathrobe was neatly hung by a dress. It wasn't ideal but it would do. She grabbed her robe and a pillow and sauntered over to the middle of the room where she plopped her stuff on the floor.

He opened his eyes and looked in her direction. "What are you doing?"

"Going to sleep."

"You can't sleep on the floor."

"Why not?" She sat down and adjusted the robe so it would lie nicely on top of her.

What Nathan Wants

He rolled his eyes. "You can't be serious. Look, I'm not going to touch you. I promise."

"It's more than that and you know it. You're holding me hostage."

"I am doing no such thing. I'm merely getting you used to the idea of being with me. Besides, if you're that opposed to being here, go ahead and leave. I won't stop you."

She settled onto the floor. "No? My parents are in the next room, and if I left, you'd probably give them a sob story about how you love me and don't know why I left the way I did."

"I didn't think of that. Thanks for the tip."

She hid the urge to scream. He was lying. Of course, he'd already thought of it! The man was brilliant. Deceptive and sneaky but brilliant. He might just as well be the most brilliant man she'd ever met. But sneaky. Definitely sneaky. And horribly deceptive. There she was in his office, thinking she was being interviewed for a job promotion. Never once did it occur to her that he was looking for a woman to have his brilliant, sneaky and deceptive offspring.

That's all the world needs. More Nathan Rudolphs running around. She shuddered and pulled her robe up to her shoulders. One was bad enough. More than one and who knew how much damage they could cause?

She closed her eyes and rolled onto her side. She bent her knees so that her bare feet were under the bathrobe. At least the pillow was soft. She released a long breath, assuring herself that soon enough morning would come and... And what? She'd have to pretend that she was happy with Nathan who would, undoubtedly, find reasons to hold her hand, put his arm around her shoulders, or bump his knee against hers again?

She didn't know what was worse. The big show she had to put on for her parents, being trapped in this whole

Ruth Ann Nordin

catastrophe, or liking the physical contact. She grimaced. *No, I don't like it. I don't like anything he does. That's all part of his brilliant, sneaky and deceptive plan.*

As she drifted off to sleep, she brainstormed more ideas on how she might get out of this marriage with her parents' blessing. Nothing came to mind though. Her ace in the hole had been the whole adultery thing, but that didn't work. It was the only thing she could fathom that her parents would accept as grounds for divorce. Well, that and abuse, and Nathan didn't strike her as the abusive type, unless one could consider a forced marriage abuse? Probably not, when he didn't physically hold her to it. With a miserable sigh, she finally fell asleep.

It was in the middle of the night when she woke up with a stiff neck and a shooting pain in her hip. Wincing, she rolled over and cried out when she pulled a muscle in her leg. She hadn't slept on a hard surface since she was a kid, but wasn't she still too young to notice this kind of thing hurt?

Opening her eyes, she realized that Nathan had turned off the lights at some point. In the dark, she made out the shape of the bed and looked at it with longing. It had to be comfortable.

No! This was all a part of his plan. He wanted her to go to bed with him. That's why he gave her no option but the bed or floor to sleep on. She wondered if she could sleep in another bedroom. Did he even have beds in all of them? She hadn't thought to check before when he was giving her parents the "grand tour". Her dad had been so tickled when Nathan called it that. Nathan had even turned to her and asked if she wanted to do it or if he should.

Despite her body's protests, she scrambled off the floor, picked up the robe and pillow and tiptoed to the door. After a glance back to make sure Nathan was still asleep, she turned the doorknob and gasped when it moved. She thought he might

What Nathan Wants

stoop to locking her in here with him, but he hadn't so that was good. Yes, it was definitely good. Now she could find a bed or couch or something to sleep on.

She crept past her parents' bedroom, noting that when it was dead quiet in a house, everything sounded abnormally loud. She made her way to the next bedroom as fast as she dared. When she reached the door, she turned the knob. It was locked. Her head hung low and she shook her head. Of course. She should have known. He wouldn't lock her in the same room with him, but he'd make sure she had no other bedroom to seek refuge in.

She glanced at the other closed doors on the second floor. She didn't even have to try them to know they'd be locked too. Weighing her options, she went to the staircase that led to the first floor and stared down the darkness that marked the bottom of it. She shivered. Even if she didn't make it a habit of reading horror stories, she imagined all types of ominous things lurking in the shadows down there.

Giving a resigned groan, she trudged back to Nathan's bedroom and quietly shut the door behind her. She stood there for a moment, with her back against the door, and tried to determine the best course of action. She could sleep on the floor again, but her body still ached. Her gaze drifted to the bed. Did she dare?

She stared long and hard at Nathan who was still lying on his back with his arms neatly folded over his chest and the blanket halfway up to his chest. It was a little creepy, she had to admit, but he was as immaculate as the rest of the room. She watched him for a good two minutes, monitoring his breathing. It was deep and steady. Okay. So he was asleep. He wasn't pretending.

If she didn't disturb him, then maybe he wouldn't wake up. She gingerly made her way across the room and set her

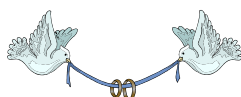
Ruth Ann Nordin

robe and pillow down. With great care, she peeled back the comforter and blanket, pausing for a moment to look at him. He was still breathing nice and slow. Good. This might work.

She eased onto the bed and shot a quick look in his direction. He still slept. Swallowing the nervous lump in her throat, she slid her legs under the covers and cautiously settled into a fetal position. She decided to face him so she could make sure she didn't wake him up, and to her relief, she didn't.

He still slept, as immaculate and perfect as ever. Assured that he wouldn't try anything with her, she closed her eyes. Her body sank into the bed, and she felt her aches already departing. Thankfully, this was a king-size bed, so she didn't have to be close to him. With a contented sigh, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Seven



Amy's first thought when she woke up the next morning was that she couldn't remember a time when she felt more comfortable. She was warm and cozy and snuggled against something solid. Sighing in contentment, she smiled and savored the last remaining moments where a part of her still enjoyed the relaxing feeling of sleep. She inhaled, noting a pleasant scent. It wasn't common, though it struck her as familiar. She took another deep breath and tried to place it. It was clean and somewhat spicy. She found she liked it.

Then an image flashed in her mind. Nathan Rudolph was shaking her hand and congratulating her because he chose her, of all women, to marry. And that's when she realized where the familiar smell came from. She also realized that her arm was draped over something warm and solid—in other words, something that was alive.

Her eyes flew open and she gasped. At some point in the middle of the night, she had rolled over to his side of the bed and snuggled against him. His arm was wrapped around her shoulders, and her arm was over his waist. Bolting up, she

Ruth Ann Nordin

gave a slight yelp as she squirmed back to her side of the bed and drew the sheets up to her neck. Not that she wasn't wearing pajamas that were buttoned all the way to top...but still...

"Good morning, honey," Nathan said with a happy grin on his face.

"We didn't do anything," she snapped.

"Sure we did. We slept together. It was nice. You're soft and curvy. I love the way you feel when you're pressed right up against me. You're better than that teddy bear I had when I was a kid."

"Well, don't get used to it."

She threw the covers off of her and ran to retrieve her clothes from the closet. He had a lot of nerve! Muttering under her breath about her ill luck, she grabbed a light white sweater, jeans, her underwear, and socks and headed for the bathroom.

But he was already in the shower, humming a cheerful tune as if they were truly newlyweds who had enjoyed more than a good night's sleep in bed. She grumbled and turned on her heel to leave.

He opened the shower door and said, "The water's great. I warmed it up for you."

Without commenting, she set her clothes on the shelf above the towels and left the bathroom. She went to the chair in front of the desk and sat down. There had to be some way she could convince Nathan to give up on this marriage thing. If she could figure out what that something was, then it'd be his idea to end the marriage. There was no sense in trying to talk sense into him; he'd have to come to the conclusion that the marriage was wrong on his own. Only then would she be able to get out of it.

What Nathan Wants

As she brainstormed possible ways to turn him off from marriage, the water stopped running in the shower. She waited for him to shave and wasn't surprised when he walked out of the bathroom with one of his white towels wrapped around his waist. The man had no sense of decency. Well, it was better than if he came out wearing nothing, so she decided not to say anything.

"All yours," he nonchalantly stated. "Don't worry about there not being enough hot water for you. I've got a great energy system."

She expected nothing less from a man who owned as much as he did. She took a shower, grudgingly admitting that the water pressure and temperature made for the best shower she'd ever had in her life. After she finished and got dressed, she placed her folded pajamas onto the closet shelf and dumped her underwear into the hamper.

He entered the closet wearing black slacks and a white undershirt and smelling even better than he had in bed. "What color shirt would you like me to wear today?" He motioned to an assortment of colors hanging from his side of the closet.

"I don't care," she replied as she tried to step past him.

He stepped to the side, expertly blocking her escape. "Don't wives like to tell their husbands what to wear?" he asked in an amused tone.

"You're an adult. You can figure out what to wear." When she realized he wasn't going to get out of her way, she groaned. "What do you want from me?"

"Your love, your body, and your child. It doesn't have to be in that order, though it'd be nice if it was."

"That'll happen when pigs fly."

"I can arrange that, you know."

She smirked. Cute. But even he wasn't *that* powerful. She inched toward him and, as she feared, he remained still.

Ruth Ann Nordin

Just as she was about to back up, he put his hands on her shoulders and shook his head.

"You're too tense. Why didn't you take that day at the spa like I suggested?"

His touch was firm but gentle, and she cursed her body for enjoying the thrill that shot through her. "I don't plan to do anything you suggest."

"Really? What if I said you should enjoy your parents' visit?"

She sighed, and she couldn't determine if it was because she was annoyed by his persistence or impressed by the way he massaged her shoulders. She might not have wanted to relax from what he was doing, but he seemed to have the magic touch. *I am not enjoying this!*

"I was thinking of wearing the white shirt with blue stripes," he whispered. He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "I think the shirt will match your clothes the best."

Then he released her, and though she knew she should be relieved, she was disappointed. She reasoned that it was because she was, indeed, stressed and needed a soothing massage to help her cope.

He moved aside, so she took that as her cue and headed on out of the closet before he touched her again. The man was much too brilliant.

A few seconds passed before he walked out of the closet, buttoning his shirt. He glanced at her. "I guess since this is a casual occasion, I'll disregard the tie."

She didn't know if he expected her approval or not so she shrugged. What did she care? Knowing her parents would be waiting for her...and him, she followed him out of the room in time for her father to open his door.

What Nathan Wants

“Good morning,” her father called out with a wide smile. “That is the most comfortable bed I’ve ever slept on. I slept just like a baby.”

Her mother exited the room with him and patted his shoulder. “And he snored like one too.”

“Now, hush. You know we don’t talk like that in front of mixed company. We’re apt to embarrass our little girl.”

“Oh, sure. You wear that bright yellow shirt and you think the conversation will embarrass her?”

Amy felt a smile tug at her lips. She’d forgotten how playful her parents were. All this time, she thought if she saw them, she’d have to remember Sean’s funeral all over again, but it wasn’t turning out to be the sad trip down memory lane she feared. Instead, she was reminded of happier days when she was a child. Her dad had always been kooky, but her mom leveled him out. Together, they made a good match. Funny how she was beginning to see them as a couple, rather than her parents.

“I have a surprise for you,” Nathan told them. “Will you come with me?”

“Sure,” her father agreed. “I’d hate to miss a surprise.”

Nathan waved them toward the bedroom that she had tried to enter but couldn’t. He opened the door, and she surmised that he took it upon himself to unlock all the doors on this level when she was in the shower. She crossed her arms. What she needed was to find out where he hid the keys to these rooms.

Her parents entered the room, and he looked expectantly at her. Rolling her eyes, she trudged forward. Her jaw dropped as soon as she saw what was in it.

“Come along, honey,” Nathan cheerfully said as he took her hand and urged her inside.

Ruth Ann Nordin

The room was a baby's room. He had already selected the crib, the dresser, the bassinet, a rocking chair, and the changing table. The wallpaper featured baby animals.

Nathan put his arm around Amy's shoulders but directed his attention to her parents. "Now, we aren't expecting yet, but we're working on having a baby. We decided on the Noah's Ark theme because whether we have a girl or a boy, it won't matter."

Amy scowled at him, but he didn't bother looking in her direction. Instead, he motioned to the mobile above the crib. He wound it up and let it play the lullaby song. She peeked at her parents and saw her mother smile widely at her father, mouth the words, "a grandchild", and knew there was no way she'd ever convince her parents that Nathan was bad news. If her parents hadn't loved him before, they definitely did now.

"We're excited about having a baby," Nathan continued.

Amy rubbed her eyes, trying to convince herself this was still a bad dream.

"I realize that we're jumping the gun a bit on decorating this room, but I'm pretty sure that a year from now we'll have a need for it."

The man was relentless. He was pulling out all the stops. And wasn't it just great that he selected *her* to be his brooding mare? The notion was so repulsive that she almost smashed everything in her sight. It wasn't bad enough that he forced her into this marriage, but he had every intention of getting a child out of her? A new source of aggravation rose up in her. She was merely a means to an end. He didn't want to be married. He wanted a child. The whole marriage thing was a formality.

Well, he had another thing coming if he thought she was going to have sex with him. Maybe that was her out. All she had to do was keep saying no, he'd give up, and then move

What Nathan Wants

on to his next victim. She'd heard he was divorced. Maybe he did this to his first wife and she refused to have his child so he sought another one out.

Nathan continued to speak as if he was the happiest man in the world. "The big thing right now is coming up with a suitable name. We brainstorm from time to time, but so far, nothing's clicked."

"If Amy had been a boy, we would have named her Chad," her father said.

"It was either Chad or Lyle," her mother added, still grinning from ear to ear. "And if she had a sister, we thought Laura would be a nice name."

"Those are good names," Nathan replied. "What do you think, honey?"

Amy refused to look at him. If she did, she might strangle him, and that wouldn't be something her parents would understand. She didn't need any reasons right now to upset them because if she did, they'd sympathize with him and spend their time trying to get her to be "reasonable". She knew how things looked to them. Nathan appeared as if he was a caring and loving husband, and all she could do was stand here and watch the whole sickening act play out in front of her.

"I think we're embarrassing her," her mother told Nathan. "Amy's always been a little superstitious, so I'm sure she'd rather not speak about babies and names until she's pregnant."

Nathan chuckled. "That must be why she insisted I take care of the room."

Amy gritted her teeth as he squeezed her shoulders.

"Fortunately, I'm an optimist. I find that planning things out in advance ensures that they happen." He kissed her on the cheek and released her. "It's okay. I enjoyed decorating the room."

Ruth Ann Nordin

Hooray for me, Amy sourly thought.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm famished." Nathan patted his stomach. "Anyone up for breakfast? I know a great place that makes the best omelets in the world. Afterwards, I thought we'd go golfing," he told her dad. Then he looked between her and her mother. "I hope you don't mind if I snag Terry for a few hours today. You may take Old Snoopy anywhere you want or take one of my other three cars."

"I'll go for one of the other three cars," her mother said. "I'm sorry, Amy, but I don't want to chance it with that old car of yours."

"Yeah," her father agreed. "No sense in taking a risk on stalling out if you don't have to."

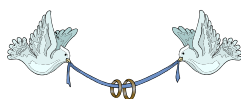
She decided not to comment. She knew arguing on behalf of her car was pointless.

Nathan smiled at her. "I hope you take time to splurge on yourself for once. Take in a movie, do some shopping, go to a spa." He shifted his gaze to her mother. "Ever since we got married, she's refused to spend a single dime of my money. I don't see what good it is to have the money on hand if I can't spoil her."

"She's always been a frugal girl," her mother replied. "Don't worry. I'm sure I can get her to buy something for herself." She gave Amy's arm a slight squeeze. "It's okay for you to enjoy yourself once in awhile."

Amy kept quiet but followed her very happy parents out of the room, blandly noting that they took one look back and giggled to each other, obviously anticipating the grandchild Amy was determined would never come.

Chapter Eight



Despite her mother's reluctance, Amy picked up Danielle. Amy owed her friend a huge shopping spree after what happened with the make-up.

"But I don't think it's a good idea for you to hang around someone who dresses..." her mother's voice drifted off as she struggled for the right word.

"Danielle doesn't usually wear that," Amy insisted for the third time. "She had a part to play, so it was a costume."

Her mother strapped on her seatbelt. "I thought she worked with you at the travel agency."

Amy put Nathan's key into the ignition of the Lexus—which she had to admit was a nice car—and shut the door. As she put on her seatbelt, she explained, "Danielle does some acting on the side." She decided, for simplicity's sake, that she didn't need to go into any more details on the subject.

"Alright." Though her mother finally caved, her expression remained guarded.

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Look, I called her up so you can get to know her. She’s my best friend. I wouldn’t pick a tramp for a friend, Mom.”

Since her mother didn’t say anything, Amy turned the key and backed out of the four car garage. What on Earth did a single man need with a four car garage? People used money to acquire things for the heck of it, not because they needed it, she assumed.

“I promise you’ll have a good time,” Amy said, glancing at her mother. “Mr. Rud...uh...I mean, Nathan gave me unlimited access to his accounts.”

He’d even gone so far as to hand her a debit and credit card in her name and said to go wild. Maybe if she took Danielle’s advice and went wild enough, he’d have a heart attack and let her loose.

She drove through the outskirts of Omaha from the wealthy division to Bellevue where Danielle lived. The drive was less than twenty minutes, and in that time, Amy pointed out some of the sites, one being the buildings on Offutt Air Force Base where she had lived before Sean died. The sting of driving by had lessened until she no longer recalled the first day they had arrived in the area and got lost. Sean had laughed the whole thing off in his typical way. Having her mother beside her brought back a lot of memories as she took the exit off of 75 so she could go right onto Capehart Road.

“I’m glad you found someone,” her mother softly said, as if she’d read Amy’s mind. “I want to see you happy again after losing Sean.”

“I am happy, Mom,” Amy assured her.

True, Amy wasn’t happy with Nathan or her new ‘marriage’, but she was happy. She liked her life. She saw no reason to mess with it. Why couldn’t things have just stayed the way they were?

What Nathan Wants

She took a left at the second light and turned into the first sub-division. She drove three blocks before she pulled into Danielle's driveway. Danielle came out of the house, and she wore a scarf and sunglasses to hide as much of her face as possible. Amy felt another stab of guilt poke at her.

Her mother breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. At least she's wearing decent clothes."

Amy groaned but pressed on the button to unlock the car doors so Danielle could get in. "Hi, Danielle," she called out, trying to sound chipper despite her apprehension when she realized a rash covered one of Danielle's cheeks. "Maybe we should go to a spa."

Danielle sighed as she shut the door to the backseat and buckled her seatbelt. "The doctor gave me a special cream. My face should clear up in a week."

"Wow." That long? Amy took her eyes off of Danielle's face and shifted the car into reverse. "So where do you want to go? Nathan said I should pamper everyone I take out today."

"Including yourself," her mother inserted.

"Right. Including me." She backed up and tried not to let her gaze linger at Danielle's rash. It was only Danielle's love of shopping that convinced her to leave the confines of her house. "So, where to, Danielle?"

"Well, since getting a new face is out of the question, I'd love to get some new clothes."

"At the mall?"

Danielle nodded.

Feeling a little better, Amy drove forward. "What do you want to look for at the mall?" she asked her mother.

"Oh, I don't know. I think I'll browse the shops. If I find anything, I'll buy it myself. Your husband has already done too much for me and your dad."

Ruth Ann Nordin

Only because he wants to win you over. Instead of voicing this thought aloud, Amy glanced in her review mirror and sent Danielle a ‘it’s been a grueling night’ look.

Danielle’s eyebrows rose in interest but she didn’t reply.

That conversation would come later. For now, Amy had to pretend she was happy to be chained to the devious rat.

The ride to the mall was relatively pleasant as Amy tried to come up with small talk to encourage communication between her mother and Danielle, and though both fell along and talked a bit, there was still tension hanging in the air.

As soon as Amy parked, they got out of the car and found the first clothing store that Danielle wanted to check out. While they were sorting through the summer selection, her mother gasped in delight and took a white knee-length dress off the rack and held it up to Amy’s neck.

“Try this on. I bet it’s your size,” her mother said.

“I didn’t come to get clothes,” Amy replied.

“Well, you could use some. This is a darling dress.”

“It is,” Danielle agreed. “White goes nice with your dark hair and tan skin. I think I saw a pair of sandals that will go great with it.”

“Oh, I know the pair you’re talking about,” her mother eagerly stated. “And it would be perfect!”

At the prompting of her mother and best friend, Amy tried it on and had to admit it was a cute dress. The straps held it up and white flowers were sewn along the neckline which stopped before she showed any cleavage. The skirt of it flowed out enough so if she spun around, it would swirl around her legs. The material was thick enough to mask her underwear but light enough so that she wouldn’t get hot when she was outside. She had to admit that the sandals would perfect the look.

From there, her mother and Danielle found a couple more outfits for her, and this endeavor seemed to be all that

What Nathan Wants

was necessary for her mother to accept Danielle. Danielle managed to find enough clothes to stuff in a few bags. Then they ate at a restaurant and window shopped until her mother found some scented candles and a music box she liked.

By the time Amy dropped Danielle off, her friend was laughing and in a much better mood than when she first joined them. Amy helped Danielle with her bags while her mother stayed in the car.

“So? How is it going?” Danielle asked as they plopped her things in her bedroom.

“Horrible,” Amy replied. “He’s won my parents over.”

“Yeah, I got that impression. Your mom can’t talk about him without smiling.” She removed her scarf and sunglasses, revealing the dark red spots where her eye shadow had been.

Amy cringed. “You look awful.”

She rolled her eyes. “Wow. Thanks.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“I’ve been through worse, though I admit this rates high up there.”

“Oh, Danielle. I can’t believe the make-up did that much damage.” She let out a long sigh. “Well, I’m going to get you and Randy a gift certificate to that fancy restaurant Mr. Rudolph took me and my parents to.”

A smile crossed her friend’s face. “You’re so funny.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re married to him and you still insist on calling him Mr. Rudolph.”

“I’m not married to him.”

“That marriage license says you are.”

“But I don’t. I’m getting out of this ordeal if it’s the last thing I do.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

"That's a shame. I was having a great time today. Can you imagine how much shopping we could do if you stayed married to him?" Danielle clasped her hands together and gave her a pleading look. "This made up for a good five years worth of hand-me-downs I've endured because of all the house repairs we had to do."

"It's a shame you couldn't have married him."

"Yeah. But I kind of like Randy."

Amy giggled. "I think he'll like the lingerie you bought."

"Hopefully, the kids will go to bed early so I can use it. You know, the best time to enjoy being married is before kids come along because as soon as they do, you're lucky to get five minutes of peace and quiet."

Amy clapped her hands. "Danielle! That's it!"

"What's it?"

"You're brilliant!"

"I am?"

"Yes. You just gave me a wonderful idea!"

"Uh...okay. Exactly what did I say?"

Amy gave her a big smile. "Why don't Mr. Ru—Nathan—and I take the kids off your hands for a couple of days? Then you can go the restaurant, watch a movie, and do whatever else comes to mind without having to worry about Chase and Byron?"

Danielle's eyes grew wide in excitement. "Really?"

"Yep!" If Nathan wanted children, by golly, she was going to give him two! Then he'd see how badly he wanted them.

"Okay. This is great! But I don't want to go out until my face clears."

"Oh, I understand. We'll plan for next weekend."

"I hope you don't mind if I say something."

What Nathan Wants

“You wish to thank me?”

“No. I have to say that ever since you got married to the head boss, my life has been so much better. Well, minus the make-up.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts.”

“I guess all good things must come to an end at some point.”

With a slight chuckle, Amy left her friend and returned to the car.

At her mother’s insistence, Amy agreed to put on the white dress before they were due to go out to dinner. She couldn’t remember the last time she wore a dress, but she did like it.

When she came out of the closet, her mother hugged her. “It’s nice to see you dressing up again. You look beautiful.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” came an all-too-familiar voice.

Amy forced herself not to roll her eyes as Nathan strode into the bedroom.

Turning to her mother, he said, “I hope you had a good afternoon.”

“Yes, we had a lot of fun. Who won the golf game?”

“Terry.” In a lower voice, he added, “And I didn’t even let him win.”

Her mother chuckled. “I could have told you he’s good.”

“Better than most,” Amy agreed before she turned to the bathroom so she could brush her hair.

To her surprise—and dismay, he followed her.

She groaned as she ran the brush down her silky strands. “My mother is right out there.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Not anymore. She went downstairs to see your dad.”

“And you’re here because....?”

“I need to change my clothes for dinner.”

“Are you taking a shower first?”

“Nope.”

She shook her head. “Then what are you doing in here?”

“Admiring my beautiful wife.”

She looked up at his reflection and caught the expression on his face. Something about it unnerved her, so she forced her focus back on her hair. Her face flushed from a mixture of uncertainty and pleasure. It’d been a long time since a man looked at her that way.

He took a step toward her and she froze. His hands felt warm and tender as they rested on her shoulders. Her breath caught in her throat when he pressed his lips to the side of her neck. A tingle ran straight down her back, making her knees weak.

Slamming the brush on the counter, she turned to face him. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

His hands settled on her hips, and even though his touch wasn’t threatening, it was highly arousing. And that was something she didn’t need.

“Uh...” If she could get her brain to work, it would help! She blinked and tried to recall exactly what it was that she found so distressing about being with him. “I...” She cleared her throat. “I...um...” *Think, Amy. Think!*

He kissed her neck again, and her body tingled everywhere in response. She tried not to encourage him. She leaned back and kept her hands on the counter behind her, but she didn’t resist it when his lips traveled up her neck before he kissed her. She thought he’d be aggressive in any kiss he’d give

What Nathan Wants

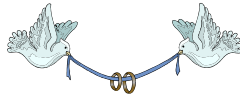
a woman. After all, any man who'd force a woman into marriage had to be a brute. But he was surprisingly gentle. And her traitorous body was more than happy to kiss him back.

He never touched her anywhere else. His hands remained on her hips, and he kept his mouth closed. He didn't press her further. When the kiss ended, he stood up straight and smiled at her. Lightly brushing her cheek with his fingers, he whispered, "You are a very attractive woman."

He left the bathroom, and all she could do was stand there, probably looking like an idiot as she tried to process exactly what had just happened. Still in a daze, she turned back to the mirror and continued to brush her hair.

That night when they went out to dinner, she didn't mind it so much when he purposely bumped his knee against hers. She still wasn't sure what to make of him but found that she was slightly disappointed when he returned the big recliner to the bedroom and slept in it that night, leaving her free to sleep in the bed alone.

Chapter Nine



“Amy...Rudolph?” the man asked, glancing up from the job application and giving her a questioning look.

She inwardly groaned. That wasn’t the name she wrote on the application. “No. My name is Amy Watson.”

“The same Amy Watson who married Nathan Rudolph?”

Shifting in the chair in front of the large desk at the Weston Travel Agency, she said, “I don’t recall there being a wedding.”

The balding man shrugged and adjusted his thin rimmed glasses. “There doesn’t have to be a wedding for someone to get married.”

“Marriage by proxy doesn’t count,” she dryly commented.

“It does unless you’re in Iowa. But we’re in Nebraska, and Nebraska recognizes marriages done by proxy.”

She gritted her teeth but forced her voice to remain pleasant. “I’m not here to discuss my marital status. I’m here

What Nathan Wants

to apply for the travel agent opening. I believe you'll find that my references are excellent."

He tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair and gave a heavy sigh. "Mr. Rudolph has a lot of connections," he slowly began. "I don't think he'll like it if I hired you."

"Who cares what he thinks?" Most of her anger at Nathan had cooled after their kiss in the bathroom, but now it was quickly rising again. "I'm free to work if I want to."

"Well...yes. Of course, you are."

Steeling herself for the answer, she asked, "But?"

"He wouldn't be happy."

"So?"

He loudly sighed. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Rudolph, but even if this is a competing travel agency, I don't want to risk upsetting him."

"I see," she bitterly replied as she stood up.

"If you're able to divorce him, then I can interview you."

She struggled for control of her intense feelings. Claspng her hands behind her back so she wouldn't strangle him, she opted to thank him, even as the word "discrimination" flashed over and over in her mind. She shouldn't have been surprised. Nathan had pulled out all the stops, but what did he do to convince this travel agency not to hire her? Apparently, his sphere of influence went further and deeper than she initially assumed.

She strode out of the building, surprised she managed to get outside before she threw her purse on the ground and stamped her feet in frustration.

Danielle, who'd been eating ice cream in front of the agency, jumped up from the bench and rushed over to her. "What happened?"

"I hate Nathan!"

Ruth Ann Nordin

“What? Why?”

“He ruined my life! They won’t even interview me because I’m married to him.”

Danielle fiddled with the spoon in her cup and scooped up some vanilla ice cream and a strawberry. “In all fairness, with the money you have, you don’t need to work.”

“He’s boxed me in, and now I can’t find employment.” Amy shook her head and picked up her purse.

“What about your parents? Do they know you’re looking for a job?”

“I told them I needed to take care of some personal things.”

Fortunately, her parents were used to her doing that. Under ordinary circumstances, she never would have left her parents like that, but having her parents there prevented Nathan from tagging along to find out exactly what she was up to. Then again, he’d given her a smile, kissed her cheek and wished her luck. She thought he seemed unusually accepting of it at the time, but in retrospect, he probably knew what she’d be doing and knew her efforts would be in vain.

“Maybe I’ll move to another state. Surely, his influence can’t reach that far,” Amy muttered. “Maybe I’ll move to Iowa.”

Danielle quickly swallowed her ice cream and shook her head. “No! You’re my best friend. What would I do without you?”

Amy didn’t want to leave either. She liked her life here. Rubbing her temples, she said, “Your kids better be little hellions.”

“Just load them up on sugar. The rest should take care of itself.”

What Nathan Wants

“Alright. Well, I guess I better head back to my prison. Thanks for coming for moral support to this interview.” Or what little there’d been of it.

“Anytime. It was nice to take in a visit during my lunch break.”

“You’re lucky. You get to go back to work.”

Danielle laughed, and though she wore sunglasses, Amy was sure her friend rolled her eyes. “Right. Lucky me. I work because I have bills to pay, not because I want a diversion from my otherwise boring life.”

“It is boring. I don’t want to sit around all day watching TV or shopping. I need something to stay occupied or I’ll go crazy.”

“I don’t know how it’s possible to be bored of shopping, but you are strange. Don’t worry though. I still love you.”

“Whew. You had me worried there for a moment,” Amy teased.

Danielle quickly finished her ice cream and threw the cup and spoon into the trash before she followed Amy to her car. “Could you at least get a new engine in this thing?”

Amy opened her door and shot her friend a warning look.

Danielle threw her hands up in the air. “Sorry. I won’t say anything else about this old relic.”

“Good.”

Amy sat in her seat and closed the door. Once Danielle was settled in, she started up the car, grateful it started up right away. Maybe a new engine was a good idea. She decided she’d look into doing that later in the week, before Danielle’s kids came over to the house and drove Nathan to the point where he tossed Amy out of the house and vowed to never have children.

Ruth Ann Nordin

After she dropped Danielle off at work, she drove to Nathan's large house and parked in front of the garage. Glancing around the premises, she caught sight of Nathan and her mother playing tennis while her father lounged back in a chair and read a book. She tapped the steering wheel with her fingers. This was all a game to him. Like a game of chess. No matter which move she made, he got his pawn in her way first.

She reluctantly got out of her car. She thought of going into the house, but her father saw her and called out to her. If it was anyone but her parents, she would have ignored them. Holding her purse, she made her way across the well-manicured lawn and slipped in through the gates that were set around the tennis court.

"Nice to see you again." Her father patted the chair next to him and motioned to the lemonade. "Kick up your feet and have a cool drink of lemonade. Your mother made it."

Her mother and Nathan still played tennis, so she decided to do as her father bid. What she really wanted to do was go up to Nathan and smack him over the head with her purse for dictating her life.

"Did you have a good morning?" her dad asked.

She sat down and took a sip of the pink lemonade. It was as good as she remembered. Shrugging, she said, "It was alright."

"Is something bothering you?"

She glanced at Nathan who expertly hit the ball back to her mother who was grinning. "Mom's enjoying this."

"You bet. She hates the way I play. She says I don't give her a challenge. That husband of yours is giving her a run for her money."

She gritted her teeth. Her husband. "Yeah. He's good at playing games." Too good.

"So what happened while you were out?"

What Nathan Wants

Noting the concern in his eyes, she relaxed a bit. "Not much. I met with Danielle for awhile and ran some errands."

"But something bad happened. You look upset."

She shrugged. "I don't want to talk about it." Like her father would understand. The man was tickled pink that Nathan took him golfing yesterday.

"Suit yourself, but if you need to talk, I'm here."

They sat quietly for awhile, sipping lemonade and watching her mother and Nathan play. The two made impressive opponents, and in the end, Nathan won but it'd been a close game.

"I'll be." Her father's eyes sparkled with merriment. "No one's been able to beat your mother in the longest time." He stood up and waited for the two exhausted and sweaty people to walk over to them.

"That was the most fun I had in a year!" her mother cheered. "Did you have a good morning, sweetheart?"

Amy shrugged. "It was fine."

Nathan's eyebrows rose in interest. "Things didn't go as planned?"

Though he seemed concerned, Amy couldn't help but think that he was inwardly cheering. She resisted the urge to glare in his direction.

"Maybe next time," he happily said and tossed a clean towel in her mother's direction. "I'm going to take a shower and then we can go to the IMAX. They have Adventure in Space showing today."

"Oh, that'll be fun!" her father said in unbridled enthusiasm.

"I better take a shower too," her mother added.

"Would you like to talk to me while I freshen up?" Nathan asked Amy.

Ruth Ann Nordin

If she was expected to have a pleasant evening, then she couldn't get into a fight with him right now, and that's exactly what they'd get into if her parents weren't around. "No. I don't want to talk to you." To add meaning to her words, she shot him a meaningful look.

With wide eyes, he smiled and said, "Okay. Whenever you're ready." Then he kissed her cheek.

She clutched her purse, reminding herself she could smack him with it later. She never agreed to marry him. He forced this on her, and unless Danielle's children did the trick, she was going to be confined to this control freak for the rest of her life. She closed her eyes and prayed that Danielle's kids would cause a lot of grief that upcoming weekend.

Amy struggled to remain pleasant during the IMAX and dinner, but every time Nathan reached for her hand or brushed any part of his body against her, she remembered that she had no freedom. At one point she kicked him in the shin when he rested his hand on her knee during the meal. The only indication he gave that it affected him was a slight rise of his eyebrows. Then he kept his hands and other body parts to himself but continued talking to her parents as if nothing was wrong.

By the time they retired for the night, he shut the bedroom door and gave her a good look. "Is something wrong?"

She threw her purse onto the desk and stormed to the closet to get her pajamas. "Gee, you think something's wrong?"

He shrugged as he followed her. "You seem a tad bit upset."

What Nathan Wants

She turned from the drawer and glared at him. "I can't get a job."

He looked as if he had no idea what that had to do with anything. "Why would you want a job?"

"You know very well why."

"No, I don't. Jobs are for people who need to make money. You already have more than enough."

"You've been telling people not to hire me."

"I never told anyone not to hire you."

Crossing her arms, she asked, "Then why did the guy who was supposed to interview me at Weston Travel Agency say he couldn't because I was your wife?"

He gasped. "You're married to me and you went to a competing agency? Have you no sense of loyalty?"

"I like being a travel agent!"

"So?"

"So you fired me from the job I already had!"

"Is that what's bothering you? You want your old job back?"

She groaned and rubbed her temples. "I want my life back! I want to go back to my job and live in my quaint apartment. I want to be free!"

"Why?"

When she realized he honestly couldn't understand what she meant, she threw her hands up in the air. "I give up. You really don't get it. You have no capacity to get it." She returned to the drawer and pulled out her pajamas. "Just so you know, there are some things you can't buy, Nathan, and I'm not for sale."

He shook his head, still appearing baffled, and said, "Fine. I can let you have your old job back, though why you'd want to subject yourself to working when you don't have to, I'll never understand. But," he continued before she could speak,

Ruth Ann Nordin

“you have to stay in this house. We are married, and despite what you think, I’m not a bad guy. The day will come when you’ll thank me for insisting on you giving this marriage a try.”

“You can’t be so sure of that.”

“Of course I can. We make a good match. I thought so when I interviewed you, and after getting to know your parents and learning all about you, I’m even more convinced of it.”

He looked very satisfied with himself as he turned on his heel and headed for the bathroom.

She sighed but decided it was better than nothing. At least she could go back to work with Danielle. A victory, no matter how small, was still a victory. She changed into her pajamas and slipped into bed. She rolled onto her side and snuggled into the comfortable sheets. Okay. So she loved the bed. Who wouldn’t? It was like sleeping on air.

To her surprise, he slipped into bed with her. She gasped, rolled back over, and pulled the sheets up to her neck as if the pajamas weren’t already concealing everything. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t touch you. I’m a little sore after playing tennis. If I sleep in the recliner tonight, my back will give me problems tomorrow.”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “Well... Alright. But keep to your side.”

He shot her an amused look. “You’re the one who had your arm draped over me last time, not the other way around.”

She shook her head. “I can’t be blamed for what I do in my sleep.”

“Really? So that means I can’t be held accountable for anything I do when I sleep either?”

She frowned. “Don’t take advantage of the situation, buddy.”

What Nathan Wants

He laughed and clapped his hands. The lights went out and the bed shifted as he settled in. "I don't need to take advantage. It's a matter of time before you insist we have sex."

She grunted but didn't respond. She didn't believe he would ever force himself on her, and that was the only reason she didn't bolt from the bed.

"You were such a cute kid," he said.

She blinked and turned her gaze to him. In the dark, she could only make out the basic outline of his face. "How so?"

"You used to wrap tin foil around your wrists and put a headband on your forehead and pretended you were Wonder Woman. I believe your mom said you used a jump rope to wrap around people's waists so they'd tell you the truth."

Her jaw dropped. "My mom told you that?"

"And about the time you used a curling iron and burnt your bangs so you had to cut your hair close the scalp to get the curling iron away from your head. She even showed me the picture."

"Oh no," she said in horror. Her mother still had that awful picture?

"You were cute, even if you did have that spiky hair in the front."

Her face grew unbearably warm. "It was horrible."

"You were only fourteen. How could you know what would happen if you let the curling iron stay on for too long? The point is you don't do that now."

"No, I don't. I'll never touch another curling iron for as long as I live."

He chuckled. "I don't blame you. I wouldn't either. You only need to be burned once to learn your lesson."

"Is that what my parents did while I was gone? Tell you all about my past?"

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Pretty much.”

She groaned.

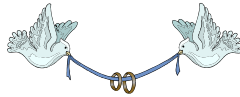
“Oh, it was great. They even brought a photo album for me to look at. You know, if I’d known you in high school, I would have asked you out.”

“When I was in high school, you were in college.”

“That’s true. Well, then it’s good we met when we did.” He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. “Good night, honey.”

This time when she sighed it wasn’t because she was annoyed.

Chapter Ten



The next day, Nathan returned to work. As the elevator doors opened, he stepped through them and noted the shocked look on his secretary's face.

"You're alive?" Carmen asked, adjusting her bifocals and peering up at him from her seat as if she had to be sure.

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

She gave a slight shrug and turned to the computer monitor in front of her. "Since you're here, you might want to join Mr. Jackson this morning. There's the appointment at Jackson Advertising at 10."

"Right." He stopped in front of her desk. "Any messages come for me while I was on vacation?"

"Is that what you called it? Some might term it kidnapping."

He shot her a 'get serious' look.

"Jack Bently left a message. He wants to talk to you about the meeting on May 31."

Nathan nodded. "I'll be sure to call him. Anyone else?"

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Just the funeral home. They want to know your height so they can design the casket.”

He noted the smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “Now, let’s get something straight, Carmen. Mrs. Rudolph has adjusted to the situation, and everything’s under control.”

The woman’s mouth dropped open. “You tied her up and gagged her!”

He balked. “I did no such thing. Please, what do you take me for?”

“You pretty much kidnapped the poor thing. If I were you, I’d watch my back when I’m asleep.”

“I don’t need to do that.” Once again when he woke up, Amy was snuggled nicely against him and she had her arm wrapped around his waist. He rather liked waking up that way.

“You mean she let you live?” a man called out.

Nathan turned to Tyler who exited the elevator. “Ha ha.”

“He swears that Amy Watson is agreeable to the arrangement,” the secretary told Tyler.

“Her name is Amy Rudolph,” Nathan reminded her.

“Why? Is that baby on the way?” the woman asked him.

“I’m working on it.”

“Well, until she sleeps with you, I’ll call her Amy Watson. She did make it clear that she’ll get an annulment.”

“Oh that,” Nathan waved his hand. “She had to say that so that she could have the appearance of control. She didn’t mean it.”

Carmen and Tyler exchanged knowing glances.

“If there aren’t any more pressing calls to tend to, I’ll go to my office.”

“Oh, right. About that...” Tyler ran past him.

What Nathan Wants

Unsure of whether or not he wanted to know what the deal was, Nathan quickened his pace so that he reached the door in time to see Tyler remove something from the nameplate on his office door. "What is that?" He snatched the nameplate from Tyler before he could tuck it into his pocket.

*Tyler Jackson, President
May Nathan Rudolph rest in peace*

"Very funny," Nathan dryly stated, hiding his amusement. He tossed it into the trash. "You just wait. One of these days, Amy *Rudolph* is going to come to my office and be very happy to see me."

Tyler glanced at Carmen and shook his head.

"It'll happen," Nathan insisted and gave Tyler a piercing look. "We are due to leave for Jackson Advertising at 9:45."

"Yes, sir." Tyler gave a mock salute before he headed off for his office.

"Why do I keep you two on my staff?" he called out.

"Because no one else has the patience to deal with you," Tyler joked over his shoulder.

"Nor would they have the compassion to call your doctor about that fungus," Carmen added. "I go above and beyond the call of duty."

"Yes, you're a saint," Nathan said, humoring her. "When you die, we'll erect a statue in your honor."

She gave him a slight grin before returning to her computer.

Nathan entered his office and turned on his computer and then opened his appointment book. It was too bad Amy's parents had a returning flight tomorrow morning. He rather enjoyed having them around. If anything, it confirmed that he made the right choice in picking her to be his wife, but he also

Ruth Ann Nordin

liked talking to them. He'd have to find a way to see them again before the year was up. With any luck, he and Amy could announce her pregnancy at that time.

He looked out the window, not really seeing the building next to him or the sky beyond. Maybe they could fly down to Florida for Christmas and announce it on Christmas day. He could picture the scene vividly in his mind. They would be around the Christmas tree, unwrapping presents, drinking eggnog, and listening to Christmas songs. He smiled. He thought Amy's face would glow with joy, and perhaps by then, she would love him.

A loud slap on his desk pulled him abruptly from his daydream. His head snapped in the direction of his ex-wife who clucked her tongue at him. "Is this what you do at work all day? Stare out the window?"

His gaze drifted to his secretary who offered an apologetic shrug. He sighed and leaned back in his seat. Well, he couldn't fault her. Veronica had a way of barging in where she wasn't wanted. He turned his attention to the woman dressed in an expensive dress suit. "What brings you here today?" he blandly asked, clasping his hands together and not breaking eye contact.

She sat on the edge of his desk and adjusted her hat. "I came to congratulate you."

"I didn't realize you followed anything that happened in my life."

She laughed and waved her hand. "Oh, please. I wasn't talking about your personal life. I meant you're off the hook for the alimony. I'm getting married!"

"What's the guy's name and address? I should send a sympathy card."

"Oh, Nate. It's nice to see you haven't lost your sense of humor."

What Nathan Wants

“So when can I stop the automatic payments to your account?” he asked, realizing that even if she was doing him a favor by relieving him of the financial burden of the alimony, he couldn’t help but feel sorry for her next husband.

“June 12th. A Saturday. Feel free to attend. I could send you an invite.”

He inwardly cringed. “I’ll pass. I suppose the least I can do is send a gift. Is there anything pressing you need as you and the victim start a new life together?”

She chuckled. “You’re way too much fun. Seriously, I can’t remember what I ever saw in you.”

“I believe it was my bank account.”

“Now to be fair, I didn’t know how loaded you were until we were engaged. I rather fancied your car and where you worked.”

“Ah, the impression of wealth.”

She gave an amused smirk. “My intended outdoes you, honey.”

“I hate to think you’d move down the money chain.”

“You know me better than that.” Standing, she adjusted her charm bracelet. “If you would like to give us a gift, a trip to the Bahamas via cruise works, but only if you give us a balcony.”

“Why? Do you have dreams of shoving him off the ledge?”

“Too bad I didn’t do that with you when I had the chance.”

They laughed, neither one really amused.

“You’re all heart, Veronica.” He sat up straight. “I can’t do a cruise, but I’ll have my secretary pick out something suitable for a bride and groom.”

“A gift that comes straight from the heart. I’m touched.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Granted, it’s not the lovely parting gift you gave me, but I’m sure Mrs. Riles will make sure it’s nothing you can infect your husband with.”

“Will you ever let that go?”

“You’re right. At least it wasn’t something permanent like HIV or Herpes.”

“Not that it matters, but I tried to be careful. I insisted on condoms each time.”

“I don’t want to know the details. Catching you with him in bed was enough.” He didn’t even want to know how many men she’d slept with while they were married, so he never asked. It was enough to know she caught Chlamydia along the way, gave it to him, and that the antibiotics cleared it from his system. From there, a clean bill of health and a divorce paved the way for a new beginning. “I do hope you’re faithful to this husband.”

“You ask a lot of people, Nate. In this day and age, who’s archaic idea is it to limit yourself to one person? Patrick and I have an agreement which is none of your business.”

He rolled his eyes. “Lovely. Maybe he doesn’t need a sympathy card. Maybe you two will be happy.” What a happiness it was bound to be, he thought sarcastically.

“Your way doesn’t work for everyone, my dear.” She let out a contented sigh. “I must be off. I’m having my wedding dress personally sewn. Try not to spend all that alimony money in one place.” Blowing him a good-bye kiss, she headed out of the office.

He breathed a sigh of relief and felt the tension leave his muscles. Maybe that would be the last he’d ever see of her. One could only hope. He waited until she left in the elevator before he turned to his computer and logged into the system.

He managed through the next half hour answering emails, though he noticed he kept glancing at the phone. It

What Nathan Wants

didn't dawn on him until he looked at it for the fifth time why his focus continued to go back to it. He missed Amy and her parents. He'd gone into work because he thought they might like time alone and because he should at least see what Jackson Advertising came up with for the commercial about his travel agency. Not that he'd go anywhere else. Tyler Jackson was Ryan Jackson's cousin.

He sighed and answered two more emails. The pull to make the call was surprisingly profound. He figured he'd develop a certain degree of amiability with the woman he chose to marry, but he had to admit that he was thoroughly enjoying his time with her, even if she had an odd way of looking at things. Why she thought returning to work as his employee was a good thing, he didn't understand. He had elevated her to his equal, but it seemed that she didn't feel like his equal until he agreed to send her back to the lowest level his company offered. What a strange thing it was to be paying his own wife to work for him when all she had to do was take her debit card and get anything she wanted.

He forced himself to answer three more emails before he caved and made the call. Amy picked up on the third ring and by the way she laughed as she said hello, he knew she was having a good time.

"Hi, honey," he greeted, trying not to sound too excited to speak to her.

His secretary, however, turned her head in his direction with raised eyebrows.

Nasy woman. He spun in his chair so she couldn't see him. He should have thought to shut the door to his office before he made the call. "What are you three up to?" he asked in a lower voice.

"We've decided to use your pool," she replied.

Ruth Ann Nordin

In the background, he heard her dad holler, followed by a loud splash. Her mother shrieked and Amy burst into a round of giggles.

A smile tugged at his lips. There was no doubt that her family was a lot of fun. His only regret was that he wasn't there to partake in the experience.

"I should have warned you that my dad loves to play in the water," Amy told him, still laughing. "It's why he lives near the beach."

"Are you swimming too?" he asked.

"Of course."

"So you're wearing a swimsuit?"

"Well, I don't swim in my clothes."

His smile widened. "Are you wearing a one piece or a bikini?"

She gasped. "Nathan!"

"What?"

"I am with my parents."

"I can't help it if you saved the best activity for when I was gone." Then he added, "So, it's a one piece. If it was just us, would you wear a bikini?"

She sighed but he noted that she wasn't as upset as she pretended to be. Her dad said something in the background, and she spoke into the phone, "My dad wants to say hi."

He waited for her to give the phone to her father and asked, "Are you going to have the energy to play golf this afternoon with all that splashing around you're doing?"

"Oh sure," her dad assured him. "This is my warm up. You got a nice pool, by the way. I especially like the flotation you can put a soda on. A person could get a horrible case of sunburn out here. You know, it's hard to want to leave."

What Nathan Wants

Nathan chuckled. "As long as you remember to be ready to leave for the course at one, you can burn all you want out there."

"I can't leave you high and dry. I'll be ready. I got to give you a chance to beat me after I slaughtered you last time."

"You didn't slaughter me. You won by three points."

"You see three points. I see a massive win."

"Well, if it makes you sleep better at night..." He shifted in his chair. "Hey, I don't have any pictures of Amy yet. We would have gotten some wedding pictures, but she insisted on eloping. Will you get a picture of her for me while you're out there?"

"Sure. Oh, Amy wants to talk to you."

"Okay." He waited for her to get on the phone. "So, I hear that you want me," he said in his best seductive voice.

"You're impossible," she replied, probably rolling her eyes. "Look, I want to have dinner here at the house tonight."

"You do?" He straightened in surprise.

"Yes. It's my parents last night here, and I want to make them something special to eat."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I used to cook all the time you know."

"Well, yeah. I mean, it's not like I paid you enough to eat at expensive places every night."

"Right. So I learned to make some pretty good meals. Tonight I want to make my dad shrimp and salmon. He likes it flavored a certain way, and I don't care how those fancy restaurants are, they don't do it well enough."

"Okay." He shrugged. "Knock yourself out."

"Great. Mom and I will go shopping while you and my dad goof off."

"Golfing is a serious game," her father called out.

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Oh sure,” her mother retaliated good-naturedly. “Grown men chasing a ball around. Real serious.”

Someone knocked on his door, so Nathan spun around in the chair. Tyler pointed to his watch, and Nathan noticed the time. Giving his friend a slight nod, he told Amy, “I have to get ready for a meeting. I’ll see you around noon.”

“Okay. See you then.”

He hung up and noticed that Tyler was giving him a knowing look.

“What?” Nathan asked.

“Young love. How grand it is.”

“Were you listening to me while I was on the phone?”

“No. I happened to walk by, that’s all.”

“That’s it. I’m getting a lock for my door. A man deserves some privacy.”

“All you had to do was shut the door,” his secretary called out.

“You’re both lucky I’m too busy to hire your job replacements,” Nathan growled.

“Hey, we’re happy for you. This one sounds better than Veronica,” Tyler said.

“You missed that one,” Carmen told Tyler. “She’s getting remarried.”

Nathan picked up his briefcase and walked over to her desk. “Do I need to give you more work so you won’t be bored enough to eavesdrop on other people’s conversations?”

Peering up at him through her bifocals, she said, “You volunteered me to get Miss High and Mighty a wedding gift. I’m involved.”

“Get her whatever you think she deserves.”

“I don’t know if I can be that inhumane.”

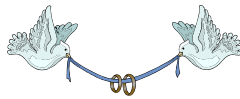
“Then fake it. Send her flowers. You can’t go wrong with those.”

What Nathan Wants

She groaned but picked up the phone. “This better be the last thing I do for her.”

“It is. Once she says ‘I do’, I’m off the hook.” He walked with Tyler toward the elevator. “I guess she was right. It is a day for celebrating.” Thank God, he was finally free of Veronica once and for all.

Chapter Eleven



Nathan and Tyler sat in the conference room at Jackson Advertising and listened to Ryan Jackson and Jacob Hackman present their idea for the commercial.

“Since we’re coming up on the summer season, you want to utilize the fact that children are out of school, so that is why this commercial involves family packages,” Ryan said as he motioned to the drawings he laid out on a storyboard. “You mentioned wanting to offer a deal on the Jack Bently cruise line, and the beginning of the commercial would be the best place to bring that up.”

“Right,” Jacob agreed. “Get people’s attention before they go to the kitchen to grab a snack. Then, we mention it at the end in case anyone is returning from the kitchen, but the end will be a quick blurb with your website.”

“And if the commercial is on a site like You Tube, you can catch their attention right before they have time to click to something else. For the Internet, we would condense the commercial to thirty seconds.”

Nathan nodded. “Sounds good. We’ll go with it.”

What Nathan Wants

“You don’t want to think about it first?” Tyler asked.

“Ryan’s your cousin. I’m not going to risk you putting arsenic in my coffee because I said no,” he joked.

“And here I thought we actually had some good ideas,” Ryan told Jacob.

“Nope. It’s because of your cousin.” Nathan broke into a smile and stood. “It’s a good idea. Go ahead and start up the shoot for it.”

Tyler stood and started talking to Jacob, so Nathan took that as his cue to approach Ryan. “Your wife is pregnant, isn’t she?”

Ryan collected the drawings but gave him a curious look. “Yeah.”

“I just got married, and I thought it might be good for my wife to talk to a pregnant woman. You know, to discuss the joys of carrying a child and motherhood and all.”

“I don’t know if Beth would say she’s enjoying it at this point. She’s ready to give birth and be done with it.”

Tyler walked over to them. “Is she that far along already?”

Ryan tucked the drawings under his arm. “It’ll be thirty-seven weeks this Saturday, and she’s carrying twins.”

“Twins?” Nathan’s eyes grew wide. He didn’t think he could handle two at once at his age. He hoped Amy would have the sense to limit it to one. As if she had any control over something like that, he silently mused.

“A boy and a girl,” Ryan proudly said.

“You’re sure on the one being a girl?” Tyler asked.

“The ultrasound finally showed that only one baby has a turtle.”

“It’s ridiculous they make up names like that for the parts,” Nathan said.

“It’s cute. Women love it,” Ryan replied.

Ruth Ann Nordin

Nathan guessed so, but still...why not just come out and call it what it actually was? With a shrug, he told Ryan, "I'd like to get started on a family. I'm forty and not getting any younger, but I still haven't convinced my wife to have a child."

"That's because of the way you married her," Tyler dryly commented. "I'm sure if she had a choice, things would be different."

"Never mind that." Nathan didn't need to involve Ryan in any of the details of his marriage. "I thought that since women are influenced by other women, your wife would inspire mine."

Tyler gave a loud sigh but didn't respond.

Ryan shrugged and smiled. "I'm sure Beth would like to talk to another woman about being pregnant. I can't promise she'll say nothing but good things about it, but overall, Beth's excited."

"Good," Nathan said. "So, would you like to join me and my wife for dinner next week?"

"We could do that or this weekend."

"I can't this weekend. We already have plans."

Nathan decided not to tell them Amy had volunteered them to watch her friend's kids in order to dissuade him from staying married to her. She could have her weekend of kid catastrophes, but he'd follow it up with the expectant bundle of joy and hoped it mixed well with a woman facing her mid-30's and the ticking biological clock that would be resounding a gong in the back of her mind.

Jacob motioned to Ryan that he had to leave, so Ryan waved to him before he turned back to Nathan. "Let me talk to Beth, and I'll get back to you on a day we can meet up. If she goes into labor, then it obviously won't happen."

Nathan's eyes lit up. "That's even better. If my wife could hold a newborn, that would be great."

What Nathan Wants

Tyler shook his head. "You'll have to forgive him, Ryan. He's a little eager to get a child."

Ryan laughed. "Apparently." He checked his watch. "I better head off. I'll email you about a good time to meet."

"Thanks." Once Ryan left the room, Nathan clapped his hands. "Well, that settles it. As soon as Beth speaks to Amy about the joys and wonders of motherhood, Amy will be ready to have one of her own."

"Don't you mean, 'one of your own?'" Tyler commented with a roll of his eyes.

"You want to know why you're not married? It's because you don't understand women."

"Huh. And here I thought all I had to do was find a judge to do a marriage by proxy and I'd get a wife."

"I chose her out of all the others I interviewed. It's a great honor."

He snorted but didn't say anything.

"One of these days, she'll come to visit me, and she'll be happy about it. Sure, she has some minor reservations, but that's normal."

"Uh huh," he sarcastically grunted.

Nathan picked up his briefcase and followed Tyler out of the room and down the hall. "It's like Cinderella. She didn't know what to do and ran off in the middle of the ball. It's the fear of not being able to fit into a wealthier lifestyle."

They stopped in front of the elevators and Tyler said, "That is really lame."

"What?"

Tyler pressed the down button. "Cinderella wanted to be with the prince but had to leave because the prince was going to see her as she truly was. If anything, you could interpret it as Cinderella pretending to be something she wasn't and almost getting caught."

Ruth Ann Nordin

The doors opened and they stepped into the elevator. “But the story is a classic fairytale. Cinderella had a heart of gold.”

“Maybe, but did you know how the original version went?”

“She didn’t end up with the prince?”

“Oh, she ended up with the prince. It’s just that her wicked step-sisters cut off a part of their feet to fit the shoe.”

Nathan cringed as the doors closed.

Amy sat on the edge of the bed her parents had slept in during their visit and watched her mother pack. She hated to admit she was thankful for anything Nathan did, but she was glad he’d invited her parents to come up. She had purposely avoided seeing them or inviting them to see her ever since Sean’s death because she was afraid it’d bring back too many memories. Her father had given her away at the wedding, and her parents had been fond of him, often treating him like the son they never had. The last time she’d seen them was when she buried him.

But the memory of that sunny fall morning didn’t bring her the despair she feared it would. Instead, it was a sense of gratefulness that they’d been able to know him and that she had been with him for the short time allotted to her. Even if a part of her couldn’t believe how fast Nathan had won them over, she was glad that they didn’t criticize her for moving on. It seemed that they had also welcomed Nathan with the same enthusiasm they’d welcomed Sean, and that spoke a lot of their care and concern for her. A child couldn’t be better loved.

“I’m sorry it took so long for me to see you again,” she softly told her mother who placed a folded shirt into the suitcase.

What Nathan Wants

Her mother glanced up and smiled. "There's no harm in taking time for yourself. Besides, it's not like we didn't often email and call."

"Yes, I know. But it's nice to see you and dad."

"It was nice to see you too."

"I don't think we should wait so long to see each other next time."

"Your husband is talking about coming to Florida this Christmas. He wants to book a condo right along the beach. He said that you mentioned how clear and emerald the water was. He said it intrigued him."

Despite the fact that he'd been interviewing her for the position of his wife instead of a job when she said that, she laughed as she recalled the way she'd extolled the virtues of the Florida panhandle. "I must be a better travel agent than I thought."

Her mother chuckled and finished packing. She zipped up her suitcase and sighed. "It was a lovely visit."

"Yes, it was." Amy stood and hugged her mother. "I can't wait to see you again."

"Me neither. And it would be fun if you brought another one with you." She patted Amy's stomach and winked.

"Oh for real, Mom. You too?"

She shrugged. "I hear being a grandparent has a lot of perks."

"Yeah well... We'll see."

Amy wasn't going to make any promises. She'd see how the weekend played out with Danielle's kids. Either Nathan was going to still be determined to have a child or he'd swear it all off for good and end the marriage. If he didn't want to take part of the responsibility of being a father, then she was better off knowing now. Either way, Danielle was doing her a favor.

Ruth Ann Nordin

She walked with her mother down the stairs and to the entryway where her father was telling Nathan about the time he got second place in a golf tournament.

"I would have been the winner if the wind hadn't been blowing to the south. It knocked my ball away from the hole at the most critical moment," he finished.

Amy rolled her eyes at her mother who gave a knowing smile.

"You have to allow him one shining moment," her mother whispered.

Her father, probably sensing their amusement, looked at them. "Women don't understand the importance of the game."

"Maybe not," her mother conceded, "but we do know when to get to the airport." She glanced at Amy. "Will you be taking Old Snoopy or joining us?"

"I'm not taking a separate car to see you off," Amy replied.

"Just checking. You have an abnormal loyalty to that car."

"Ha ha," she shot back.

"Oh, that reminds me." Nathan pulled out a business card and handed it to her. "I'm having a new engine put in that car, and I'm taking care of the rust on it while it's being worked on. This way, it'll be like new."

Amy sighed as she reluctantly took the card. Once again, he was taking the reins in her life and once again, her parents looked grateful about it, but she had to admit that it was a touching gesture. He was extending the life of her first vehicle.

"Thank you," she said, surprised that she meant it.

He smiled with a pleased look on his face and picked up her mother's suitcase so they could go to the airport.

What Nathan Wants

The ride there was nice. The sunny weather promised a safe and uneventful flight. At one point, he reached for her hand and she decided not to pull back. Her parents were in the backseat and couldn't see it, so that made it more meaningful. It wasn't something he did to appease her, make her forget something, or to give her parents the impression that they were a happily married couple.

They waited with her parents who checked in and went upstairs to the corridor that would lead them to their flight. Amy fought a momentary stab of grief as she hugged her parents good-bye. She did miss them, and even if her life was no longer in Florida, the distance would not make them any less precious to her.

"I love you, sweetie," her father whispered. "You made a good choice with this Nathan, just like you did with Sean. Your mother and I are happy for you."

And that was the final seal of approval. She smiled and thanked her dad before he joined her mother and walked down the corridor that led to the security check point.

Nathan put his arm around her shoulders. "They're nice people."

"Yes, they are."

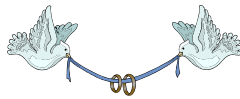
"I'm looking forward to seeing them again. Your dad and I are going to partner up and join the golf tournament down there. It should be fun."

"That is the only Christmas gift my dad needs."

"What do you think your mother wants?"

She thought of her mother's excitement as her mother patted her stomach. There was nothing more her mother would love than to hear she was going to be a grandmother. With a shake of her head, she told him, "I think you know the answer to that." Before he could ask for clarification, she headed back to the car.

Chapter Twelve



It was around five when Danielle dropped her two and four-year-old children off at Nathan's house. Her face was back to normal, a fact that Amy noted with relief as she handed Danielle the gift card for the restaurant. Chase and Byron huddled together but smiled at Amy. Amy returned their smiles and took the diaper bag and suitcase from Danielle.

"You'll have a good time with your aunt Amy," Amy promised them. "It's your uncle Nathan that you have to get used to." She winked at them. "Feel free to be normal kids around him."

Danielle looked uneasily at her friend. "Are you sure you want to put Nathan through this?"

Amy shrugged. "He's the one who keeps insisting on having a child. What better way is there to find out if he means it or not than to let him be a dad for a weekend?"

Danielle bit her lower lip.

"Nathan's a grown man. He can handle two little kids." Maybe. Or maybe not. Either way, she was about to find out.

What Nathan Wants

“Yes, but are you really going to get out of the marriage if he can’t handle it?” Danielle pressed.

“I don’t know.”

Danielle’s eyes lit up. “Then you might stay with him!”

“Shh...” Amy glanced over her shoulder. Good. Nathan hadn’t returned from his den. “Not so loud.” She practically shoved her friend out the door. “Now, have a good time. You have my cell number if you need anything.”

“Okay. Okay. Can I give my kids a hug before I go?”

“Oh, sure.” Amy stepped aside so that Chase and Byron could hug their mother.

“I love you guys,” Danielle said and kissed their cheeks.

Amy smiled. Even if Danielle complained about all the hard work motherhood was, it was apparent that, deep down, she enjoyed it. It warmed Amy’s heart. Up until that time, Amy never gave motherhood any serious thought. She and Sean figured they’d start a family when he got out of the military, and then he died so it wasn’t even an option. But now... She blinked and shook her head. This weekend wasn’t about her. It was about Nathan.

Danielle stood up. “Okay. I’m going. I’ll be here Sunday at four.”

“Sounds good. I’ll call you later tonight to let you know how things are going, but remember, this is the weekend for you and Randy to be together.”

“Yes, I know. I promise not to worry too much.”

After Danielle left, Amy turned to the two boys who peered up at her. “I think we’re going to have a lot of fun. I have some great things planned. First, there’s the park, then the zoo—”

“Can we see a bear?” Chase, the four year old, asked.

“Of course we can.”

“A giraffe?”

Ruth Ann Nordin

"I think the zoo has just about every animal there that you're interested in."

Chase looked very happy, and Byron sucked his thumb and held her hand.

She heard Nathan's footsteps before she saw him.

"What a lovely scene," he said, not hiding his pleasure.

Chase and Byron immediately turned to him with wide eyes and inched closer to Amy.

She laughed. "It'll take them time to get used to you." She squeezed the boys' hands. "That is your uncle Nathan."

"Uncle?" Nathan asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Danielle and I are best friends, so I think of these kids as my nephews."

Nathan nodded. "Ah.." Then he knelt in front of them. "You know, I'm not the scary one. She is." He pointed at her. "Hey, wait a minute," he told Chase. "What's that behind your ear?"

Chase brought up a hand and traced it. "Nothing."

"Hmm... I thought I saw something. Let me check." He felt behind the boy's ear, gasped, and showed Chase a quarter. "Look at that. You're made of money."

"Awesome!" Chase exclaimed and took the quarter. He felt behind his other ear.

"It doesn't happen each time," Nathan said. "Just once in awhile."

"Try Byron," Chase said.

"You think he's got a coin behind his ear too?"

Chase nodded.

Nathan reached behind Byron's ear and pulled out a nickel. "I see it runs in the family."

"Too bad it wasn't another quarter," Amy inserted.

Nathan glanced up at her and winked. "The smaller they are, the less they make."

What Nathan Wants

She laughed. Of course. It made sense, and it was cute.

"I wanted to ask you," Nathan began as he stood up, "if you would like to go to dinner next week with a couple friends of mine. Alright. They're not really friends, but I do know the husband and thought it might be fun to get to know them better. The man is in charge of the commercials for my company and seems like a nice guy."

"Maybe," she replied.

"Maybe?"

"I have to see if you survive this weekend first."

His gaze met hers in an unmistakable challenge. "I might surprise you."

She shrugged, pretending that she wasn't curious. She did want to see how he would fare.

"What's that behind your ear?" he asked her.

Startled, she felt the area. "Nothing."

"Here. Let me check." His fingers brushed her hair back, and he lightly touched the skin behind her ear, making her body tingle. A smile widened on his face before he produced a folded dollar bill in his hand. "Look there, boys. Amy makes dollar bills."

She shook her head. She should have known that's what he was doing. "Okay. That's a good one."

"Can you make another dollar?" Chase asked her.

"I'm sure I can, but we should wait until after dinner," Amy replied. "So, where should we take them?"

Nathan grinned at her. "You're going to make this hard on me, aren't you?"

She didn't know why she thought he wouldn't prepare for this weekend, but it was quickly dawning on her that he had and that she might, once again, be out of her league. He seemed to anticipate all of her moves before she made them.

Ruth Ann Nordin

"I did a quick internet search and found a great pizza place fifteen minutes from here that has games for kids," he announced, putting his hands in his pants and rolling on the heels of his feet as if he couldn't wait to head out.

Chase and Byron cheered but stayed close to her.

"I'll get the keys and we'll head out," Nathan said.

Amy suddenly realized what he didn't think about. "You'll need car seats."

"Oh, I had those installed in my other car. We're all set."

A bit disappointed that he had planned for that one too, she sighed and went to get her purse so they could go out.

When the kids were asleep, Amy retired to the bedroom that night. As she shut the door, she noticed that Nathan stared at her in surprise. "What is it?" she asked.

"Your parents left this morning," he replied as he set his wallet on the nightstand by what had become his side of the bed. "Aren't you going to sleep in another bedroom now?"

"Oh." Setting her purse on the dresser, she shrugged. "All my clothes are in here. It's easier this way."

"Of course."

She noted his amusement but decided to ignore it. Instead, she opened the closet door and retrieved the pajamas. When she came out, she noticed that he had taken off his watch and belt. She hesitated for a moment because then he began to unbutton his shirt. He wasn't looking her way at the moment, so it gave her the freedom to admire his broad shoulders and flat chest. As he turned to head toward the closet, she quickly looked away and headed for the bathroom. Okay. So maybe

What Nathan Wants

she wanted to see him naked. She was a normal female, and she did miss sex.

Forcing the thought from her mind, she closed the bathroom door and changed clothes. It'd been a long time since she'd enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh, and her body made it perfectly clear that it wanted to do so again. Sighing, she took her toothbrush and put toothpaste on it. She needed to get a grip on herself.

She was in the middle of brushing her teeth when Nathan entered the bathroom. She stopped and took a good look at his reflection in the mirror as he placed his neatly folded pajamas on the ledge above the towels. Her face flushed a wild shade of red, but she couldn't take her eyes off of him.

He opened the shower door and glanced her way. "Want to join me?"

She coughed and almost dropped her toothbrush. Grabbing a washcloth from the counter, she wiped the toothpaste that dribbled down her chin. Then she spit in the sink and dared to look over her shoulder. Even if he seemed annoyingly smug in catching her undivided attention, she couldn't help but look down at the more interesting part of him.

"Well, come on in if you want." Then he stepped into the shower and closed the door.

As soon as he turned the water on, something in her snapped and she could think again. What was wrong with her? She wasn't a teenager. She was a grown woman who'd had sex before. She knew the male body very well, but here she was, standing in the bathroom like an idiot and openly gazing at Nathan as if she was a virgin.

She turned on the faucet and dabbed her face with cold water. She needed to get a hold of herself!

"The water is nice and warm," Nathan called out.

Ruth Ann Nordin

She couldn't see him clearly through the steam covering the shower door, but she wanted to be in there. Her pulse raced and her body screamed at her to go in there. She bit her lower lip and drummed her fingers on the counter. Did she want to stay married to him? This was a big decision. Shouldn't she at least wait and see how he handled being with kids? And, probably the most important question of all, was that the only thing he wanted? To get her pregnant so he could have a child?

She didn't like thinking that. She'd like to think he picked her for companionship too—someone to spend his life with, someone to love. She didn't just want to be a mother. She wanted to be a wife. Maybe she should ask him. And what if he said yes just so she'd sleep with him and get pregnant? She saw that baby room. He'd designed it before he interviewed for a wife.

Finally, she opted for the safe route and left the bathroom.

In the middle of the night, one of the kids woke up crying. Alarmed, Amy jerked awake, immediately tangled in Nathan's arms as he struggled to throw the sheets off his body. The whole ordeal resulted in what might be classified as a wrestling match with a lot of grunting before Amy finally freed herself from Nathan, but she fell out of the bed and landed on the floor.

He hopped out of bed and helped her up. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I think so." Her elbow and thigh were sore, but there wasn't anything that was seriously injured.

What Nathan Wants

“I wanted to have some interesting activity with you in bed, but that wasn’t quite what I imagined,” he joked.

“I don’t know if interesting is the word,” she replied as they went to the bedroom where the kids were staying. “I thought there was an emergency, and I needed to scramble to safety.”

“I guess the kid does sound like a tornado drill.” He led the way and opened the door. Flipping on the light, he turned to the youngest boy who had fallen off the bed. “So that’s what happened.”

Chase who had woken up, sat up in bed and said, “Byron needs gardens.”

Amy furrowed her eyebrows as Nathan picked the crying two year old up. “You mean, Byron needs guard rails?”

“I think so,” Chase said.

“That’s not the only thing he needs.” Nathan held Byron out to her. “He has a dirty diaper.”

Amy shook her head and smirked. “You want a child so badly? Well, prove you can handle it.”

He blanched. “You can’t be serious!”

“Do you want a child or not?”

“But...but...”

She met his gaze and crossed her arms.

He grimaced but headed for the diaper bag.

“I’m thirsty,” Chase told her.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said, turning her attention to Chase. “If you go potty, I’ll give you some water.”

“I can do that,” Nathan volunteered.

“Oh no,” she immediately argued. “You’re the one who married me to get a child. That means you have to prove you can handle having one because if you don’t agree to change diapers, even the really nasty ones, I’ll go on the pill.”

He gasped. “You wouldn’t!”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“We aren’t in our parents’ generation. Men are expected to help out. There’s more to having children than making them, Nathan.”

Sighing in resignation, he shuddered. “You win. I’ll change the diaper.”

Smiling in satisfaction, she waved for Chase to go potty. After Chase went to pee and then drank some water, she returned him to bed. Nathan had changed the diaper and laid out the comforter on the floor where he tucked in a sleepy Byron. Her heart warmed at the sight. Everything looked to be in order, so she figured he managed pretty well for a man who never went through the task of changing a diaper before.

Once Chase settled into bed, she and Nathan left the room. He turned off the lights, but the nightlight in the corner of the room cast a yellow glow over everything. They returned to their bedroom and she returned to her side of the bed.

“Have fun changing that diaper?” she asked, unable to resist the opportunity to tease him.

“No. I almost threw up. Who knew that kids could produce smells like that? And how can someone so small produce something that big?” He shuddered. “I washed my hands three times but still feel unclean.”

She grinned. “Well, you did a pretty good job. Byron looked happy.”

“Sure he was. I did all the work. He just laid there and laughed at me.”

She burst into a fit of giggles. “Not as easy as it looks, is it?”

At that comment, he rolled onto his side so he was facing her in the dark. “How would you know? You don’t have kids.”

“No, but I’ve babysat those boys a couple of times. I’ve had my fair share of diaper changes.”

What Nathan Wants

“Then why didn’t you tell me to not inhale that horrible odor?”

“Some things have to be learned the hard way.”

“Yes, I know. It’s all a part of your plan to convince me to let you out of this marriage. I guess it was worth a shot, but it didn’t work.” He inched toward her, and she thought too late to scoot back. He put an arm around her waist and drew her closer to him. Though their bodies didn’t touch, she felt his heat through their clothes. “I still want to be married to you.”

“What if I can’t have kids? What if I’m infertile?”

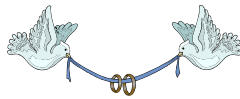
“Is that a hypothetical question or is that really the case?”

She thought to lie and tell him she knew that for sure, but then she realized the fib would do more harm than good. Finally, she opted for the truth. “I don’t know. Sean and I never tried to have children. I might be. Then I might conceive right away. But what if I can’t have them?”

“Then I still want to be married to you,” he whispered and kissed her lightly on the lips. “We can always adopt.” He rolled onto his back and resumed his normal sleeping position.

This time, when she snuggled up to him and wrapped her arm around his waist, it was by choice.

Chapter Thirteen



Amy couldn't help but notice how well-behaved the boys were around Nathan. She watched them all morning, and Chase did everything he wanted with an enthusiasm that didn't make any sense. Granted, he was doing fun things with the two, like trying to teach them to play tennis, but the whole thing struck her as odd. The kids were too good. They didn't fight or throw a tantrum over anything.

She shook her head as Chase handed Byron the tennis ball. Surely, just because Nathan told Chase to do that, it shouldn't be enough of a reason for Chase to obey, especially since Chase was the one who retrieved the ball. In all the times she'd watched Chase and Byron in the past, she never once saw Chase happily hand something over to his little brother. But there he was, giving the ball to Byron as if he always did this.

She set the glasses of lemonade on the table between the two chairs and studied Nathan. Yes, he was tall and strong. Maybe a little kid would obey him out of fear, but when she glanced at Chase and Byron, they were smiling and laughing. So they weren't doing what he asked because they were afraid of

What Nathan Wants

him. She sighed. Maybe she'd never figure it out. Nathan might have a way with people, but she had a hard time believing something strange wasn't going on when she wasn't looking.

It didn't take her long to learn why the kids were so well-mannered. After they finished dinner at the fast food place Chase wanted to go to, she returned from the bathroom and saw Nathan hand each of the two boys a dollar bill.

Once she overcame her shock, she walked up to them and said, "So this is how you've been getting them to behave."

Nathan's eyebrows rose. "It's been working, hasn't it?"

She rolled her eyes. "But you can't do this to kids."

He turned to them. "Go play on the jungle gym over there."

Chase and Byron cheered and ran to the slide.

"I know what you're thinking," Nathan began, "but you're wrong. I am perfectly capable of handling our child without paying him or her off."

"Are you?"

"Of course I am." He took her hand and urged her to sit beside him. "Look, these are other people's kids."

"Danielle is my best friend."

"Exactly. The point is those kids don't belong to us. It's not our job to raise them to be responsible citizens. Our job is to give them a good time while they're visiting us."

"You can do that without money."

"I guess, but I don't have candy sitting around the house."

She shook her head. "You're amazing, you know that? You can rationalize anything."

"What's to rationalize? They're only here for the weekend. Now, I know I was supposed to freak out and swear off kids altogether before I released you from this marriage, but it's not going to happen. In case you haven't noticed, I can hire

Ruth Ann Nordin

a nanny if I don't want to raise the kid, so changing a ton of dirty diapers isn't going to dissuade me from having one."

"Well, I don't want a nanny coming in and raising my child. I want to be the one to do that."

He smiled and squeezed her hand. "Which is one of the reasons I chose you. You're the kind of employee who takes initiative. I figure that would apply to your personal life too. And before you start in on how I only married you so you'd be a mother to my child, lots of women would agree to my terms if it meant they could have access to my bank account."

Okay. So he had a good point. She gave a reluctant nod.

"I was married before," he told her, leaning back in the booth and putting his arm around her shoulders so he could pull her closer to him. "Her name was Veronica. Until she gets married next month, her last name will still be Rudolph."

"I've heard of her," Amy commented.

"I'm sure most of Omaha has. You weren't here five years ago when we got a divorce. It was in the papers for awhile, and many rumors floated around."

"What kind of rumors?" She tried not to sound interested, but she had to admit that this definitely got her attention.

"The usual. Secret lovers, drugs, alcohol. Stuff like that."

She hid her disappointment. For some reason, she expected something a little...juicier. "It sounds like the typical tabloid stuff."

"That's exactly what it was."

"So what really happened?"

"I caught her in bed with another man."

"Oh." That had to have hurt. She'd be devastated if Sean had been with another woman. As much as she hated the

What Nathan Wants

fact that he died, she was glad he'd been faithful to her. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "It was just as well. Looking back, she did me a favor. She hated children. I don't think she would have ever agreed to have one. Of course, when I married her, I wasn't thinking that far down the road."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Hey, I happen to think you're more attractive than her."

"I've seen her picture in a couple of magazines. She's gorgeous."

"Only on the surface." He kissed her lightly on the ear, causing a tingle to rush up and down her spine. "I promise that I won't pay our kid to be good. Alright?"

"Alright." She realized, a little too late, that her agreement with his statement clearly indicated her concession to stay in the marriage. She glanced at him. "You have a sneaky way of wording things."

His eyes widened. "I have no idea what you mean."

"Right."

She shook her head but decided not to press the issue. The day had been surprisingly good, even if he did bribe the children to be on their best behavior, but it had been nice to watch him interact with them. She had no doubt that he'd be a good father, and he'd want to be involved in his child's life. Choosing to enjoy the moment for what it was, she relaxed against him and watched her "nephews" play.

Danielle came by to pick up the kids the next day, and while Nathan brought their things down from the spare bedroom, Danielle whispered, "So, how did it go?"

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Great,” Amy honestly replied.

“Really?”

“Yep. It turns out he’s good with kids.”

“Then you’ll stay with him?”

Amy caught the hopeful gleam in her friend’s eye. “I’m thinking about it.”

“Thinking? What’s there to think about?” Danielle motioned to the large entryway. “All of this can be yours if you just say yes.”

“But I hardly know him. I mean, I’m learning about him and I like what I’m learning, but how much do I really know?”

“You can’t know everything about a man before you marry him.”

“I know that, but Sean and I dated for a year before we got married.”

The sound of kids laughing directed their attention to the stairs where Nathan waited for the oldest boy to catch up to him. He held the suitcase and diaper bag in one hand and held Byron’s hand with the other.

Danielle nudged her in the side and gave her a pleading look.

“He pays them to behave,” Amy whispered. “That’s why they love him.”

Danielle’s expression turned from one of surprise to one of amusement. “If it works...”

“Danielle, it’s awful. What is he teaching them?”

“That if they are good employees, they might get a raise?”

“I doubt it.”

Nathan smiled at Danielle. “Did you have a good weekend?”

What Nathan Wants

"The best," Danielle told him. "Thanks to you and Amy."

"I know that I'm your boss, but you and your husband should get together with me and Amy sometime. It'd be nice to get to know Amy's friends."

Danielle appeared nervous but said, "Yeah. That'd be fun."

The phone rang.

"I'll get it." Nathan gave the boys a high-five and turned to the kitchen.

"We want to come back," Chase told his mom.

"Wow," Danielle replied. "They're not picky kids, but I'm surprised." She looked down at her boys. "Aren't you happy to see your mother?"

"Course we are!" Chase reached up to hug her while Byron grabbed her by the leg and called out 'mama'!

"They did miss you. Why else do you think they asked to talk to you and Randy twenty times while you were gone?"

"True." She hugged her children. "I missed you guys so much!"

"No one will ever replace their mother," Amy assured her. "I'll see you at work tomorrow."

Danielle stood up straight and swung the diaper bag over her shoulder. "You're really going back to work?"

"Yes. I miss it there."

"You miss it because you don't take advantage of the many shopping opportunities you have." She sighed and shrugged. "I'll never understand you, Amy, but I love you."

"Same here. I'll see you tomorrow."

Danielle picked up the suitcase and led her children to the car while Nathan came out of the kitchen.

"Oh. They're gone already?" he asked, looking disappointed.

Ruth Ann Nordin

“She has to get them to bed so she can be at work bright and early tomorrow morning.” Amy shut the door and grinned. “You know how upset you’ll be if we don’t provide excellent customer service.”

“Not as upset as you get when a man proposes,” he quipped. “If memory serves, you wanted to run me over with your car.”

She snorted. “That was hardly a proposal. It was a mandate.”

“I’ll never understand how you saw it that way, but that’s all water under the bridge. That was Ryan Jackson on the phone. His wife had a healthy boy and girl early this morning, so they can’t make it for dinner this week.”

“So everything went okay?”

“Yep. Tyler is Ryan’s cousin, so I should go down there to say congratulations. Want to come?”

“I don’t know. I mean, they don’t even know me.”

“But you’re my wife, so it’s okay.”

“Well...” Despite her uncertainty, she nodded. “Okay. I’ll go.”

“Great! We won’t stay long. Just long enough to say hi and to congratulate them.”

She studied him. “You seem a little too eager to do this.”

“Nonsense. I’m a happy person all the time. Let’s go.”

She joined him and when they got to the hospital, he bought a floral bouquet and two balloons. “You sure do go all out for someone you hardly know,” she commented as they got into an elevator.

“Then think of how I’ll be when you’re the one who has the baby.” He winked at her. “I can decorate your entire maternity suite with flowers.”

“No. That’s not necessary.”

What Nathan Wants

“Why? Don’t you like flowers?”

“Sure, I do, but not a mountain’s worth.”

The elevator went up and once the doors opened, they stepped onto the maternity ward. She let him lead the way. He found Tyler almost as soon as they walked through the double doors and checked in.

Tyler shook his head as soon as he saw Nathan. “One would swear you’re the father of the babies.” He glanced at Amy. “I can only imagine what he’s been putting you through.”

“I haven’t been putting her through anything,” Nathan replied. “I’ve been a perfect gentleman. So how is everyone doing?”

“Good.” Tyler smiled. “They decided to name the boy Jacob Tyler. Isn’t that great? I get to be the kid’s middle name.”

“What did they name the girl?”

“Stacey Ann.”

“That’s a pretty name,” Amy commented.

“You can name our child whatever you want,” Nathan promised her.

“You’re too obvious,” she told him.

“I’m forty. At my age, I don’t have the luxury of being subtle.”

“Anyway,” Tyler interrupted them, “the new parents are down here. I don’t know where you’re going to put those things. The room is full as it is.”

He shrugged. “We’ll find a place.”

Since Amy didn’t know any of the people who hovered around the woman propped up in the bed holding the girl, she stayed toward the door but made sure she didn’t block it. She crossed her arms, suddenly feeling nervous about being there. Nathan found a small space left between the other flowers and balloons and set his gift down.

Ruth Ann Nordin

To her surprise, he didn't join her. Instead, he went right into the middle of the group and asked Elizabeth Jackson all about her birth. Amy thought some of his questions were none of his business, but apparently Elizabeth and Ryan were happy to answer them. From the way Elizabeth and Ryan's parents filled in some of the extra details, Amy realized they didn't mind the nosy questions; in fact, they seemed excited to have a chance to tell anyone who cared to listen everything he wanted to know.

"So after your water broke, you came right to the hospital?" Nathan asked.

"They say to come to the hospital within an hour after the water breaks," Ryan replied, standing beside the bed where Elizabeth sat. "You don't want to risk an infection."

"That's good to know." Nathan glanced over his shoulder at Amy.

She quickly averted her gaze, sure her face was flaming red since it was obvious to anyone who cared to pay attention that he was taking mental notes on what to do with Amy if her time ever came to give birth.

"So how did you know your water broke? Was it like you see it in the movies?" Nathan asked.

"It can be a gush," Elizabeth said, smiling at her daughter. "But for me, it wasn't so apparent. It was like a slow and steady leak."

"That's how it was with me too," her mother added. "As soon as she called me and asked if it was normal, I knew we were about to be grandparents." She looked at Elizabeth's father with the same thrilled look that Amy's parents had shared when Nathan showed them the baby room.

"We were so excited," Elizabeth's father agreed. "We came right down."

"So, did the labor go smoothly?" Nathan asked.

What Nathan Wants

Tyler leaned between Ryan's parents to tell Elizabeth, "You'll have to forgive him. He thinks he's going to be a father within the year, so he's planning everything out in advance." He glanced at Nathan. "As if he can control that kind of thing."

It was at that time that Amy had the urge to bolt from the room. She expected everyone to turn in her direction and stare at her, but to her relief, they were so caught up in one of the baby's sneezing that they didn't seem to mind.

"I didn't labor for long before I went in for a c-section," Elizabeth said.

"You don't want to know the details on that," Ryan told him. "It was gross."

"Oh, there's nothing gross about any birth," Ryan's mother argued.

"I'm not saying it made me pass out, but I never realized Beth's insides were that colorful," Ryan replied.

Tyler shuddered. "Nathan, if you want more details, then do it when I'm not around, okay? The point is that the babies were born and they and their mother are doing well."

"Exactly." Ryan smiled at Elizabeth and kissed her. "You did a wonderful job, Beth."

She returned his smile, and it was apparent that a husband and wife couldn't be happier with each other and the lives they created together. The moment had a ripple effect through the room, for their parents also smiled at each other before turning their attention back to Elizabeth and Ryan.

Ryan held his son to Nathan. "Would you like to hold him?"

"Yes, I would." Nathan gently took the baby in his arms and asked, "How much does he weigh?"

"Four pounds. His sister is almost five pounds," Ryan answered.

Ruth Ann Nordin

Nathan stroked the boy's cheek and laughed when the baby wrapped his hand around his finger. "I didn't think a newborn would be this tiny."

"That's because he's a twin," Elizabeth said. "I think the average is around seven or eight pounds for a newborn?" She glanced at her mother.

Her mother shrugged. "It's been forever since I gave birth to you. I think you were about seven and a half pounds."

"That's still tiny," Nathan responded.

"Well, they don't come out being twenty pounds," Tyler interjected.

"Thank goodness!" Elizabeth gasped.

The group chuckled and Nathan turned around, as if he just realized that Amy wasn't right next to him. He waved her over. "You should hold him. It's a lot of fun."

Acutely aware that all eyes had turned to her, Amy reluctantly stepped forward. She smiled uncertainly and was rewarded with smiles from everyone else.

"This is my wife, Amy. We got married about a week ago," Nathan introduced.

"Nice to meet you, Amy," Elizabeth said.

"Congratulations on your children," Amy replied, not knowing what else to say. She sure wasn't about to ask the poor woman a bunch of personal questions like Nathan did!

"We're getting started on our own family," Nathan told them.

Amy had to bite back a sarcastic reply. Maybe she was considering it, but she didn't recall giving him the green light. She forced a polite smile as he placed the baby in her arms. Since she hadn't held a newborn before, she experienced a sudden bout of apprehension with the task. The sleeping boy was so small. What if she dropped him? She remained still, afraid to move.

What Nathan Wants

“Doesn’t it feel nice to hold a baby?” Nathan asked her.

If she wasn’t concentrating so hard on keeping the baby secure, she would have scowled at him. The fact that he seemed to think all he had to do was want something and get it with the snap of his fingers was irritating her, especially when he did it in front of a group of strangers.

Tyler rolled his eyes but didn’t say anything. At least one other person in the room knew what was going on and agreed with her. That gave her a little consolation.

Nathan and Amy stayed to visit for another ten minutes before they left, and Amy decided she was going to do something that didn’t follow Nathan’s neatly planned calendar of events. When they reached the elevator, she kept walking.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’m taking the stairs,” she snapped.

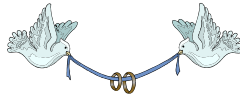
“Why?”

“Because you expect me to go down the elevator.” She glanced over her shoulder to make sure he wasn’t following her.

He wasn’t. He stood by the elevator doors with a bewildered expression on his face.

She reached the door for the stairwell and called out, “You can’t dictate my life.” Then she pushed the door open and stormed down the steps.

Chapter Fourteen



Danielle opened the front door and gasped, almost dropping the slice of pizza in her hand. “What are you doing here?”

“Can I stay here tonight?” Amy asked as her cab pulled away. She gave her friend a pleading look.

“Uh... Yeah. I guess.” Danielle replied, still in a state of shock as she moved aside so Amy could enter the house. “Can I ask what happened?”

Amy set down the two bags of clothes she bought so she wouldn’t have to go to Nathan’s house to get any. Standing up, she placed her hands on her hips and gave a low grunt. “I’m not going back there until he either ends the marriage or realizes that he needs to consult me about major issues like if or when I want to try for a child.” Amy rubbed her eyes and groaned. “I can’t take it anymore. He snaps his fingers and expects people to coming running to obey him, and he assumes that if he hands out some money, they’ll fall all over themselves to please him.”

“So...what exactly happened?”

What Nathan Wants

“Tyler Jackson’s cousin’s wife had twins, and Nathan took me to the hospital to see the bundles of joy.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. That part was fine. But then he started talking to everyone as if I was in complete agreement about having his child. I don’t recall having that discussion with him. He didn’t ask me if I wanted to marry him. He just barged into where we worked and announced it, and when I said no, he married me anyway! He got my parents up here so I’d have to play along because they loved him. And now he’s telling everyone that we’re trying for a child! These were strangers, Danielle. I don’t know who those people were.”

Danielle seemed to consider the situation, so Amy continued her sad story.

“It’s too much. Marriage? My parents? A child? Am I not allowed to have a say in any of it?”

Danielle glanced at the pizza in her hand. “Go on to the guest bedroom, and I’ll be right in to talk.”

Grateful, Amy picked up her bags and bypassed the kids and Randy who were watching a baseball game in the living room while they ate their pizzas. She was too upset to say hi to any of them. What she needed was a game plan. She needed a strategy. That was Nathan’s strong point. He planned things out in advance and did everything he could to position himself in the best possible light. Her problem was that she spent so much time reacting to him that she couldn’t think far enough ahead to take him off guard.

She sat on the bed and sorted through the clothes and toiletry items. She figured she had enough to get through a week. If that wasn’t enough time for him to wise up, then she could always buy more.

Danielle entered the room and shut the door. “Okay. Randy will clean up the kids when they’re done eating.” She sat

Ruth Ann Nordin

next to Amy. "Now we can talk without being interrupted. What else happened?"

"Nothing. I left. I hid in the bathroom for awhile, called a cab, did some shopping, and came here."

"I'm having trouble understanding what's so awful about being with a man who's rich, wants to be your husband, and wants a child."

Amy turned to her friend. "That's not what I'm getting at. It's this control issue he has. How would you feel if Randy came home one day and started dictating your life? Let's say he gave you a list of everything you had to do every day. He didn't even ask if the list was convenient or if you could fit it into your busy schedule. He just told you that's what was going to happen and then he broadcasted it to the public that you were going to do those things?"

Danielle nodded. "You're right. I wouldn't like it."

Amy felt some of her fury depart at her friend's sympathetic expression. "I mean, what if I didn't want a child? Sure, he mentioned adopting if I couldn't conceive, but what if I didn't even want to do that? It's like my thoughts and feelings don't even factor into any of these decisions. The only thing he relented on was the job, but everything else?" She threw her hands up in the air and placed them on her knees. "I can't let this go on. If I'm going to be married to him, this has to stop."

Her jaw dropped. "You want to stay married to him?"

Amy shrugged. "He's not a bad guy when he's not controlling things."

"Oh!" Danielle hugged her. "Thank you!"

"For what?"

"I foresee many happy shopping trips in our future!"

Amy groaned, but this time it was in amusement. "You're awful, Danielle."

"I know. What can I say? I love Nathan's money."

What Nathan Wants

“Absolutely awful.”

“But he was good to the kids. They had fun this weekend. A guy who was that good to my kids can’t be all bad.”

“He controlled them too, you know.”

“Don’t worry. Out of the \$30 they earned, Randy and I only let them keep \$1 each.”

“\$30? He’s insane,” Amy muttered. “The kids could have been bought for less than that.”

“Sure. At their age. But I won’t let that hinder his generous nature.”

“You really do have a price tag, don’t you?”

Danielle looked at her as if she was crazy. “You’re just now getting that?”

“It’s a good thing we met before I had more than \$20 to my name.”

“Hey, friendship can’t be bought, okay? No matter what your financial status, you’ll always be my best friend.”

Amy smiled. “You’re mine too.”

“So, what are you doing here? If you’re not leaving him, then I assume you have a good reason for not going home.”

“I need to teach him that he can’t control me. I won’t blindly do whatever he says.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I need to think ahead.” Amy yawned. “But first, I should get a good night’s sleep.”

“It’s not that late out.”

“Maybe not but I didn’t get much sleep for the past couple of nights.”

“The kids have a hard time sleeping?”

“Not exactly.”

Danielle gasped. “Oh my gosh, you had sex with him!”

Ruth Ann Nordin

Amy shushed her. "Can you say that any louder?"

"Sorry. Is it true?"

"No. But we did sleep in the same bed, and I spent a good portion of the night debating whether we should or not."

Danielle looked disappointed. "You know what your problem is?"

"That I'm married to a control freak?"

"No. It's that you think too much. You're always analyzing everything. Sometimes you need to stop thinking and act."

"I need to think of how to get Nathan to start taking my opinion into consideration on these big issues," Amy argued.

"Maybe you'd get somewhere if you gave him some satisfaction."

Amy rolled her eyes.

"It works. Sometimes when I want something, I butter Randy up with some alone time, if you know what I mean."

"You have no scruples."

"Oh come on. You're telling me you never used your feminine wiles to your advantage?"

"I didn't need to. Sean wasn't a control freak."

"Alright. Fine. I got no scruples. But, I did get new flooring in the kitchen."

"You had sex with Randy so you could get new tile?"

"No. I did the striptease and pole dance he's always fantasized about for the new tile. I have sex with him regardless. I'm just saying sometimes you catch more flies with sugar than with vinegar, that's all. It doesn't have to be sex. It could be something else. I like to call it a compromise. I do something I don't really care to do to get something I want."

"Like dressing up like a hooker for the hot tub?"

What Nathan Wants

“Exactly!” Danielle patted her face. “It took awhile and some medicated cream, but the make-up came off. So it was definitely worth it.”

“Maybe.” Amy yawned again.

“I’m going to let you sleep. Things will look better in the morning. Good night.”

After Danielle left, Amy got ready for bed.

When Amy and Danielle got to work the next morning, Danielle shrieked and hurried to her new desk. “Look at this chair! I think it’s real leather.” She ran her hand over it. “It is. And look, we got new computers!”

Amy stood in the room, taking in all the new furnishings. Blinking, she shook her head and walked out of the building. Suite 105. She had the right place. She dumbly walked back in and watched as Danielle squealed in delight over all the new stuff.

“I should check the kitchen!” Danielle nearly bounced all the way to the small room in the back.

As her shock wore off, Amy stepped closer to her desk. Well, her name plate was there. That was good. It meant she was actually still working here. She went around her desk and touched the smooth surface of her desk. No chips or scratches from years of use. The brochures were neatly set in their respective slots along the side of the desk. A new calendar sat on her desk. New pens, new notepads, new... Well, new everything.

Danielle rushed out of the kitchen and grabbed Amy by the shoulders. “We have a frappuccino maker! Whatever you do, stay married to him.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“When did he have time to do this?” Amy asked, bewildered.

“Who knows? Who cares?” Danielle let go of her and sat in her chair. Twirling around, she cheered. “You getting married to the boss was the best thing that’s ever happened to me!”

“He doesn’t do this for any of his other employees.”

“Exactly. That is why it’s a good thing I happen to work with you. Believe me, I’m counting my lucky stars on this one.” Danielle stopped spinning in her chair, looked under the desk, and gasped. “There’s even a heater under here so our feet can be warm in the winter. Oh, he is so thoughtful!”

The door chimed as a man walked in carrying a bouquet of roses and a box of chocolates. “Is there an Amy Rudolph here?”

Danielle jumped out of her chair and patted Amy on the back. “She’s Amy Rudolph!”

“These are for you, ma’am.” The man set the items down, and Amy noted the card that was in the bouquet. “I hope you have a nice day.” He smiled at the two women and left.

“I envy you,” Danielle said as she leaned forward to smell the roses. “Nathan is so wonderful!”

Amy didn’t know if she wanted to read the card or not but reluctantly pulled it out. When she read it, her face grew hot with anger. She tore it up and threw it in the new trash can. Then she threw the roses in and picked up the box of chocolates.

“Wait!” Danielle grabbed her arm. “What is it?”

“All he wrote was that he made reservations at Dante Pizzeria Napoletana’s for noon. He didn’t even ask me if I wanted to go. He didn’t apologize. He didn’t even ask if I wanted to have lunch with him. He just expects me to show

What Nathan Wants

up, like I'm some kind of mindless puppet. I'm not a mindless puppet!" she screamed at the flowers sitting in the trash can. Grunting, she got ready to throw the box of chocolates on top of the flowers.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Danielle snatched the box from her. "No need to take out your frustrations on the chocolate. I'll take these off your hands and eat them for you, okay?"

"I'm...I'm sick of this!" Amy was so upset, she had trouble thinking straight. "Does he honestly think I can be bought?"

Danielle shrugged and sat in her chair. She opened the box and clapped her hands. "He got the expensive kind. I know it's wrong to love another man, but I do so love your husband, Amy."

"I have to put a stop to this. I can't keep letting him do this to me."

Danielle plopped a chocolate square into her mouth and moaned. "Oh my gosh, this is as good as sex. Don't tell Randy I said that."

"I'm putting a stop to this." Amy stormed over to the door and flung it open.

"Hold on!" Danielle quickly swallowed the treat and stood up. "Okay. You're upset. You have every right to be. You're not his employee..." She hesitated. "Well, you are but you're also his wife. So you're his equal. I get that, and I support you. You don't have to jump because he says to, but I just beg you that whatever you do when you see him, please don't end the marriage."

Amy opted not to respond. Instead she gave her friend the eye roll and left the building. The walk down the six blocks to the Rudolph headquarters almost cooled her anger. Almost. But not quite.

Ruth Ann Nordin

She stormed into the tall building, ignoring the woman sitting at the front desk, and went straight for the elevator. She stepped in when the doors opened. Once the elevator went to the top floor, she charged out of it, ready to do battle with anyone who got in her way.

Carmen glanced up from the computer. "Door's unlocked. Go on in." She motioned to Nathan's closed office door.

"Thanks," Amy grumbled and flung the door wide open.

Nathan, who was reading through a document, looked up in surprise.

She slammed the door behind her and stormed over to his desk. Crossing her arms, she narrowed her eyes at him.

His eyes grew wide. "Are you unhappy about something?"

"I'm not going to lunch with you!"

"Why not? I picked the place you like the best."

She resisted the urge to pull her hair out. "You don't get it, do you? You just don't get it."

"Get what?"

She paced in front of his desk. "I'm not someone you can pay off, Nathan! You can't give me gifts, snap your fingers, and expect me to come running. I'm not Danielle's kids. I'm not—" She stopped herself before she said 'employee'. "I'm not something you can control."

Appearing confused, he shook his head. "What are you saying?"

"I'm not someone you can control!"

"So you're upset because I sent you flowers and candy?"

She screamed in frustration.

Tyler came running into the office. "What's wrong? Should I call 9-1-1?"

What Nathan Wants

Amy turned to him and motioned to Nathan who continued to look confused. “Will you explain it to him? Please? He doesn’t get it. No matter how many times or how many ways I tell him to stop telling me what to do, he doesn’t listen!”

Tyler sighed. “Nathan, you’ve got to stop this.”

“Stop what? Buying things for my wife?”

Tyler gave her an apologetic look. “I knew this whole thing was a big mistake when he concocted this crazy scheme. Look, he doesn’t exactly have the best social skills when it comes to women.”

“Hey!” Nathan protested.

Tyler continued, ignoring his friend. “He thought if he interviewed all the single women in this company, the one he picked would be more than happy with being selected to be his wife. I know. Who in their right mind is going to believe that, right? Well, he’s not in his right mind.”

“I sign your paychecks,” Nathan reminded him.

“There’s something you have to understand about him,” Tyler went on, not seeming to care that Nathan was glaring at him. “Or maybe it’s something you should understand about most people who have accumulated a lot of money. A lot of people can be bought, and he’s learned that over the years. So when he wanted a child to leave his things to when he dies, he thought all he had to do was pick the woman and she’d come running.”

Amy rubbed her temples.

“I know,” Tyler assured her. “I told him it wouldn’t work, but he wouldn’t listen to reason.”

She turned to Nathan. “I can’t be bought. I don’t care what other people you’ve run into in your life, but you can’t tell me what to do. I don’t care how much money or things you

Ruth Ann Nordin

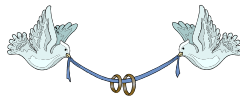
throw at me. I'm not going to do something just because you want it." She waited for a moment. "Do you get it now?"

"So," Nathan began, "you don't like the fact that I sent you flowers and chocolates and made the reservation at the restaurant."

"Ugg!" She threw her hands up in the air. "I give up. I'm going back to work, and I will not be meeting you for lunch!"

Without looking back, she headed out of the office.

Chapter Fifteen



Nathan watched as Amy stormed out of his office and entered the elevator. She glared at him. As the elevator doors closed, he waved to her. He noted her look of indignation before the elevator started going down.

He laughed. “Isn’t she great?”

Tyler shook his head. “You mean, you wanted her to do that?”

“I hoped it would happen, yes.” Nathan returned his gaze to the document.

Tyler walked over to the desk and pulled the document from him. “Do you mind explaining exactly what you are trying to achieve here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“If it was, would I ask the question?”

He considered his friend’s statement. “You have a point.”

“So are you going to humor me and explain or are you just going to sit there with that idiot smile on your face?”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“She can’t be bought, and that means two things: she’s with me because she wants to be and she won’t let me control her.”

“You’re pushing her away from you, Nate.”

“If that was true, she’d be down at the courthouse filing for a divorce. But she’s not. She’s returning to work. Though why she insists on working when she doesn’t have to, I don’t understand.” He shrugged. “That’s a small matter.”

“You’ve thought of everything, haven’t you?” Tyler sat on the edge of his desk and threw the document at him. “And you’re so proud of yourself.”

Nathan took the document and flipped to the page he needed. “No. I’m proud of her.” He glanced up at his friend. “You really believe I don’t understand women at all?”

“I think you owe her an apology for putting her through all this aggravation. She doesn’t deserve it.”

“I’ll make it up to her. Don’t you worry your pretty little head about it.”

Tyler groaned but stood up. “Fine. I’ll still be surprised if she stays with you.”

“Oh, she will.”

Tyler strode out of the room and said something to Carmen who laughed.

Nathan was honestly surprised that Tyler didn’t catch onto things. All Amy needed now was time to cool down. He estimated that she’d be able to have a calm and rational discussion by the afternoon. For the time being, however, he needed to give her space. With a contented smile, he returned his attention to the document.

What Nathan Wants

“Why do we need men again?” Amy asked at the restaurant she and Danielle chose for lunch.

“Because sex is fun?” Danielle ventured as she put down her menu.

Amy shot her an exasperated look.

Danielle shrugged. “I think it’s fun.”

She ran her fingers through her hair and groaned. “I don’t know if I can even get through to him. I mean, there I was telling him over and over what I wanted, and he sat there and smiled at me as if I was telling him I was in love in him. The man is a complete lunatic.”

“Maybe. But he’s a very well-to-do lunatic.”

“Is everything about money for you?”

“Pretty much.”

A smile tugged at Amy’s lips. “At least you’re honest.”

“Yes. That I am.” She bit her lower lip. “Are you going to stay married to him?”

“Worried we’ll lose that frappuccino maker if I don’t?”

“That’s part of it. I’d also miss our shopping sprees. But mostly, I’d like to see you happily married again. I remember how miserable you were when Sean died.”

“Sean was a good guy.”

“He was.”

“And he’s nothing like Nathan. The two couldn’t be more opposite.”

“Like night and day,” Danielle agreed.

The server came up to them and took their order.

Once he left, Danielle continued, “Different can be good, you know.”

“I don’t mind that Nathan is different. I just don’t want him dictating my life. It might not work. I mean, if he keeps this up, then I’ll be miserable. More miserable than I was when Sean died.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“I pray that he comes to his senses. I’d hate to lose him.”

For the first time that day, Amy laughed. “You’re really something.”

“Hey, if you can’t use your friend’s husband, who can you use?”

The server brought them their drinks.

Amy added sugar to her coffee and stirred it in. “What was it like to be pregnant?”

Danielle’s eyes grew wide. “Wow. One minute you want to rip the guy’s heart out and the next you want to get pregnant?”

“I didn’t say I wanted his kid,” she clarified. “I was thinking about yesterday when Elizabeth Jackson explained her labor and birth, but she never got around to saying what it was like to be pregnant.”

“Well,” Danielle began before she took a sip of her smoothie, “I enjoyed being pregnant after the morning sickness phase passed. There are no real benefits to the first trimester, except for being able to see that positive reading on the pregnancy stick. The second trimester is a lot of fun. That’s when you first feel the baby kick and start to show. I know some women complain about the last month, but I still enjoyed it. I know I can’t explain what it’s like to carry another human being and feel him moving around, but it was probably the most amazing thing I will ever experience.”

Amy caught the wistful tone in her friend’s voice and smiled. Being pregnant hadn’t been something that Amy ever thought about because she didn’t think she might have the chance at it. But now it was within her grasp. Though she’d rather die than admit it to Nathan, beneath the embarrassment of the moment in that hospital room, she experienced a sense of longing when she held Elizabeth’s baby in her arms. She

What Nathan Wants

imagined what it might be like if that was her baby she was holding, and even the memory of that sensation made her pulse pick up with excitement.

Curse that Nathan! He knew exactly what he was doing when he had her hold the baby. He figured her maternal instincts would kick in and darned if they hadn't!

"If I could be pregnant for the rest of my life I would," Danielle admitted, "though I'd opt to be five to six months along. It was still easy to move around and I still looked pretty good at that point."

Amy laughed again. "Yeah. I remember you got as big as a whale."

Danielle gagged. "Don't remind me. I had to throw all those maternity clothes away so I didn't have to be haunted by how big I got. I sure don't want to ever go into that section of the store ever again. It was humiliating."

"But it was for a good cause."

"And that was the only thing that got me through the experience."

The server came with their meals so they turned their attention to the food.

Amy glanced up as she and Danielle were ready to close the travel agency for the day. She should have expected Nathan to stop by.

Danielle noticed him too and said, "At least let him speak before you toss him out of here, okay?"

"I promise," Amy replied. It was good for him that she'd had sufficient time to calm down.

"Should I wait for you and see if you need a ride to my house?"

Ruth Ann Nordin

“No. If I need to, I’ll get a cab.”

Danielle nodded and grabbed her purse. “Okay. But I want you to keep one thing in mind while you talk to him.”

“What’s that?”

Danielle motioned to their new computers, desks and chairs. “It’s a much better work environment than before, and he’s letting you keep your job.”

“Only because I insisted I keep working.”

“And he didn’t control you on that, did he? In fact, judging by all the new stuff, he’s supporting it.” She patted Amy’s arm and smiled. “Keep that in mind. Oh, and the frappuccino maker works like a dream!”

Danielle headed out right before Nathan entered.

Amy set her purse back on the desk and folded her arms.

“I would have come with flowers and chocolate, but somehow, that didn’t seem appropriate,” Nathan said as the door closed behind him. “And before you start in on how I didn’t get the message when you came barging into my office earlier today, I want you to know that I did. I’ve been telling you what to do, and that hasn’t been fair to you. I’m sorry. For now on, I will ask you what you want before I make plans, unless I plan to surprise you with a token of my affections. However, should you find such a token offensive, you may throw it in the trash. Deal?”

She wasn’t prepared for this, so she didn’t know what to say.

“Take your time,” he finally replied. “I see business hours are over. Do you want me to drive you home, take you out to eat, or take you to your friend’s?”

“Uh...” She blinked and stared at him. Was this the same person who had looked at her earlier as if he had absolutely no clue as to what was bothering her? Then

What Nathan Wants

something clicked. She set a hand on her hip and studied him. "Have you been testing me?"

"Of course not."

"Yes, you have. All this time, you've been doing things to purposely see how I'd respond."

"I admit I was interested in your reaction, but I wasn't trying to upset you. That would be counterproductive. I want you to be happily married to me and be willing to make a child with me. Those two things won't happen if you feel the need to keep yelling at me."

She sighed. "Why me? There must be plenty of women who'd be willing to marry you and give you a child. So why me?"

He shrugged and sat in her chair. "Why not?"

"I hate it when people answer a question with another question."

"But it fits, doesn't it? Why wouldn't a man want you to be his wife and the mother of his child?"

"No. The question is why would a man who has more money than he knows what to do with want a woman who works at the lower ranks of his company?"

"You think the only woman who'd suit me is one who has a significant amount of money?"

She thought over the question and nodded. "Alright. Yes. I do."

"Money isn't everything. It sure doesn't guarantee a good marriage."

"I'm guessing your ex-wife had money then?"

"She did. I might have had more, but she wasn't hurting." He reached for her hand and gave her a wicked smile. "Come and sit on my lap."

She remained still. "I'm not done talking."

Ruth Ann Nordin

"We can still talk. I thought it'd be more fun to have this deep and meaningful conversation if you sat on my lap." His eyebrow rose in interest. "Hasn't it ever been your fantasy to do something totally improper with your boss in the workplace?"

She gasped. "No!"

"Really? Not even once?"

"No, not even once."

He shook his head. "Hmm... I thought everyone had that fantasy at one time or another."

"Well, they don't. And I guess when you see all your female employees, you have fantasies about them?" she snapped.

"Oh goodness no. The fantasy only works one way. There's no fascination in being with someone beneath you."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"You don't count. You're my wife. I rescued you from this place, but you insist on staying here. I can't help that one." He grinned as he looked her up and down. "Now I have the fantasy. Want to hear it?"

Her face grew warm, and though she was fully dressed in her blue blouse and black pants, she suddenly felt naked. Resisting the urge to cover her private regions, she said, "No. I don't."

"That's a shame. It's a good one." He ran his hand along the top of the desk. "You know, this desk could have some unique uses."

"I've heard enough!"

"Okay. Fantasy's over. Come on." He patted his lap and gave her a pleading look. "I'll keep it PG."

Despite herself, she caved. "Fine. But keep it PG."

"I promise."

What Nathan Wants

She didn't know why she was doing this. It was ridiculous. And yet, she sat down and wrapped one of her arms around his shoulders. Her feet dangled an inch off the floor, and she had the sudden flashback of when she was a little kid sitting on Santa's lap and asking for toys.

Nathan settled one hand on the small of her back and the other on her knee. "This is nice. I like the way you feel."

"PG, Nathan," she warned.

"This is PG. There's nothing morbidly R about the word 'nice'."

"Alright."

He chuckled in amusement. "You are so cute." Lightly stroking her lower back, he continued, "So you want to know why I interviewed for a wife?"

Turning her attention back to the conversation, instead of the surprising thrill of his touch, she nodded. "Yes. Why would you resort to such a thing?"

"I wanted to pick a wife based on logic. I've done the whole 'head over heels' thing, and it didn't work. So I compiled a list of things I valued in a relationship, had Tyler do his best to screen out women who seemed like they made a good match, and then interviewed the ones who sounded the most promising. You see, when it comes to marriage, I've learned it's best to use your head. I don't just want a woman to give me a child. I want a woman who'll make a good companion and make a good mother for the child we'll create together."

She considered his words. "It's an unorthodox way of doing things, but I guess since you've been burned once, you wanted to play it safe."

"Yes. I wanted to make the right choice the second time around."

"Why didn't you tell us you were looking for a wife instead of making us think you were interviewing for a job?"

Ruth Ann Nordin

“And risk the possibility that you’d be lying to get into my bank account?”

“We could have been lying anyway to get a bigger paycheck with the promotion.”

“True,” he agreed. “But the answers you gave would be geared more towards a job venture than a personal one. Based on some of those answers, I got a good feel for each woman’s personality and how she might suit as a spouse and mother. Take that comment you made about not bugging your friends to go through this agency for their traveling purposes if they could get a better deal elsewhere. That told me two things. You do what is in the best interest of those you care about, and you can’t be pressured into going against your values. Of course, since I offer the better employee benefits and you opted to work for me, you also know a good deal when you see it and take advantage of it.”

“I had no idea my answers could be interpreted that way. That’s surprisingly deep.”

He shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a surprisingly deep kind of guy. I’m not all good looks. I do have a brain.”

“No one would ever accuse you of not having a brain.”

“Would they accuse me of not having good looks?” he teased.

“Are you looking for a compliment?”

“It wouldn’t hurt.” His hand moved up her thigh and even higher.

“Nathan,” she warned.

His eyes grew wide in mock innocence. “What?”

“Keep it PG.”

“The butt is PG.”

She groaned, but this time there was a trace of enjoyment in it. “You are definitely a man.”

“You saw me naked and you doubted that?”

What Nathan Wants

“You promise me that you won’t dictate my life?”

“No way. In fact, I want to spend the next few days doing whatever you want. It’s your call, okay?”

“Whatever I want?”

“Anything.”

She couldn’t resist asking, “What if it’s something you don’t like?”

“As long as I’m with you, I can’t imagine it being horrible. If nothing else, the view will certainly be nice.” His gaze met hers and he offered a charming smile. “I’m very attracted to you, you know.”

She blushed, feeling oddly pleased that the way his hands caressed her suggested an attraction of a more sexual nature. She missed knowing a man was physically interested in her. It was also nice to know he wouldn’t just be with her to make that child.

“Alright,” she finally said. “We’ll do a couple of things I want to do.”

“Great!”

“Can I start with where to eat tonight?”

“Sure.”

“Even if it’s an ordinary place like your home? I miss cooking, you know.”

“We’ll stop by the store and pick up whatever you want to make.”

She smiled. “I like eating out, but sometimes I want to eat at home.”

“Would you like some help? As long as it’s easy, I can assist. I could cut vegetables.”

She laughed. “That’s a switch. You working for me for a change.”

“Feel free to boss me around.”

“Don’t think I won’t.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“You know what’s nice about you?” he whispered.

“My butt?” He couldn’t seem to stop rubbing it.

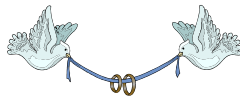
“Well, that too. But I like that you don’t hold a grudge. Sure, you were fighting angry with me earlier today, but now you’re quite amiable.”

“I’m not ready for sex yet,” she warned.

She wanted to make sure he meant it when he said he’d consult her about the big decisions, and she wouldn’t be sure about that until something came up that should be their decision.

“Okay. Let’s get some food and then head home,” she said. Deciding not to be too hard on him, she leaned into him and kissed him.

Chapter Sixteen



Three days later Amy just finished booking a flight and hotel with a customer when she realized that Danielle was snickering at her again. She waited until the woman left before she turned to her friend. “Why do you keep laughing? Is there a joke I don’t know about?”

Leaning back in her chair, Danielle cleared her throat and shrugged as she studied her coffee cup. “You’re restless.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Oh please. You can’t sit still to save your life.”

Amy resisted the urge to get up and check to make sure the poster on the wall was secure. It didn’t need another pin to keep it in place. “I’m doing fine,” she finally lied and glanced at the clock.

One more hour before Nathan would be by to pick her up.

“You’re a horrible liar,” Danielle commented before she took a sip of her frappuccino.

Amy groaned and stood up to shred some paper. “Okay. Maybe I’m a little bit ready for the day to be over.” She

Ruth Ann Nordin

ran a few pages through the machine and tried to ignore Danielle's laughter.

"Closing time will come soon enough." Danielle glanced around the room. "I guess there isn't much to do. Maybe you should go see our boss about..." She scanned the room and snapped her fingers. "I know! Tell him we need a new lamp. That one in the corner isn't enough."

"That's lame."

"Well, you can never have enough light. Ask anyone in the dark."

Amy sighed and shook her head. She could wait. It was only an hour.

"Where are you taking him today?" Danielle asked.

"Fontenelle Forest."

"I was wondering when you'd take him to your favorite spot. That must mean you actually care about him."

Amy shot her friend an amused look. "The fact that I've been going home with him didn't clue you in?"

Danielle shrugged. "I just figured you got tired of me."

"I could never get tired of you."

"Aw. That's the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me. Thank you." Danielle sat up and picked up a pen. "I might as well get the supply list filled out, unless you want to do it?" Danielle gave her a hopeful look.

"Forget it. It's your turn."

Giving a slight pout, Danielle began marking down the items they needed on a list.

Amy finished shredding the paper in time to hear Danielle moan. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"My pen ran out of ink. Can you get me another one?"

Amy went to her desk and pulled a pen from her pen holder.

What Nathan Wants

“No. Not that kind. I want one that says Rudolph Travel Agency on it.”

Amy sighed. “What does it matter what the pen says on it? The important thing is it works.”

“You have no clue, do you? I can’t represent this company if I have an ordinary pen. I need a pen that advertises this place. How else will our customers take us seriously?”

“We don’t have any of those pens.”

“I bet the boss does. He must have a drawer full of these beauties.” She held up the silver pen with the fancy black lettering on it.

“You won’t stop until I go see him, will you?”

“Nope.”

“Fine. I’ll go.”

“No need to thank me,” Danielle called out as Amy went across the room.

Amy opened the door and smiled. “I won’t,” she teased.

Okay. Amy had to admit she did want to go see Nathan, but she wasn’t about to tell Danielle that. It was ridiculous to be experiencing these high school emotions. She was a grown woman, after all, but experience them she did. By the time she reached the main office, her heart was fluttering like crazy.

Cool down, Amy. You’re thirty-four, not seventeen!

She approached the secretary who was on the phone. “Yes, Mr. Bently. I’ll transfer you to him now.” Then she pressed a button on her phone. “Mr. Rudolph, you have Jack Bently on line 1.” She hung up and smiled at Amy. “Nice to see you. From the looks of it, I won’t be writing Nathan’s obituary today.”

“No. Not today,” Amy replied.

“Oh good. That means I get my paycheck.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

Amy laughed at the older woman's joke.

"Go on in."

"Thanks." Amy went over to the office and opened the door.

Nathan glanced up from the appointment calendar on his desk. Smiling, he waved her in, and kept talking on the phone.

She stepped into the office and shut the door. It felt weird to be here and not be upset or thinking she was being interviewed. She stood still for a moment and tried to decide what to do.

"Yes, I'm aware of the engagement you have coming up," Nathan said into the phone as he tapped his pencil on the calendar.

Clasping her hands behind her back, she strolled over to the windows and peered at downtown Omaha. She made out the place where she worked not too far from there. A glance further out showed her the direction of Fontenelle Forest. Judging from the sun and breeze, it'd be a nice day for a walk.

"No, I wasn't aware of that."

Noting the apprehensive tone in her husband's voice, she turned on her heel.

He sighed but patiently listened to the man on the other end. She could tell that Nathan wasn't too happy by the way his eyebrows furrowed.

Her sympathetic gaze traveled from his handsome profile to the familiar image on his computer. Her eyes grew wide and she gave a slight gasp. On his screen saver was a picture of her lounging by the side of his pool in her swimsuit. She was smiling at the camera as if she was more than happy to grace Nathan Rudolph's computer. She looked back at Nathan in disbelief. He was far more cunning than she gave him credit for.

What Nathan Wants

"I'll try to make it." Though Nathan winced, he sounded pleasant. He hung up the phone and rubbed his forehead. He sighed and glanced at her.

Before he could speak, she pointed to the computer. "I see you found a way to get a picture of me in a swimsuit."

A mischievous grin crossed his face. "It's my favorite one."

"It's horrible. I'm barely wearing anything."

"You have a swimsuit on. Too bad it's a one piece. I was hoping you were a bikini kind of girl."

She shook her head. "Does anyone else see that?"

"Of course not. Don't worry. Your lovely body is for my eyes only."

She debated whether or not she wanted that picture on his computer. He was her husband, and even though she wasn't as fully dressed as she preferred, it wasn't as if she was naked. Plenty of women wore less at a pool and thought nothing of it. She sighed. "Okay. Fine. You can keep it up."

"You're definitely nice to look at during the day." He offered a wicked smile and wiggled his eyebrows. "So, did you come to act out a fantasy about visiting your boss during working hours?"

She hid her amusement. "No. I came to get some pens."

He blinked. "Pens?"

"We ran out of the pens with the company logo on them."

"Are you pulling my leg?"

"Nope. Danielle sent me. She needs to fill out the supply sheet, and she can't do that unless she has the right kind of pen."

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Oh, in that case...” He opened one of his drawers and retrieved a couple. “It’s a good thing I keep these on hand at all times.”

She went over to him and took them. “Thank you. She will be most relieved.”

“While you’re here, I need to ask you a question.”

“Alright.”

“Would you sit on my lap while I ask it?”

“Can’t I just sit in that chair?” She pointed to the chair across from the desk.

“What’d be the fun in that? I thought you came so we could make out.”

Feeling playful, she decided to oblige him and straddled him. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she leaned forward and kissed him. His hands settled on her hips as he returned her kiss. Her skin warmed as their kiss deepened. She traced his bottom lip with her tongue and involuntarily groaned when he parted his lips for her. She pressed closer against him until she felt his erection between her legs. Every nerve ending in her body seemed to spark to life.

She hadn’t made love since her last time in bed with Sean, but the memory of how pleasurable sex was came rushing back to her. There was no doubt about it. She couldn’t wait anymore to consummate her marriage to Nathan. She’d held out as long as she could as she waited to see if he would try to dictate that she do something, and though a couple of days probably wasn’t long enough, she knew she wanted to stay married to him so why torture herself by waiting?

His hands traveled up her back and around to her front where he cupped her breasts in his hands. She never dreamed of doing something this risqué while at work, but she had to admit this was the most exciting thing that ever happened to her—sexually speaking. She wondered if they should just strip

What Nathan Wants

down and do it here and now. Her body was primed for action, and judging by the strength of his arousal, he obviously felt the same way.

But then she remembered the secretary on the other side of the door and the vice president in the next office. No. She couldn't do this right here when other people were around. The idea that someone might overhear or, even worse, walk in on them, calmed her passion back to a simmer.

Reluctant, she ended the kiss and tried to catch her breath.

"You feel good, Amy," he whispered, leaning forward and kissing her neck.

She gritted her teeth so she wouldn't give into the urge to move her hips. "At home. Tonight."

At that, he sat back and made eye contact. "You promise?"

"Yes. I can't do it here when there are other people around."

"I suppose I can hold out for that long." He smiled and caressed her breasts. "Mind if I take a peek now?"

She laughed and swatted his hands away. "No way. I don't trust you. As soon as I unbutton my shirt, I have a feeling you'll talk me into keeping things going."

"You're probably right." With a heavy sigh, he brought his hands back to her hips. "I'll keep it PG."

She gave him a quick kiss. "I'll make it worth the wait."

"I don't doubt it."

She smiled at him and asked, "Did you have something you wanted to ask me?"

"Yes, I did. Jack Bently is thinking of offering an exclusive cruise package through my company, and this would attract some of the richer clients in Omaha and probably even out of state, but he wants me to go to an extravagant party

Ruth Ann Nordin

where he plans to announce his new ship line to the world. He wants me there, but I don't want to go alone."

"You're asking me if I want to go?"

"Yes, but you should be aware that my ex-wife will be there as well. She's the model for the magazine ads he plans to run, and I believe she has a part in the commercial."

She cringed. She didn't exactly relish the idea of running into his ex-wife. "How many people will be at this event?"

"Probably a hundred, not including any reporters or the paparazzi. I try to avoid them and the ex whenever I can."

"You're obviously not looking forward to it."

He shrugged. "I'm not. If I was single, I'd go, but if I go, I'll want to bring you."

"You're not going to manipulate things so I have to go," she teased.

"No way. I don't want you leaving me, especially when things are finally getting good." His gaze drifted to her breasts.

"You men are so easy to read." She wiggled on top of him and was rewarded with the feel of his erection. "Okay. I'll do it."

He blinked for a moment and then said, "Oh. You meant the thing at Bently's."

"Yes."

"I thought... Well, I thought you were about to make my desk fantasy come true."

She knew that's what he'd think, which was why she enjoyed the sudden change in topic. Maybe she shouldn't take such a fiendish delight in tormenting him, but it was too tempting to resist. Besides, she would satisfy his needs when they got home. Standing up, she checked the clock. "I have just enough time to get back to work before my boss comes to pick me up."

What Nathan Wants

“He can’t wait.”

She smiled to herself as she went across the room. Opening the door, she glanced over her shoulder and winked. “Just you wait until I get you home.”

Then she turned and almost ran into Tyler who was ready to knock on the door. His eyebrows rose in surprise.

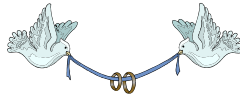
“Thank you for a most entertaining diversion, sweetheart,” Nathan suggestively called out to her.

Heat flooded to her face. “Pens. I came for pens.” With trembling hands, she held the three pens up. “See?”

“She’s right,” Nathan replied. “And I gave her exactly what she wanted.”

Sure her face was as red as a tomato, she hurried to the elevator, not even bothering to make eye contact with the secretary. As soon as the doors opened, she scampered into the elevator and refused to look back.

Chapter Seventeen



“This is a nice place,” Nathan admitted as they strolled hand in hand up the boardwalk at Fontenelle Forest. Trees lined their path, giving them a sense of privacy, and since the place was vacant for the most part, they could hear the sound of birds chirping and squirrels running from tree to tree.

“I love coming here,” Amy replied and glanced up at him. “I can take time to sit and think.”

“What do you usually think about?”

She shrugged. “Most of the time my job.”

“No kidding?”

Grinning, she said, “Nope.”

“I had no idea I occupied so much of your time.”

“It wasn’t you I was thinking of. It was various aspects of work. There is a difference.”

“Really? I can’t think of a single one,” he teased.

She chuckled and led him to one of the benches along the way. He sat next to her and put his arm around her shoulders, noting how wonderfully she fit next to him.

What Nathan Wants

“That’s the Missouri River and further out is downtown Omaha.”

The cut in the trees and dip of the land afforded them a good view of the river, and over the river was another series of trees that tapered off to the tall buildings in the distance. He could even see where he worked. For a moment, he thought that the buildings where people spent so much of their time were just that: buildings. Whether or not they’d still be standing a hundred years from now was anybody’s guess. And though he wouldn’t live forever, that building he worked in—the one that symbolized his life’s work and would likely survive him—didn’t mean much in the whole scheme of things.

It seemed to him that a true legacy a man might leave behind was a child; a piece of himself that would have a heart and a soul. A unique person that nothing could duplicate; someone with a free will who could love and be loved. Maybe someone who might make the world a better place and touch someone’s life.

Maybe his plan had been to have a child, and it was a plan he still wanted. But he had to admit that he didn’t anticipate a woman he could love to go along with it. He figured the most he could hope for was an agreement to have an amiable marriage. Ideally, he hoped for friendship, and it was important that she would be a good woman, someone who would make a good mother. That was why he interviewed for a wife. He could have selected many women, but after what he went through with Veronica, he had to be picky. He didn’t want another woman who would cheat on him. He wanted a woman who could honor her marriage vows, even if she never loved him.

Amy was far better than he’d hoped for.

“This is my favorite spot,” she told him.

Ruth Ann Nordin

He kissed the top of her head and smiled. "I can see why."

"I came here a lot after Sean died," she softly said. "For the longest time, walking along this boardwalk was the only thing that gave me peace. Out there," she motioned to the buildings, "things are busy. It's easy to get caught up in the stress of everyday life. But here, when you can sit down and relax, things are simple. That's why I love coming here. You can get away from it all for awhile and just enjoy the fact that you're still alive."

"You must miss him," he acknowledged.

"I do. A part of me always will. Just like you probably miss your parents?"

"Yes." That was one of the reasons why he liked spending time with her parents. They had welcomed him with open arms and made him feel like a member of their family.

"It took a long time to get over Sean's death," Amy confessed. "I didn't bother dating again because I didn't think anyone would be as good to me." Then she looked at him with a gentle smile. "You may have done things in a way that didn't endear me to you right away, but you're a good guy."

His heart warmed at her words. "To be honest, I didn't think you'd make such a fuss."

She laughed. "I guess that doesn't surprise me by the way you acted. You did look like you were surprised when I came into your office and tore up the marriage license."

"I was. I couldn't imagine why a woman didn't want the money I came with."

"Well, I was never up for sale."

"Sean was a lucky guy."

"I do like being with you, Nathan."

"I like being with you too. And though my methods were unorthodox, I must admit I made an excellent choice."

What Nathan Wants

She rolled her eyes. "Leave it to you to wrap a compliment for me with a compliment for yourself as well."

He chuckled.

"Are you ready to walk again?" she asked.

"Sure." He stood up and took her hand to help her up. "You know, this is kind of fun. We'll have to come back here." He slipped his arms around her waist and kissed her. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me." Then, before she could respond, he kissed her again, this time letting his lips linger on hers.

When they got home, she led him upstairs and into the bedroom. "We need a shower," she told him, casually taking off her clothes.

When it was just the two of them, she had no trouble playing the seductive part, but in front of others, such talk did embarrass her. Fortunately, they were alone, and for the moment, she could put the ordeal at his office behind her.

"Do I get to join you this time?" he asked as he took off his tie.

"You have to. I can't wash my back."

"I have that brush in the shower that can do the job."

She finished unbuttoning her shirt and pretended to think about it. "You're right. I guess I don't need you in there after all." She slipped off the shirt and undid the clasps on her bra.

He pulled her against him. "Now that I think about it, that brush is old. You're better off if I do it."

She grinned at him and took off her bra. "I have a feeling you're right."

Ruth Ann Nordin

He kissed her and she melted in his arms. His hands ran up her bare back as he left a trail of kisses down her neck.

She gave a contented sigh before she worked on his buttons. It'd been a long time since she'd enjoyed the male body, and she had every intention of exploring every inch of her husband. He shrugged off the shirt and then worked on taking off his pants. Taking that as her cue, she also removed hers and put her clothes in the hamper.

"You're beautiful," he softly told her, making no qualms about openly staring at her naked body.

"So are you." She lightly traced the muscles in his chest and let her hand explore lower. "I've always found a man's body to be one of the finest creations ever made."

He smiled. "I could say the same about a woman's body. You complete me, you know. Physically and emotionally." He kissed her again and she leaned into him.

After the kiss ended, she took him by the hand and led him to the shower where she turned the water on and waited for it to warm up before she lathered up the soap. He followed suit and started rubbing the soap onto her back, massaging her muscles as he went along her spine.

"That feels nice," she murmured.

"Makes you wish you had joined me sooner, doesn't it?" he teased.

"I don't know. Something tells me you're worth the wait."

He chuckled.

When he was done, she motioned for him to turn around and washed his back, taking the time to thoroughly study him. She wrapped her arms around him and washed his chest. Eyes closed, she relied on her sense of touch to memorize every contour of his body. Fine hairs sprinkled his chest until her hands found the line of hairs that led to his

What Nathan Wants

erection. Unable to hide her sly grin, she reached lower and cupped him in her hands. He moaned, rewarding her for her efforts to clean all of him.

She had missed this part of the marital relationship. This sense of completion as she appreciated the differences between her and her husband. Maybe they still needed time to adapt and learn about each other, but she sensed that they made a good couple.

This time he was the one who turned around. “Now I get to do your front,” he said in a husky tone that sent shivers of delight up and down her spine.

“Who am I to argue with the boss?” She handed him the soap.

He slowly ran his hands over her skin, starting at the shoulders and working his way to her breasts, spending considerable time brushing her nipples which sent sparks of pleasure through her core. She groaned and leaned her head back. He kissed her neck as his hands slid lower. She parted her legs and allowed him to clean her with the same attention she’d cleaned him just moments before.

His fingers were skilled as they caressed her most sensitive regions, and she gasped when she realized she was going to reach the peak sooner than she expected. She should have expected it to be quick. Years of celibacy had made her extremely sensitive to his attentions.

“Not yet,” she whispered as she pulled his hand away. “I want you inside me when it happens.”

He turned off the water and grabbed the towel from the hook outside the door. He wrapped it around her shoulders and kissed her, allowing his tongue to brush hers. He cupped her face in his hands and deepened the kiss. She let out a low groan and clung to him.

Ruth Ann Nordin

Then he picked her up in his arms and carried her out of the shower and to the bed where he gently placed her. He moved over her and resumed his kisses. His erection pressed lightly against her, tempting her to take him into her body, which was exactly what she did. She gasped as he slid into her. Time had erased the memory of how wonderful it felt to be this intimate with a man.

He murmured her name and reached between them so he could rub her sensitive nub, continuing what he'd begun in the shower. She brought her legs up around his waist and shifted so he was deeper inside her. She was only briefly aware of her moans as she moved her hips, surprised he could retain enough self-control to hold himself still as he caressed her.

He brought his lips close to her ear. "You feel good, honey."

The momentum continued to build, and she lost all concept of time or where they were. The build was slow and purposeful. He took his time going faster and then slowing, until it was time to increase the rhythm of his thumb as it worked in circular motions on her. And when she cried out her need for release, he worked faster so that she found her completion. She grasped his arms and expressed her pleasure.

He slowed the intensity of his movements until the lingering effects of her orgasm subsided. Then he shifted so that he was fully inside her and began his careful thrusts, using the same patient building that he'd employed on her. She savored each motion, her body still clenching tightly around him. Yes, she had missed the physical expression of love and the pleasure it brought. When he found his release, she held onto him and smiled in satisfaction as his seed filled her.

They remained still for a long time, each content to hold the other and listen to each other's heartbeat that seemed to beat in unison.

What Nathan Wants

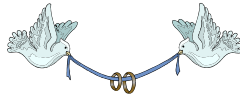
Finally, when the silence was broken, he was the one who said, “You take me to the very heights of heaven. I only have one request.”

“What is that?” she softly asked.

“Don’t let me fall back to Earth.”

She brushed his cheek with her fingers and whispered, “Never.”

Chapter Eighteen



Two weeks later after work, Amy took Danielle to the mall so they could find a suitable dress for the affair due to take place that Friday evening. She tried not to think about it because whenever she did, her stomach went into a series of flip flops. She hated large social functions.

Danielle made a careful study of the dresses on the rack in front of her. “Hmm... I think black would be good. It slims the figure, not that you need it—” she winked—“and it says that you are sophisticated.”

“Whatever color my dress is, I want it to be a dark one.” Amy’s eyes fell on a navy blue gown. “What about this one?”

Danielle rolled her eyes. “You are going to a party, not the convent.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Amy inspected the dress with its long sleeves, long skirt and high neckline.

Her friend pretended to yawn. “Nothing if you want to bore your husband.”

“I’m not trying to turn Nathan on. I’m trying to survive the night without looking like I don’t know what I’m doing.”

What Nathan Wants

With a loud sigh, she returned the dress to the rack in front of her. “Oh, who am I kidding? I’m totally inept at this kind of thing.”

“Which is why you want to direct people to your more desirable assets.” She grinned and picked out a black strapless gown with a cut up to the mid-thigh. “Now this says, ‘Do not pay attention to what I say but how great my legs look.’” She wiggled her eyebrows and giggled.

“No way. I’d look like a high priced whore.”

“Maybe I should buy it. Randy would love it.”

“Might as well.”

Danielle squealed. “I’ll go try it on.”

Amy chuckled before she turned her attention to the next rack. She saw a black dress that she thought might work. It had spaghetti straps, a heart-shaped bust line, a slimming trim along the waist and a skirt that spread out ever so slightly so it wouldn’t hug her legs. She immediately loved it.

Once she tried it on and was happy with it, she joined Danielle in picking out a small black purse and matching shoes.

“Okay, Granny,” Danielle said as they passed the lingerie store. “Now that you’re married again, you’ll need to forgo the dull white underwear.”

“My underwear is comfortable.”

“Your underwear does not match your new dress.”

“Who cares what my underwear looks like? No one’s going to see it.”

Danielle stopped in front of the store and shook her head. “Amy, it’s been much too long, hasn’t it? You’ve forgotten that men are visual. Sure, maybe no one at the party will see it, but your husband can. What you need to do is let him see you put it on. Then it can drive him nuts during the whole night until he can’t take it anymore, throws you over his shoulder, and whisks you off to your home where he makes

Ruth Ann Nordin

mad passionate love to you. If you tease him just right, he won't even make it to the bedroom."

Amy burst out laughing. "That's got to be the most ridiculous scenario I've ever heard."

"Ridiculous or erotic? There is a huge difference." Danielle gave her a pointed look. "No man thinks your inability to hold off until you get to the bedroom is ridiculous, and I seriously doubt any man would protest getting a sneak preview of what'll happen after a night out."

"And you don't write romance novels because...?"

"Don't have the time. I'm too busy with Randy." She winked. Then she sighed. "Alright. I'm also too busy with the kids. You do have to find time to squeeze the fun stuff in once they come along." She took Amy by the arm and practically dragged her into the store. "This will be fun. Trust me."

Though Amy protested—mostly because she was mortified to be caught in a lingerie store, she had to admit it might be fun to show Nathan something more interesting than white bras and panties.

In the end, Danielle talked her into three new sets of underwear and a red teddy. "You need red," Danielle insisted. "Red says passion."

And so Amy opted for the red teddy instead of the light blue one.

"I can't wait to surprise Randy with what I got," Danielle excitedly said as she sorted through her three bags. "He'll love it!"

"I'm sure he will," Amy mused.

Danielle had bought twice as much as Amy and was glowing from the shopping spree. "This is just how I envisioned our days would be like when you married Mr. Rudolph. You and me...shopping and you actually buying something..." She dabbed her eyes. "It warms my heart."

What Nathan Wants

“You’re so full of it.” Amy rolled her eyes and headed down the corridor for the exit.

Danielle followed her. “What? You didn’t like my sentimental moment?”

Amy sighed. “I don’t think you’re ready for the Hallmark Channel yet. You need to be a little more sincere.”

“Okay. So I’m not an actress. We can’t be everything.”

“True.”

“Amy,” Danielle began as they walked out into the warm sunny weather, “if you do get pregnant, are you going to stop working?”

“I don’t know. I hadn’t thought about it.”

“I’d miss you at work, you know? But I’d totally understand. I mean, it’s not like you need to work to pay the bills. My mom watches my kids so I don’t have to pay for daycare. Otherwise, there’s no way I could afford it.”

They reached her car, and they put the bags into the backseat.

When the car started on the first try, Danielle said, “I’m so glad your husband put a new engine in this relic.”

Amy hated to admit it, but she was too. She couldn’t imagine her life without Old Snoopy. She patted the dashboard. “This car and I have been through a lot together. He’s a part of the family.” Amy shifted the car into first gear and pulled forward out of her parking spot. “It was nice of Nathan to take care of this car.”

Danielle smiled at her. “It’s nice to see you in love.”

“I don’t know if it’s love. It seems too soon.”

“Don’t you believe in love at first sight?”

Amy glanced at her with a ‘there’s no such thing’ look. The light turned green and she turned right onto highway 50.

She shook her head. “Such a thing does exist. Your problem is that you’re much too skeptical. I hope your

Ruth Ann Nordin

husband loosens up that quality about you. Lord knows I've been trying since we met four years ago, but I still haven't made much progress."

"Love takes time. You need to go through life's ups and downs together."

"Love is a choice you make. The other stuff happens regardless of it. You determine you'll stick it out. The problem people run into is that they spend their time thinking about themselves instead of their spouse."

Amy's eyes grew wide as she inspected her friend. "That is unusually deep of you."

Danielle shrugged. "I have my moments."

"We're still going to get our hair done tomorrow, right?"

Looking surprised by the sudden change in topic, Danielle nodded. "Sure. It'll be fun."

"I made the appointments for us right after work. I hope Randy's okay with you taking all this time to do this with me."

"He's fine. I promised him season tickets to the Nebraska Husker games. He'll do anything for football. This year Chase is old enough to go with him. Randy already bought him a red sweatshirt."

Amy chuckled. "At least he didn't insist on decorating the nursery in Husker paraphernalia."

"No, but I had to promise we could go with a red theme."

"He's a lost cause."

"Tell me about it," Danielle agreed. "I wish I could go with you tomorrow night. I know how big social events frighten you."

"They don't frighten me. I just never know how to act or what to say in a big group. Besides Nathan, I'm not going to

What Nathan Wants

know anyone else there, and I'm sure that he has to talk to some people. I can't hang onto his arm all evening."

"If it helps, you can watch other people and imagine what they're talking about. It helps speed up the time, and if the conversation is right, it can be quite amusing."

Amy rolled her eyes. "You are so strange."

"Maybe. But I'm never bored!"

"I guess that counts for something."

Once Amy dropped Danielle off, she went home where she found Nathan in the den.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Pretty good." His gaze lowered to the bags in her hands. "Did you get a dress for Friday night?"

"Yes. Danielle wasn't much help though. She wanted me to dress up like a tramp."

"What's wrong with that?"

She noted the amusement in his eyes. Shaking her head, she asked, "Why am I not surprised?"

"I can't help it if you're sexy."

Pleased by his words, she blushed. "Yeah well, I got something special for you."

His eyebrows rose in interest. "You did? What is it?"

"You'll find out tomorrow night."

"Can't you give me a hint?"

"It's something that will make you happy," she replied suggestively.

"Does it have something to do with you and me being alone?"

She shrugged innocently. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"You know that's not an actual answer." Though his tone was scolding, his smile was playful.

Ruth Ann Nordin

"It's the only one I'm giving." Enjoying the light-hearted banter, she decided to add, "Let's just say you'll be thanking Danielle."

He frowned. "That doesn't sound like something conducive to us having sex."

Winking, she said, "You'll like it. I promise." She motioned to her bags. "I better put these away. I don't want you to get any ideas on what the surprise is."

"And if I do some snooping?"

"Then I won't surprise you, so don't you dare!"

"It must be good. Okay. I won't snoop." Before she could head for the bedroom, he asked, "Do you want to eat out or stay here?"

She thought for a moment. "Go out. I'll be back down when I'm ready."

"Sounds good."

Smiling, she turned.

"Oh, Amy?"

She looked back.

"I miss you already."

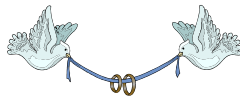
She laughed. "You're silly. I'll be right back."

He chuckled as she headed for the stairs.

As she put her new underwear away, her skin warmed at the thought of making his fantasy come true. She thought it might be a perfect end to the evening once they left Jack Bently's place. And since they'd be downtown anyway, it wouldn't be out of the way to go to his office.

She cleared her throat as she tucked her underwear deep in her drawer in case Nathan decided to do some snooping around. Closing the drawer, she hung the dress up and put the shoes and purse away. Now all she had to do was survive the engagement, and the rest would be downhill.

Chapter Nineteen



Amy took a deep breath as she inspected her reflection in the bedroom mirror. She thought the black dress looked nice enough on her. It hid her not-so-great features while showing off the curve of her breasts and hips. She had to admit the hairstyle Danielle picked out for her was a good one. Black clips swept her hair back from her face and her locks hung in soft waves past her shoulders. Danielle even insisted on applying some make-up that she promised would not cause a rash. Danielle had laughed as she gave Amy the facial, but Amy still cringed at the memory of what she put her friend through. She was lucky that Danielle was a good sport about things.

Nathan entered the bedroom carrying a black velvet box. He looked fabulous in his tuxedo. Her mouth grew dry at the sight of him, and she was blushing like a high school senior ready to go to the prom.

“I thought you might like some accessories, so I took the liberty of doing some shopping.” He held the thin rectangular box out to her.

“You did the shopping?” she asked as she took it.

Ruth Ann Nordin

He shrugged. "Okay. My secretary picked them out, but she's always shown great taste."

She laughed. "It's probably just as well since this is jewelry."

"I don't know the first thing about picking out the right earrings or necklaces for a black tie event."

Maybe she should have minded, but she didn't. He thought of her, and she liked that. When she opened the box, she saw a simple white gold chain with a pearl. The pearl was encased in a white gold heart and two small diamonds were on each side of the heart. The earrings were pearls.

"I love these," she admitted, surprised his secretary picked something out that suited her perfectly.

"Carmen was sure that you'd like them."

"She was right." Amy turned to the dresser and put the box down. She lifted the earrings out and put them in her ears despite her shaky hands.

"Nervous?" he asked.

She glanced at his reflection in the mirror. "Does it show?"

"A little." He took the necklace and unclasped it. "But you're so beautiful, no one will notice."

Her face grew warm from the compliment. She swept her hair up so he could put the necklace on. If she wasn't so uncertain about how to act, she might not be so anxious. She figured she'd be expected to act sophisticated but how, exactly, did sophisticated work? Was it how she walked and laughed or in what she talked about? No. She wouldn't talk. She'd smile and do a lot of nodding. As long as she didn't trip on something, she should be okay. Thankfully, they already ate. She'd hate to try to eat like a rich person, though she guessed she technically did ever since she married Nathan. Still, that was not in front of a group of well-to-do entrepreneurs.

What Nathan Wants

He finished with the necklace and kissed her neck.

Her skin tingled. Turning around so she could face him, she wrapped her arms around his neck and stepped on her tip toes so she could kiss him. His arms slid around her waist and he pulled her closer against him.

She had to admit that being in love was one of the best experiences a person could ever have, and even if she gave Danielle a hard time about it, she agreed that the love she and Nathan were beginning to develop would grow stronger over the years. The 'in love' feeling would not always be there; it would be replaced by something more solid and stable. But there was no reason why she shouldn't get the most out of the honeymoon phase of their marriage. If Sean's death had taught her nothing else, it was that she had to appreciate what she had while she had it.

When the kiss ended, he pulled back from her and smiled with a wicked gleam in his eye. "I really like this necklace." His fingers traced the chain and went over the pearl. "It draws my attention to your finer qualities." His fingers drifted to the beginning of her cleavage where he brushed the top of her breasts.

"Yeah well, wait until you see what's underneath," she teased.

"That's the best part." He bent down and gave her butterfly kisses on her skin where his fingers had just been.

She giggled. "That tickles."

"I've noticed that your skin is pretty sensitive."

"When your touch is that light, it is."

He stood straight and chuckled. "So you like it rough?"

"Nathan, you're impossible." She swatted him playfully on the arm and went to get her purse from the closet.

"Maybe. But I do have one more surprise for you."

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Oh yeah? Is this because you know I have one waiting for you?”

“No, but I admit I’m dismayed you won’t even give me a hint.”

She grabbed her purse off the shelf in the closet and came back out. Shutting the doors, she said, “If I did that, you’d know what it is.”

“Then you won’t be giving the right hint.”

“I’m no good at hints.” She walked over to him and looked expectantly at him. “Okay. What’s your surprise?”

He pulled out a small black box from his breast pocket. “I notice you don’t have a wedding ring.”

She blinked. “I forgot all about that.”

“I didn’t.” He opened the box and showed her the row of diamonds that decorated the top of the gold band. “This is one I picked out myself. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No. In fact, it’s a lovely surprise.” She held out her hand and watched as he slipped it on. “And you knew my ring size because...?”

“I took in one of your other rings to the jeweler.”

She nodded. “Well, I can’t fault that logic.”

He smiled. “You sounded just like your dad when you said that.”

“Did I?”

“He said the same thing a couple of times when your parents were here. It’ll be nice to see them this Christmas.”

“Where you’re sure we’ll be telling them that they can expect a grandchild in the next year?”

“That’s the plan.”

She sighed but shook her head in amusement. “You can’t control that one, no matter how hard you try.”

“The kid will be mine. He’ll know to do his part.”

She rolled her eyes. “We’ll see.”

What Nathan Wants

Still seeming as optimistic as ever that things were bound to go according to his plans, he said, "I went ahead and got myself a ring to match yours, except I decided to leave out the diamonds."

Her eyebrow arched. "Doesn't that mean you got a regular gold band?"

"Yes." He took it out of his pocket and showed it to her. "I wanted to wait until you had yours on before I put mine on."

"Nathan, that is the kind of ring just about every man wears when he gets married."

"Because it works." He put it on and showed it to her. "Simple but the message is still there. It says, 'I'm married to the most wonderful woman in the world.'"

"It talks?"

"I said it sends a message, you silly thing you."

She shrugged but grinned.

He adjusted his gold cufflinks. "Are you ready?"

She took a deep breath and made a mental note not to squeeze the life out of her small purse. "As ready as I'll ever be."

He took her by the hand and led her out of the bedroom. "You'll be fine. The worst that will happen is you'll get bored."

"It's only two hours, right?"

"Yep."

Two hours. She could manage through two hours. It wasn't that long. And yet, it seemed like an unusually long period of time. Maybe if she knew what to expect, it would be easier. A hundred people. She might be able to blend into the background, and avoid the dreaded ex-wife. Though she tried not to think of it, the woman lingered in the back of her mind and worried her. Just what kind of woman was she?

Ruth Ann Nordin

“You okay?” Nathan asked, breaking her out of her thoughts as they walked down the stairs.

“Yeah. I’m okay.”

They reached the bottom step and went to one of his cars. After she got in, he went to his side and started it up. She buckled her seatbelt and reminded herself, once again, that this was only for two hours.

I need to relax. I’m making too big of a deal out of this. She took another deep breath.

“I rarely go to these things,” he assured her as he drove out of the garage. “So you don’t have to be subjected to this often.”

She nodded, thankful that was the case. With his job and his money, who knew how often he had to go out and socialize at fancy events? She knew so little of this new world she’d been thrust into. She much preferred her privacy, though she had to admit that the maid was an unexpected delight. She would be very happy if she never had to clean another toilet for as long as she lived.

The ride through downtown Omaha to the outskirts where Jack Bently lived was a nice one. She enjoyed driving through the city. She especially loved the Christmas season where the city was decorated with a variety of colored lights. Her thoughts turned to what might be in December. Even if she chided Nathan for his insistence that they’d be expecting a child, the hope was lodged deep inside. She hoped this was one of the many areas he turned out to be right.

When Jack Bently’s estate came into view, she straightened in her seat. The place was huge. The three-story white house was set on a well-manicured lawn. She shook her head. No one needed a place this elaborate. She could barely detect any of the city lights from the row of large trees that surrounded the perimeter of his property. For all intents and

What Nathan Wants

purposes, this estate seemed to exist in the middle of nowhere, and the sun was setting in the sky.

Soon it would be dark and an array of lights would undoubtedly light up the place. They were soon behind a short line of cars. Two cars came in behind them, and her stomach tensed. This was it.

Nathan reached over and took her hand in his. "The good news is that we can go outside for some peace and quiet once in a while. It doesn't have to be a constant bombardment of people."

She tried to smile her thanks but was far too nervous to do so.

When he drove up to the entrance, a valet came over to park the car so he and Amy got out. A group of photographers rushed over to them and took their pictures. She instinctively stepped closer to Nathan, immediately sympathizing with rock stars and actors. They had to deal with this all the time. She just had to deal with it tonight. She'd never been more grateful than right now that Nathan wasn't a high profile personality. She'd hate to deal with the mass of cameras every time she went somewhere.

Nathan took her by the arm and led her into the entryway. "I think that's about the only time they'll want your picture," he whispered.

Sure enough, as soon as the other couple got out of the next car in line, the people aimed their cameras in the other couple's direction.

Amy relaxed. But only a little. She turned to the butler who greeted them and directed them to where they could go to sample hors d'oeuvres and wine, see Bently's business plans, or mingle with the other guests. Turning to Nathan, she waited for him to decide.

Ruth Ann Nordin

"I might as well make an appearance with Bently," he told her. "Do you want to come with me or sample some of the food? I hear the shrimp cocktail at his parties is among the best around."

Her stomach twisted into horrible knots. There was no way she could eat, regardless of how exceptional the food was. "I'll go with you."

"I'll see what I can do about getting us out before the two hours are up," he promised.

With a slight nod, she slipped her arm through his, since she noticed that the other women were doing that with their dates, and tried not to trip and fall as she walked in her heels. She felt about as graceful as a one year old learning how to walk. The constant stream of people passing by them made her dizzy, so she kept her gaze toward the entertainment room where another round of photographers and reporters surrounded Jack Bently who looked as if he was thrilled with all the attention.

"I thought he'd be older," she admitted.

"He didn't have to build his wealth from scratch. His parents live in California and are loaded."

She nodded and waited with Nathan on the edge of the group for Jack to notice them. She guessed that Jack Bently was in his late twenties or early thirties. He had dark blond hair, a muscular build, and perfect white teeth. The guy looked like he walked right off the movie set and into real life, and by the way he kept smiling at the cameras, it appeared that he knew it too. Amy already didn't like him. She reminded herself not to make rash judgments. She had to be fair and give him a chance. Pushing aside her initial prejudices, she stepped forward with Nathan when Jack motioned to them.

"This is Nathan Rudolph of the Rudolph Travel Agency. He's the lucky person I've chosen to do my exclusive

What Nathan Wants

cruise line through,” Jack introduced, staring and smiling at the cameras the entire time he spoke.

Lucky indeed. Amy resisted the urge to roll her eyes. *What an ego.*

“Yes, and the agency is excited about the venture,” Nathan replied with ease as he shook Jack’s hand.

Both men glanced at the cameras and paused to smile before they let go of the handshake.

“Who is this lovely lady with you?” Jack asked, turning to her.

Again, a gazillion flashes made Amy blink as people took her picture.

Nathan slipped an arm around her waist. “This is my wife, Amy.”

“Charmed,” Jack pleasantly greeted and kissed her hand.

“Uh...thanks,” she hesitantly replied. Is that what women said in situations like this?

“Of course, I mean that you’re the one who’s charmed.” Jack laughed as if he made the funniest joke anyone had ever heard, and reporters and cameramen laughed along with him.

Amy stared at Jack and tried to determine just how much he loved himself.

Turning back to the cameras, Jack said, “I only select the best. My cruise line will feature the grandest ship anyone’s ever seen. It will give everyone with enough cash the chance to be ‘king for a day’, so to speak. Why, I have top name actors already signing up to go on it.”

“Can you give us their names?” a reporter asked.

“Well, to name a few, Angelina Jolie and Robin Williams say they can’t wait. Why, just the other day, Angelina called to ask if I have suitable accommodations for her children. She then went on to tell me about how one of her kids...”

Ruth Ann Nordin

As he rambled on, Amy sighed and scanned the room. Posters for his ship lined the walls, and she noticed the words that were across the top of the posters read *An Experience of a Lifetime*. Below the words was a picture of the cruise ship, which looked pretty much like any other cruise ship she'd seen. She didn't know what was so special about it. Maybe it was the overinflated prices he planned to attach to it that made it attractive. Some people assumed that expensive meant better quality. This, of course, wasn't necessarily the case, but she'd witnessed it enough. The couple featured on the poster was a stunningly attractive man and woman. They looked the part of what type of people Jack Bently was hoping to attract.

She turned her attention back to Jack.

Someone from the audience asked Nathan if Jack would work exclusively with the Rudolph Travel Agency for an indefinite period of time.

"The contract currently states one year," Nathan replied, his arm still comfortingly around Amy's waist. "After that time, we will discuss how to proceed with the upcoming year."

Jack laughed and, once again, shot a big smile to the cameras. "Yes. Nathan twisted my arm to get the full year out of me. I originally thought it'd be for the summer, but he reminded me that people can cruise in the winters too, especially since they'll be departing from California."

Again, he laughed and those around him laughed as well.

Amy sighed in boredom. This whole conversation was as exciting as an infomercial.

"I'm sure you're glad you came," Jack told Nathan and Amy. "I have other people to talk to before the night is over. A pleasure." He kissed Amy's hand again.

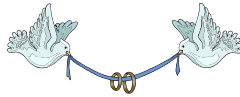
What Nathan Wants

“Let me guess,” she said before he could say it. “The pleasure is all mine.”

“You’re quick to catch on.” He winked at her. “I like that.”

She forced a smile and gladly left the crowded room with her husband. The worst was over. Only another hour and some odd minutes to go.

Chapter Twenty



Amy breathed a sigh of relief when Nathan escorted her onto the patio. The place led to a pool large enough it put the one Nathan had to shame. It also had a hot tub to the side of it. Though no one used either, the entire space was decked out in lights and soothing symphony music played through the speakers set out along different places along the patio. There was only one other couple lounging by one of the patio tables. They laughed and talked as they sipped wine.

“Are you okay?” Nathan asked.

“Why? Do I look like I’m not?” she wondered, bringing her hands to her cheeks to find out if her skin was unusually warm or cool.

“You look overwhelmed,” he replied slowly, as if he wasn’t sure if she would like the analysis.

“Oh.” She sighed and headed for a chair. “Then I do a lousy job of playing the part.”

He chuckled and followed her. “I didn’t realize there was a ‘part’.”

What Nathan Wants

She sat down and inhaled the warm night air, grateful for the breeze that cooled things down enough to make the evening comfortable. "Yes. There is a part. I'm supposed to be a rich woman who can handle social events like this with great calm and dignity."

"You're doing fine." He pulled a chair closer to hers and sat down. He took her hand in his and kissed it. "I'm proud to have you with me."

She shuddered. "If you must kiss my hand, please kiss my palm. I know you have to do business with Jack Bently, but he gives me the creeps and he kissed the top of my hand."

He glanced at her. "Bently creeped you out?"

"There's something about him I don't like. I don't know what it is."

"It's probably that he thinks he's God's gift to women. I wouldn't give him anymore thought."

"I guess you're right," she murmured, noting that he turned her hand over and brushed his lips along her palm. It might not have been an intimate part of her body, but it created a spark through her. Then when he playfully planted kisses up her arm, she squealed. "That tickles!"

With a wry grin, he straightened, and still holding her hand, he took out the handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped the top of her hand. "There. All traces of him are now gone. Feel better?"

"Much." She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

He tucked the handkerchief back into his pocket. "Would you like something to drink? A little wine might help settle your nerves."

She took a deep breath. "It's not a bad idea."

"I'll go and get a glass for you. Would you like anything to eat?"

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Maybe if there’s something with chocolate in it.” Hey, who was she to deny a chance to eat chocolate?

His smile widened. “You got it. I’ll be right back.”

She turned her attention to the rest of her surroundings. Beyond the large patio and pool was an expanse of green lawn that led to a gazebo and what looked like a golf course. She wondered how much of this Jack really used. Nathan only used his tennis courts and pool if he had company. She gathered that it was a good way to keep guests entertained. Regardless, luxury items served little purpose, even if they were nice to have around.

The breeze blew again so she closed her eyes, enjoying the quiet—away from the majority of people who stayed inside the house. The couple stayed on the other side of the patio, still enraptured in their conversation, which she couldn’t hear from where she sat. All she heard was the woman’s laughter above the music.

“So you’re the new Mrs. Nathaniel Rudolph.”

Her eyes flew open and she looked up at the dark haired, slender woman whose black dress clung to every curve of her body and whose high heeled shoes showed off her long legs.

“You’re the model in the poster.” Amy said it because it was the first thing that came to mind, not because it was the smartest thing to say.

“Yes. The ex-Mrs. Nathaniel Rudolph.” The woman placed her glass of wine on the table and sat next to her.

Amy tried not to openly stare at Veronica, but the woman looked better in person than on the poster. And Amy thought she looked gorgeous in that poster. Veronica’s dark brown hair was swept back and held in place with what looked like diamond hairpins. There wasn’t a blemish on her face, or maybe the make-up hid any that might be there.

What Nathan Wants

Veronica let out a happy sigh and said, “I talked to Nate a couple weeks ago, and he never mentioned you. That’s downright rude of him. How else could I reveal his dirty little secrets to you?” She laughed, a sound that struck Amy as gentle wind chimes. “I jest, of course, darling.” She set her hand on Amy’s arm and removed it within the same moment.

Amy shifted uncomfortably in her chair. For all outward appearances, the woman seemed friendly, but this was Nathan’s ex-wife. Claspings her hands in her lap, Amy cleared her throat, and not knowing what else to say, she blurted out, “It’s nice you have a sense of humor about it.”

“What’s not to have a sense of humor about? We’re both women. He’s a man. I know whose side to be on.” Veronica winked at her and picked up her glass. “How is married life treating you? I hope Nate’s not being too much of a brute.”

“How do you mean?”

“Another joke.” She giggled and sipped her wine. “I fear you take me too seriously.” Setting the glass back down, she added, “I mean no harm, I assure you.”

“Oh. I’m sorry I misunderstood.” Amy wished the woman would get up and leave. “It’s been a long day, what with work and getting my hair done and all.”

She gasped and placed a hand over her heart. “You work?”

“Yes.”

“What is it you do? You can’t be a model or actress. You aren’t proportioned right.”

Amy frowned as her stomach tightened up into knots. “I’m a travel agent.”

Veronica’s eyes grew wide. “You mean to tell me that Nate’s making you work in his company? As a low level employee? Why, my dear, you are at the bottom of the chain.

Ruth Ann Nordin

You have every right to quit and demand better treatment than that. I'm appalled Nate would make you stoop so low."

Amy's cheeks grew warm. "He didn't. I wanted to keep the job."

Veronica stared at her as if trying to determine whether or not Amy was kidding. When she realized Amy wasn't, she turned to her, concern written across her face, and said, "Why would you degrade yourself this way?"

"I'm not degrading myself."

"But you're rich now. You can do much better than signing up people for vacation packages. You have enough money to buy your own company and run the show or spend all your time taking those vacations."

"I like my job." Even as Amy said it, her voice sounded weak.

Veronica clucked her tongue. "Nate should have explained how things work. You are no longer one of them. You are now one of us. And we do not subject ourselves to menial tasks. We're much better than that."

Amy was so overwhelmed by the woman's vehemence that she had no idea how to respond.

She placed a caring hand on Amy's arm. "Nate is doing wrong by you. He should have cleared your desks and gotten you out of that place. Why, think of how it must look for him to let his wife work *for* him! I was jesting earlier when I said he was being a brute, but now that I hear this, it's no longer in good humor. This is a serious matter. You need to demand your rights. He can't go on treating you like this."

Amy struggled to find the right words, but her head was a mass of replies and she didn't know which one to go with. Did she tell Veronica to back off and mind her own business or explain the situation? And then she couldn't fathom why she

What Nathan Wants

had to tell Veronica anything at all. She glanced around them. Didn't Veronica have anywhere else to go?

"I'll talk to him, if you want," Veronica offered.

"No!" Amy gathered her courage and straightened up in her seat. "I'm happy with things the way they are. Nathan and I have come to an agreement that makes us happy." *Why am I explaining this to her? It's none of her business!*

"You can't be serious," Veronica replied. "You can't possibly be happy."

"Well...I am." She crossed her arms and jutted her chin out.

"You poor, poor thing. Whatever was Nate thinking when he married you?" She grabbed her glass of wine and took another sip. "I suppose he must be getting desperate to have that kid he's always wanted. When I was married to him, it was 'let's try for a baby, let's try for a baby'. Give me a break. Do you know what pregnancy would do to my figure?" She motioned to her flat stomach. "Anyway, I started telling him I was trying, but I snuck in the pill the whole time."

"There's nothing wrong with a man wanting a baby," Amy softly said.

Veronica smiled in sympathy. "Oh, that's why he married you. You agreed to have his child for him." She patted her hand. "That explains everything, though he could still let you quit working so you can at least enjoy yourself while you destroy your figure. I mean, you're giving up a lot. Not only will you have to give birth to the thing, but then you'll have to find a nanny to care for it and the right schools to educate it. You'll have to subject yourself to countless Mommy and Me parties with other notable mothers and their snot-nosed kids." She shuddered. "That is definitely not a life I envy. More power to you."

Ruth Ann Nordin

Amy's skin bristled at the condescending tone in the woman's voice.

Veronica's gaze lifted over Amy's head, and she called out, "Darling! Where have you been? I've looked everywhere for you."

The man with salt and pepper hair smiled broadly at Veronica. "I had to take care of a contact for you. The magazine agreed to feature you in its December issue."

Veronica squealed with delight and clapped her hands. "How splendid!" She gave Amy a meaningful look. "You see what I mean? It's hard to compete in this business unless you're perfect." She motioned to the man. "Amy, this is my fiancé, Patrick Barr. Patrick, this is Amy Rudolph."

"Rudolph? As in Rudolph Travel Agency?" Patrick asked.

"The same," Veronica said, obviously amused. "Apparently, Nate's taken it upon himself to remarry."

"Ahh..." Patrick nodded and smiled at Amy. "Then congratulations are in order. Precious and I will marry in one week."

Precious? Amy resisted the urge to show any reaction to what seemed like a fake term of endearment. She guessed that was what rich men called their rich soon-to-be wives.

Veronica held out her left hand to show Amy the engagement ring on her finger. "Patty spoils me so. Why, I can hardly hold my hand up with a diamond this big." Then she let out another one of her wind chimed laughs.

"Nothing's too good for you," Patrick responded.

Amy felt like she was going to puke. The whole thing struck her as amazingly superficial.

"Oh, you and Nate must come to the ceremony," Veronica insisted. "It's going to be the wedding of the decade. I'll have my assistant send an invite."

What Nathan Wants

Amy tried to smile but feared she only winced instead. Attending their wedding was the last thing she wanted to do, and she was sure it wasn't something Nathan wanted to do either.

"It was very nice to meet you," Patrick told Amy, extending his hand to her.

Amy reluctantly took it and shook it. "Nice meeting you too."

Amy said that because it was one of those things she was expected to say, and she had no doubt they were being polite to her and giving the invitation because it was something they were expected to do.

Veronica stood up. "Good luck on having Nate's kid. Of course, you could opt for the surrogate mother thing. Just an idea."

Amy dumbly watched Veronica as she gracefully walked back into the house with her fiancé who slipped his arm around her waist. They stopped so Veronica could whisper to a woman who glanced at Amy and laughed. Amy's entire body grew hot with anger. Who did Veronica think she was to make fun of her or to mock Nathan's desire to have a child? Women weren't the only ones who wanted children. Men did too.

Sean had talked about having a family one day, and Amy remembered picking out possible names and musing about whether they'd have girls or boys or both. Then she got the news of his death and all those dreams came to an abrupt end. She forced them aside, thinking that she wouldn't bother marrying again. But she was married again, and those long-forgotten dreams had found their way back into her heart.

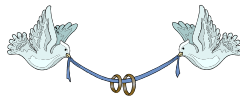
She turned away from the patio doors, not wishing to see what else, if anything, Veronica would do. Who cared what Veronica thought? She didn't run Amy's life. And Veronica's

Ruth Ann Nordin

opinion was just that: Veronica's opinion. It didn't matter. Veronica didn't have an impact on her life.

Amy worked through the thoughts, but even as she tried to assure herself that it didn't matter, her mind raced with all the witty comebacks she could have told the snob.

Chapter Twenty-One



Amy waited for a couple of minutes when she heard familiar footsteps. She glanced over her shoulder and relaxed. It was Nathan with a glass of wine in one hand and something behind his back.

He handed her the glass of wine and sat next to her. “Feeling better yet?”

Hardly. But she decided not to tell him about Veronica and how much the conversation with the woman bothered her. Veronica was better off where she belonged: in the past. She could only imagine what he’d been through with her.

“I have something you’ll like,” he said with a knowing gleam in his eyes.

“What?” She tried to sneak a peek behind his back but he expertly dodged her attempts. “Are you going to show me or do I have to guess?”

“I’ll show you.” He produced a piece of fudge that was on a napkin.

“Chocolate!” Her mood immediately picked up. “It looks great.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

"It is. I snuck in a piece while I was in the house talking to Ryan Jackson about the commercial for Bently's cruise line."

"Was there a problem with it?"

"Not really. There was a debate over which one of the women would be in the shot by the pool."

"Is it that big of a deal?" she asked in surprise.

"Believe it or not, it is. Ryan says it's a real headache when women argue over which part they want."

"Sounds petty to me."

"It is, but it's how things can be."

"She sipped the wine before she sampled the fudge. "Wow. This is good."

He grinned. "I told you."

"So, did the women resolve the dispute?" she asked.

"No. Jack Bently has to make the final call."

She bit off another piece of fudge and rolled her eyes. "That must give him a god complex."

He laughed and shook his head. "You don't care for rich men, do you?"

"I don't care for men with over-inflated egos." She glanced at him. "I thought you were that way at first."

"And now?"

She shrugged. "Not so much anymore."

"Not so much?"

She giggled and finished her treat. "But you are attractive, generous to a fault, and intelligent."

"It's nice to know I have some redeeming qualities."

"It doesn't hurt that you're a good lover," she slyly added.

He leaned forward and gave her a wicked grin. "You better watch out. My ego may get bigger."

Unable to resist the urge, she gave him a light kiss on the lips. "I guess I'm asking for it then."

What Nathan Wants

He brushed the hair off her shoulder and kissed her neck. "You know I love you, don't you?"

Her gaze met his and she smiled. "I do now." With a slight flush that could have been from his declaration or the wine, she added, "I love you too." She reached out and took his hand. "I want a child, Nathan. I'd like to be able to fly to my parents for Christmas and tell them I'm pregnant."

He squeezed her hand. "It's not just a child I want. I also want a lover and a friend."

"Hmm... You got the lover. Wherever will you find a friend?" she mused.

He chuckled, and all lingering memories of Veronica departed.

She finished her glass of wine and asked, "What else do you have to do here?"

"I have to sign a couple of documents when Jack Bently is ready. He's currently indisposed."

"Indisposed? When he has a bunch of people flocking to hear his every word?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe he had to visit the little men's room."

"Speaking of which..." She stood up and grabbed her purse from the table. "I should go to the bathroom. Do you know where it is?"

He got to his feet and shrugged. "Somewhere in the house. I'm sure there are half a dozen."

"Oh good. I was worried I'd have to visit an outhouse," she joked.

Looking amused, he led her into the house which was swarming with people. She stayed close by his side and gave her wine glass to one of the servers who asked if she needed anything.

"Which way to the bathroom?" she asked the woman.

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Down that hall,” the server said. “It’ll be the second door on your left.”

“Thank you.” She turned to Nathan. “I’ll only be a minute.”

“I’ll wait here,” he told her and leaned against the wall.

She made her way past a good twenty people and breathed a sigh of relief as she made her way down the vacant corridor. The second door on her left was open. She slipped into the empty bathroom and did her business before she did a quick check on the pink panties with black lace tracing it. Her strapless bra matched.

Despite her reluctance to buy the items, she was glad Danielle talked her into it. Now to come up with the excuse to go to his office. She’d been debating that one and still couldn’t come up with a good one. Worse came to worse, she could just tell him that she was going to fulfill his fantasy, though the element of surprise was something she rather enjoyed. That settled it. She would think of something, even if it was as lame as asking for more pens.

She checked her hair and make-up. Satisfied, she picked up her purse from the counter and opened the bathroom door in time to see the door across from her open.

Jack Bently buttoned the top button on his shirt and turned.

Amy’s gaze drifted further into the bedroom where Veronica was slipping back into her dress. Then Amy looked back at him, too stunned to say anything.

“Angie, is it?” Jack asked as if nothing was wrong. He shut the door and waited for Amy to speak.

Clearing her throat, Amy said, “Amy.”

“Oh right. Rudolph’s new wife.” He adjusted the shirt collar and pointed to the bathroom. “Are you done?”

She blinked and quickly moved out of his way. “Yes.”

What Nathan Wants

“Thanks.” He went right by her and into the bathroom where he locked the door.

Shock held her in place for another three seconds before she bolted down the hallway. She’d like to be naive enough to think nothing happened, but she was old enough to put two and two together. She shouldn’t have been surprised. If Veronica cheated on Nathan, it’d make sense that she’d cheat on her fiancé.

She reached the end of the corridor and entered the foyer where she caught sight of Patrick Barr talking and laughing with one of the other guests. She glanced over at Nathan and debated in which order to do what she felt was right. If her fiancé was cheating on her, she’d want to know, and she couldn’t leave without warning Patrick. If he married Veronica and she cheated on him, then his hurt would be on Amy’s conscience.

Making her decision, she strode over to Nathan who frowned as she approached. “Is something wrong?”

She glanced at the clusters of people around them. It wasn’t the place to go into details. “I have to talk to someone really quick.”

“Is it serious?”

She began to nod when Jack Bently came over to them and patted Nathan on the back.

“You ready to sign those papers?” Jack asked, not even bothering to look in her direction.

“Yes,” Nathan replied.

“Good. I’ll get the reporters rounded up, and we’ll make it official.” Jack walked by her as if he didn’t see her and called out to several people on his way to the room where ads for his cruise line decorated the walls.

She turned her attention back to Nathan.

Ruth Ann Nordin

“As soon as I sign those papers, we’ll go,” he promised. “You want to come and watch?”

“Uh...” She shifted from one foot to the other, unsure of how to proceed. “I don’t know.”

“You need a minute to think about it?”

“No. It’s...” She lowered her voice. “I saw him coming out of the bedroom, and it was obvious that he and your ex-wife were...” She paused and shot him a meaningful look. “You know.”

Nathan gave a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

She pulled him closer to the wall where they had a small amount of privacy. “I don’t like him, Nathan.”

He studied her expression and waited for a few seconds before he spoke. “You think his personal life will lapse over into his public one?”

“How can you trust someone who can’t keep his hands off another man’s fiancé?”

He took a moment to consider her words and nodded. “Let’s go home.”

She blinked in surprise. “Really?”

His lips turned up into a smile. “Is that a surprise?”

“Well...yes.”

“You have a good point. The way a man conducts himself when people aren’t looking will probably be similar to how he treats people when they are. People can’t hide who they are forever.” He squeezed her hand. “I’ll have the valet pull the car around, but I owe it to Ryan Jackson to tell him Bently’s part in the commercial won’t be necessary. Do you mind if I go find him?”

“No. Of course not.” She was still stunned that he was basing an important decision on what she thought.

What Nathan Wants

Stunned...but also very pleased. Her thoughts and feelings really did matter to him.

As he disappeared into the crowd, she scanned the room and found Patrick Barr still chatting with the other man. Bracing herself for being the bearer of bad news, she made her way over to them, just in time for the man to head off to talk to someone else.

Taking a deep breath, she asked, "May I talk to you?"

Patrick turned his gaze to her and smiled. "Of course, Amy. What's on your mind?"

She glanced around the room to make sure no one was paying attention to them. Clutching her purse, she got ready for what she was sure to be either disbelief or anger. "I hate to do this," she softly said, "but I feel it necessary to tell you that..." She took a deep breath. "I feel terrible about this, but if it was me, I'd want to know."

"Know what?" His gentle voice and kind smile did little to ease her discomfort.

She gulped and quietly blurted out, "I saw Jack Bently and Veronica in the same bedroom, and she was undressed."

There. She said it. She winced and got ready for his denial or rage.

He chuckled. "Is that all?"

"Is that all?" she dumbly repeated.

"It's nothing."

"It's nothing?"

Waving his hand, he explained, "Veronica and I have an agreement."

"An agreement?" She suddenly realized she was beginning to sound like a parrot. Shaking her head, she said, "I don't understand."

Just then, Veronica came over to them and kissed him on the cheek. "Darling, how I've missed you."

Ruth Ann Nordin

He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her closer to him. "Did you have fun in my absence?"

"I certainly did." She laughed and patted his chest. "And the best part is I get to be the woman by the pool in the commercial."

"Good." Patrick turned to Amy. "It was nice seeing you again, Amy."

Amy was sure her jaw hung to the floor as the two went off to mingle with another couple. She struggled to make sense of what she'd witnessed. Maybe she shouldn't be surprised that Veronica had sex with Jack Bently so she could secure a spot in a commercial. Only, there wouldn't be a commercial now that Nathan was telling Ryan that he wouldn't be signing the papers with Jack Bently.

She waited for Nathan to come to her, and when he did, he asked, "Are you ready?"

Nodding, she accompanied him toward the front entrance.

A man ran over to them. "Mr. Rudolph, Mr. Bently is waiting for you in that room." He pointed behind them.

Nathan shook his head. "Give him my apologies, but I've decided someone else may have the benefit of his cruise line."

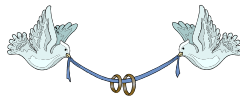
"But...sir...?"

"If he wishes for me to go into detail, I'll do that when I'm at work on Monday. This is not the place or the time." Nathan's firm tone left no room for argument.

"Yes, Mr. Rudolph," the man finally answered and headed back for the room where Jack would be expecting Nathan.

Without a look back, Nathan took her by the hand and led her out the front door, and she couldn't think of a time when she admired a man more.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Once Jack Bently's property disappeared in the rearview mirror, Amy turned to her husband and smiled. "I love you, Nathan."

He glanced at her and returned her smile. "I think you've said that already tonight."

She shrugged and took his hand in hers. "Maybe it bears repeating."

"I'd never get tired of hearing it." He squeezed her hand. "I love you too."

She enjoyed the silence as the lights of downtown Omaha grew closer. Before they were due to take the exit off of I-80 that would take them home, she asked, "Nathan, can I get more pens?"

His eyebrows furrowed and he laughed. "What?"

"Pens. You know. Like the kind you have in your desk? I need a pen." Even as she said it, she knew how lame it sounded, but given the stuff that had just transpired that evening, it was the best she could come up with. "So, can I please have a pen?"

Ruth Ann Nordin

He shook his head and bypassed the exit he needed to go home. "Alright, but that is a strange request."

"I feel like writing a letter to my parents, and I want to use the best pen in Omaha."

He gave her a 'you're odd' look, but he took the exit that led to his work. "I guess I can do that."

She wondered if he bought the flimsy excuse or if he saw right through it. He seemed as if he had no clue as to what she had in mind, but maybe he was playing along to amuse her. She decided not to dwell on it. He'd just paid her a high compliment that night by taking her concerns into consideration, and if he was merely humoring her now, then that was fine.

He pulled into the parking garage and up to his spot. After he opened the door for her, he said, "I do have a couple of those pens at home."

"You do? Why didn't say something before?"

Grinning, he held his hand out to her. "Just a hunch it was best to keep quiet."

She took his hand and got out of the car. "You know."

"Would it ruin the mood if I said I hoped?"

"No, though I guess that I don't do anything that surprises you."

"Maybe."

He was playing with her, she realized as he shut the door and locked the car, but she didn't mind the game.

Holding the keys in his hand, he asked, "Ready to get those pens?"

The sexy tone in his voice made her blush. "Yes."

When they got into his office, he shut the door and asked, "Do you want me to turn on the lights?"

"How can you expect me to find pens in the dark?"

What Nathan Wants

“Good point.” He flicked the switch on and threw his keys on his desk.

After he drew his blinds, she opened the drawer that contained the pens and pulled one out. “Okay. I got it. I’m ready to go now.”

He glanced her way.

“What did you think I came up here for?”

“You better be kidding.”

“Why would I kid about something as serious as a pen? Writing a letter is important.” She got a nice sense of satisfaction in watching his expression go from a knowing look to disappointment. “You coming?” She turned off the lights. “Oh wait. I dropped it. Can you get me another one?”

“A pen?” he asked, sounding unsure.

She quickly unzipped the back of her dress. “Yes. Turn on that light on your desk and find one for me.”

“Why don’t you turn on the lights? You’re right by the light switch.”

She groaned and let the dress fall softly to her feet. “Must you argue with a woman’s logic?” Then she slipped off her thigh high pantyhose.

He shuffled across the room and turned on the lamp in time to find her standing in front of his desk in nothing but her pink bra and panties with the black lacy trim.

“Sit down,” she ordered.

His eyes grew wide but a smile crossed his face. “I thought you wanted a pen.”

“I do. But I’ll get it later.” She set her hands on her hips and gave him a determined look. “Are you going to listen to me or not?”

“Who am I to argue with the boss?” He sat in his chair.

She moved the lamp over to the edge of the desk. The soft hue lighting it produced in the room would embolden her

Ruth Ann Nordin

enough to act the part she wanted to play out for his fantasy because there was no way she'd be able to do this with the overhead lights shining down on her. Her skin was already warm from the weight of his stare. She went over to him, not feeling as graceful as she imagined she'd be when she visualized how this would play out, and she thought it was way too quiet in the room.

"Do you have a radio or something to play some music?" she asked.

His gaze rose from her breasts to her face. "What?"

Well, at least she knew he didn't pick up on her awkwardness. That made her task easier. "Music. You know. To set the mood."

"Sure." He swirled in his chair as if he couldn't do her bidding fast enough and went to the shelf lining his wall. He turned on his radio and adjusted the channel until it settled on an instrumental station. Then he promptly returned to the chair and faced her, an expectant smile on his face. "Is there anything else I can do to inspire the mood?"

"Not yet." She undid the buttons on the jacket of his tux. Noting how dry her lips were, she licked them. "I might need some help with this." She leaned forward and tried to remove the cummerbund from around his waist.

Instead of helping her, he ran his hands up her arms.

She glanced up at him and chuckled when she realized his gaze was focused on the generous amount of cleavage her position allowed. Her uncertainty began to ease. She could probably fall flat on her face, and he wouldn't notice as long as she was showing off a part of her body. Slightly amused, she succeeded in taking off the cummerbund and tossed it to the floor.

What Nathan Wants

She knelt in front of him and unfastened his pants. When he sharply inhaled, she glanced up at him. “If it’s going to be your fantasy, it might as well be a good one.”

He leaned back and helped her with his boxers so that she could explore him with her tongue and mouth. She took her time, alternating her technique and pacing, taking cues from his groans and shifting in the chair to gauge when she should do what.

When she was satisfied with her pursuit of him, she undid the shirt studs. He straightened in his chair to help her remove his shirt and jacket before he took off his undershirt. Then he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. His tongue traced her lower lip until she opened her mouth and brushed her tongue with his. He groaned and deepened the kiss as his hands slid to her bra and brushed her breasts through the soft fabric.

She undid her bra and flung it aside so he could touch her naked flesh. Her nipples responded to his light teasing, and she let out a contented sigh when his mouth left hers so he could kiss her neck. She closed her eyes and took in the sensations his hands were capable of producing. Her breasts had always been sensitive to touch, and thrills raced through her body and settled in her core.

“Get on my lap,” he whispered in her ear.

Highly aroused, she obeyed, forgetting that she was supposed to be the one giving the orders. Slipping out of her panties, she climbed on top of him. She straddled him, thinking that he was going to enter her right then and there, but he lifted her up and settled her onto his desk. Wrapping her legs around his waist, he entered her and she gasped in delight, her body tingling with unbridled excitement. This fantasy was a lot more electrifying than she thought it’d be.

Ruth Ann Nordin

He leaned over her and enveloped her in his embrace, her breasts crushed against his chest as he passionately kissed her. Her hands ran up and down his back and her hips rocked leisurely in rhythm with his, in no hurry to finish what she'd started. In time his movements became more forceful, his actions more demanding. She reached down to caress the sensitive nub on her body, and he rose above her, his hands braced on the desk as he continued thrusting inside her.

She was hardly aware of anything but how good he felt and how she clenched tightly around his erection. Her fingers worked faster until she found her release. She cried out and rode each wave of pleasure as it crashed over her. He followed shortly after, his body stiffening as he had his orgasm. Her legs tightened around his waist and she savored the lingering effects of their lovemaking.

He leaned down and held her, gracing her cheeks, her lips and her neck with his kisses. She, in turn, rubbed his back, wishing this moment in time could be suspended forever and knowing it couldn't. These were the times she cherished, when they were together intimately and caught up in the physical joys of their union. And to think something so wonderful could result in a child. She tried not to think of Veronica, but what Veronica considered a curse, Amy thought of as a blessing. She felt fortunate that she'd be the mother of Nathan's baby and that he'd be the father of hers.

"That was better than I thought it'd be," Nathan whispered. "But I think I'm stuck."

She laughed. "Getting old, are you?"

"Well, I'm not at my prime anymore." He eased up and stretched his back. "That's better."

He helped her sit up and hugged her. "You're wonderful, you know that?"

What Nathan Wants

She snuggled in his arms and rested her head on his shoulder. “You are too. I still can’t believe you turned down the contract for the cruise line for me.”

“You made a good point. I would have been stupid to not listen to you, and if there’s one thing I’m not, it’s stupid.”

“You think Jack will be mad?”

“Most likely, but he can take his cruise line somewhere else. There’s always someone else looking for a connection with a wealthy man. He probably already has someone else lined up for the job.”

Amy figured Nathan was right, so she decided to give it no more thought.

They got dressed and just before they left the office, Nathan snapped his fingers.

“I almost forgot.” He returned to his desk and opened the drawer. “I have your pen. I wouldn’t want you to miss out on writing that very important letter.”

She pretended to sigh with relief as she took it from him. “Oh good. I mean, if I didn’t leave with this, then it would have been a wasted trip.”

He chuckled and opened the door.

She glanced around the dimly lit area where she usually saw his secretary sitting at her computer. “Boy, this place looks spooky at night.”

“Now you know why I only come in during business hours.” He shut and locked the door. “Thankfully, you’re here to protect me.”

She slid her arm around his waist as they went to the elevator. “Yeah, I’m a regular bodyguard alright.”

“You are. You have that intimidating look down perfectly.”

“Intimidating look?”

Ruth Ann Nordin

The elevator doors opened so he led her inside the elevator. "You can be pretty scary when you're riled up. I'll never forget how you charged up here that day you tore up the marriage license in front of me."

She hugged him. "Oh, that. I forgot I did that."

"How could you forget? That was the day my secretary bought a burial plot for me by the city dump."

"She was jesting."

"I got a bill for it."

She shot him a critical look.

"It's true. She thought it was funny," he replied. "The tombstone was in the shape of a rat and had the engraving: 'R.I.P. Here lies Nathaniel Rudolph who died of a mysterious illness. We'll miss him.'"

"She did not." Amy flung her arms around his neck and giggled. "You're making this up."

"I'll have to show it to you sometime."

She kissed him. "I don't want you dead."

"You did that morning."

"So I was a little upset. I got over it."

He hugged her. "I assured her that you'd be fine, but she refused to believe me."

The elevator doors opened and she stepped forward with him. "I can only imagine what she'd think if she knew what just happened in your office."

"She wouldn't think anything. All you did was get a pen." He winked and stopped in front of the car so he could unlock it. "It was all very innocent."

"Well, maybe some day I'll tell you my fantasy and you can do your part to make it come true."

His eyebrows rose in interest as he opened the door. "And what would that be?"

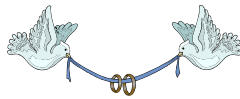
What Nathan Wants

“It has something to do with a private spot on the beach in the moonlight.”

“Sounds like a Christmas present.”

She smiled and kissed him. “It’d be nice.” Then she got into the car and let him take her home, which was exactly where she wanted to be.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Monday morning, Nathan had just stepped off the elevator when Carmen held up a piece of paper. “Your ex-wife called.”

Nathan took the piece of paper, crumbled it up, and threw it into the trash. “Thank you, Carmen.”

His secretary cleared her throat as he turned to go into the office.

He returned his attention to her. “Is there something else?”

She held up his cummerbund. “The cleaning crew found this under your desk.”

Unable to hide his smile, he took it and asked, “Did they find anything else?”

“No, though they noticed the lamp was moved from its regular location.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Anything interesting happen here Friday night?”

“Nothing that would interest you.”

“Hmm...” She drummed her fingernails on her desk. “I guess Amy won’t be killing you after all.”

What Nathan Wants

He shook his head. "I'm surprised you thought such a thing was going to happen. It was a matter of time before things worked out."

"As ever, you're an optimist." She glanced at him and sighed, "And judging by the stupid grin on your face, I should start looking into buying you a baby gift."

"Wouldn't hurt."

He decided that was all he was going to say on the issue before he unlocked his door and went in. Setting his briefcase down, he sat behind his desk and turned on his computer.

The phone buzzed so he switched on the intercom. "What is it, Carmen?" He looked through his open door where she sat.

She peered over at him. "Ryan Jackson's on line 1."

"Alright." He switched off the intercom and picked up the phone. "Good morning, Jackson."

"Do you still want to delete Bently's cruise line from the commercial?" Ryan asked.

"Yes. I spoke with his assistant. Jack will find another agency to sign up with."

"I had to be sure before I sent out the new contract to you. I'll get right on it and have it to you before the day is up."

"Good. Oh, Ryan?"

"Yes?"

"How are things with your wife and the kids?"

"They're fine. Her mom's been over helping so she can get some rest."

"I didn't think of that. Does she like having her mother there?"

"Of course, and her mother can't get enough of the grandkids."

Ruth Ann Nordin

That gave Nathan something to consider. He should ask Amy if she wanted her mother's help when their child was born. "Good luck with everything, and congratulations."

Ryan laughed. "Yeah, Tyler said you're eager to have one of your own. Maybe I should be the one wishing you luck."

After they said good-bye, Nathan logged into his system. The first thing he did was check his emails. An email from Jack Bently caught his attention. With a grimace, he opened it. As expected, Jack went into a tirade about Nathan's decision to not sign the papers on Friday night and swore that Nathan would be out of business within a week.

Nathan knew the man carried some weight in town, and Nathan had no doubt that he'd soon be getting emails or calls from a few of his connections who felt their loyalty to Bently surpassed their loyalty to him. And he was right. By the end of the week, he'd lost a fourth of his clients.

Amy stood by Danielle in the supermarket holding a pregnancy test kit. "But aren't these all the same?" Amy asked her friend, glancing at the box in her hand.

"No, they aren't. First Response and EPT are the best ones. This store brand will probably give you a false negative, if you are pregnant. Trust me. I've been there; done that."

Danielle had a point, and she had two children to prove it. Amy nodded. "I'll take one First Response and one EPT."

"Wait. You're already three days late. An EPT will work fine. The First Response is best if you're a day or two ahead of when you expect your period."

Amy sighed. "I can afford both."

Danielle thought about it and shrugged. "True."

What Nathan Wants

Amy put the store brand box back on the shelf and selected the other brands. Turning to her friend, she asked, "Is there anything you need while we're here?"

"Nah. I'm okay."

She made her purchase, wondering if she was about to find out that she was going to be a mother. For the past week as she gave careful consideration to the possibility of having a child, she'd become interested in browsing through baby catalogues where she gauged prices for what she and Nathan might need to buy. He had the baby room made up, but he didn't have clothes or blankets or toys.

Then her parents would come and visit. She couldn't wait for them to see their grandchild! But first she had to tell them, and that was where Christmas came in when she and Nathan went down there to visit them. She couldn't wait to see their faces when they told her parents the good news.

By the time she and Danielle got into her car, she had mentally planned out the baby's gender, name, and first day of kindergarten. Of course, it was all speculation, but she couldn't help herself. She tried to keep in mind that being late a couple of days didn't mean she was pregnant.

"Can I take this test at your house?" she asked Danielle as she drove her friend toward her home.

"Don't you want Nathan to be there when you take it?" Danielle replied as she fluffed her hair and examined her reflection in the visor mirror.

"No. I'd rather find out before I go home. What if I'm not pregnant? I don't want to get Nathan's hopes up."

"And to think this morning when you came into work, you ran up to me and said you're going to have a baby." Danielle shot her an amused smirk.

Amy groaned. "I know. It's easy to be optimistic with you."

Ruth Ann Nordin

"I guess I can relate to that. Alright. Take the test at my house."

Excited, Amy pulled into Danielle's driveway and grabbed the bag. "I'm so excited!" She opened the door and jumped out.

Danielle laughed and turned off the engine. "Yeah, I kind of figured that. Here's your keys." She reached across the driver seat and handed them to Amy.

"Oh! Thanks." Amy shoved them into her pocket.

Danielle led the way into the house. "I always love it this time of day right before Randy brings the kids home on Mondays. He takes the kids to his parents for a couple of hours first." She stopped Amy and asked, "Do you hear that?"

Amy blinked and shook her head. "I don't hear anything."

"Exactly. It's quiet." She let out a long, contented sigh. "It's the most beautiful sound in the world."

"Yeah, but you'd miss them if they didn't come home."

"Yes. You're right. But the fact that they do come home is why I cherish these moments the most. You will too once you've been a mother for a couple of years. Of course, you have to have more than one to truly appreciate it. I mean, it's having the second child that opens the doors to the fighting, the screaming, things breaking and not knowing which kid did it." She glanced warily at Amy. "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

Amy gave her friend a playful slap on the arm. "You're horrible."

"I'm just saying..." Danielle grinned. "Can you pee or do you need to drink some water?"

"No. I can go. Do I need to go a lot?"

"No. The instructions are right inside the box."

What Nathan Wants

Amy placed the bag on the kitchen table and pulled out both boxes. "Which one should I do?"

Danielle went to the refrigerator and pulled out a soda. "And this is why you should only buy one box. Now you have to go through this horrible internal debate on which will yield the desired result."

"Well, which one would you pick?"

"Might as well do First Response. It's the most sensitive."

"How many lines is it if I'm pregnant?"

"Two. One is the control line and the other tests whether you have any hCG's in your system."

"HCG?" Amy asked as she picked up the First Response box.

"It's the hormone the baby produces. If the baby is there, you have it. If the baby isn't, you don't. Simple as that."

"Oh." Amy nodded and turned the box over. "Where are the instructions?"

Danielle groaned, set her drink down and gently pushed Amy toward the bathroom. "Inside the box. Please take that test before you drive me crazy with all these questions!"

Amy opened the box while Danielle turned on the light. She pulled out one of the tests and took off the cap. "Exactly where do I pee on this? Should I pee on the whole thing?"

"Go for most of it. It's not rocket science, Amy. You'll do fine." With a chuckle and an eye roll, she shut the door, leaving Amy alone.

Amy bit her lower lip and frowned as she read through the instructions. It looked simple enough. She took her time in taking the test, wondering if she peed too little or too much, but in the end, two lines showed up clear as day on the stick, and she ran out of the bathroom and yelled for Danielle.

Ruth Ann Nordin

Danielle came running down the hall with a half-eaten doughnut in her hand. "Is it positive?" she asked, her eyes shining.

"Yes!"

The two women squealed and hugged each other in the hallway outside the bathroom.

The front door opened and a rush of eager shrieks from two hyper little boys floated down the hall.

"What did I say about the quiet?" Danielle mumbled as she bit into another piece of her chocolate doughnut.

"Oh no!" came Randy's horrified tone. "Danielle?"

"What? I'm in the hall!" she called out, looking surprised. "Did we get the credit card bill today?" She glanced at Amy and softly said, "I thought I stayed in my limit this time."

Chase ran past her and into his bedroom with an overwhelmed Randy trailing behind with Byron tugging on his pants.

"You're eating chocolate?" He held up the EPT pregnancy box and motioned to Danielle's doughnut. "What...?"

Danielle burst out laughing. "Relax, Randy. It's not me." She motioned to Amy and smiled. "We're going to be an unofficial aunt and uncle!"

With a loud sigh of relief, he clutched his stomach. "Thank goodness."

"We didn't mean to scare you, honey." Danielle went over to him and kissed him. Then she patted his stomach with her free hand before she finished her doughnut. "You should know by now that I always keep chocolate around the house no matter what."

Amy returned to the bathroom to collect the box with the extra test in it. She threw the used one in the trash.

What Nathan Wants

When she came out of the bathroom, Randy was telling Byron, "Good news, son. You're still the youngest!"

"Another one wouldn't be so bad," Danielle told him.

"Hey. Byron is the baby of this family, and he likes it that way. Don't you, Byron?"

Byron nodded.

"He agrees to everything you say," Danielle teased, fluffing her son's hair. "You're daddy's little shadow, aren't you?"

Chase ran out of his bedroom with an armful of cars. He bypassed them and made a beeline for the living room.

"I better get home," Amy said, too excited to stand still.

"Okay. Let me know how Nathan reacts," Danielle replied. "I'm sure it'll be better than what this man over here just did."

"Hey, I want to make sure the kids never outnumber us," Randy argued. "They're scary enough as it is. Can you imagine three or more?" He shuddered.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning," Amy told Danielle. "Bye, Randy." She took the other pregnancy box from his hand and left.

Amy came home and found Nathan sitting at his computer in the den. She frowned when she noticed his unusually somber mood as he stared at the monitor.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing."

She raised her eyebrows and leaned against the doorframe. "You're looking tense for something that amounts to nothing."

"It's nothing that concerns you. It's business."

Ruth Ann Nordin

She shook her head and walked into the room. "Nathan, we're married. That means whatever concerns you, concerns me, whether it's business or not."

His gaze met hers. "I don't want to worry you."

"Worry me?"

"Maybe that's the wrong term."

She took a deep breath and readied herself for whatever he was going to say. "You have to treat me like an equal, Nathan. When I married you, half of this business became mine. Now stop playing the macho male type and tell me the bad news."

A slight smile formed on his lips. "Macho male, huh?"

She groaned.

"Okay. Fine. Jack Bently talked a fourth of my clients into investing somewhere else. I don't want to lay anyone off, so I decided not to expand in a couple areas I've had my eye on since last year. We'll have to be conservative with our spending until I get things back to normal."

It took her a moment to comprehend what he was saying, but when she did, a sick feeling came over her. She pressed a hand over her stomach, and asked, "Is this because I asked you not to do business with him?"

"That's the part that worried me. You would assume this was your fault." He sighed and stood up so he could walk over to her. Rubbing her arms, he continued, "I made the decision to not sign those papers."

"Because I said something."

"And I'm glad you did. Amy, I don't want to deal with men who will sleep with another man's wife because she wants a part in a commercial, nor do I want to do business with a man who uses his influence to try to destroy someone else's company. What you saw wasn't pleasant, but I'm glad you told

What Nathan Wants

me. How else was I supposed to know who I was dealing with?”

She rubbed her eyes and shook her head. “I had no idea this would happen.”

“It’s not the end of the world. Things will work out. I still have most of my connections, and I don’t have to lay anyone off to keep things going. I’ll get more connections and be back to where I was before all of this happened. When I get there, I can proceed with my plans. It’s a temporary setback. I’ve recovered from worse before.” He kissed the top of her head and held her close to him.

“You sound sure about it.”

“Of course, I’m sure. I wasn’t born into this lifestyle. I worked hard to get here. That’s what Jack Bently didn’t think about. Regardless of how hard of a hit I take, I always bounce back.”

Oddly enough, his certainty in the midst of any situation—including the one that convinced him she would ultimately stay married to him—was a great comfort to her at that moment.

“So...how was your day?” he asked, pulling away from her.

“Better than yours.” She couldn’t be quite as excited about being pregnant after this news, but some of the enthusiasm sparked inside of her. “I had Danielle show me which pregnancy tests to buy.”

Nathan’s eyebrows rose in interest. “And?”

With a shy smile and glance at where her hands rested on his chest, she said, “I’m pregnant.”

Before she knew it, he lifted her up in his arms and twirled her around. “That’s great news, honey!”

Her arms went around his neck and she laughed. “Nathan! I’m going to get dizzy.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Sorry. We don’t want to do that.” He set her feet back on the ground and grinned at her. “I knew it wouldn’t be long.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Apparently, whatever you want, you get.”

“Works for me.” He kissed her soundly on the lips. “I say we’re going to have a girl.”

“You’re impossible. You can’t order up a girl or a boy.”

“Sure, I can. You said it yourself. I get whatever I want, and I want a cute little girl who’ll finally get her mother to go shopping so she’ll buy things for herself. I hear mothers and daughters enjoy lots of shopping sprees.”

“I’m not going on a shopping spree until things are back to normal for the business. It wouldn’t be right.”

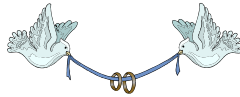
“I don’t think it’ll take that long. A year at the most.”

“I hope you’re right.”

He put his arm around her shoulders and led her out of the den. “I hope you learn to trust me. I know what I’m talking about. Now, what do you want to eat tonight? I’ll even help you cook if you give me a simple task.”

Feeling more optimistic about the future for the agency, she decided on barbeque chicken.

Chapter Twenty-Four



December 20
Fort Walton Beach, Florida

Amy unbuckled the seatbelt as the cabin lights came on. Nathan stood to grab their carry-on bags from the overhead compartment before he moved aside so Amy could walk in front of him. The flutter in her womb matched the flutter in her heart. She hadn't been to Florida since the day she and Sean left for Omaha. Visiting her parents had been long overdue, but she was here now and that was all that mattered.

"Are you ready to see the emerald coast up close?" she asked Nathan, absentmindedly recalling how she'd bragged about the Florida beaches during the interview. "I do recall you had a peculiar interest in it."

He followed her off the plane. "I am interested."

She glanced at him and couldn't tell if he was humoring her or if he meant it. But she decided it didn't matter. It was nice to be bringing him to where she grew up, and one of the stops had to be the beach.

Ruth Ann Nordin

They exited the gate and saw her parents by one of the windows.

“Mom! Dad!” she called out and ran over to hug them. She wrapped her arms around them and held them close.

“Now we don’t want to hurt the baby,” her father said.

“You’re not going to hurt her,” Amy promised. “And I’m not fragile just because I’m pregnant.”

Her mother looked expectantly at her. “May I?” She motioned to Amy’s belly.

“Yes, but I can’t guarantee she’ll kick for you.” Amy placed her mother’s hand on her stomach and over a body part that pressed against her womb. “I think this is an elbow, but it could be a knee.”

As if on cue, the baby moved.

Her mother laughed with delight. “It’s such a wonderful feeling, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Amy admitted.

“How far along are you now?”

“Thirty-one weeks.”

Her parents gave her a questioning look.

“Seven months,” she clarified.

They nodded and smiled to each other, obviously thrilled with the impending birth of their first grandchild.

Amy glanced at Nathan who stood to the side and watched them with contentment. “Come on over.” She waved him forward. “You’re a part of this family too. It isn’t all about the baby.”

Nathan obeyed, and she wrapped her arm around his waist. He switched the carry-on bag to the other hand and placed his arm around her shoulders and drew her close. “It’s good to see you again,” he told her parents.

What Nathan Wants

“You too,” her father said, patting his back. “I got a friend who’ll be joining us for golf. That is, if you think you can handle going up against me and another pro.”

“Bring it on,” Nathan dared, his eyes shining with mirth. “I’ve been practicing.”

“So have I,” he replied, looking undaunted by the unspoken threat.

Amy turned her attention back to her mother who asked, “So you’re sure it’s a girl?”

“Nathan had the ultrasound technician check several times. There’s no doubt about it,” Amy said. “I shouldn’t be surprised the baby’s a girl. Nathan predicted it.” Though she rolled her eyes, she couldn’t keep the humor out of her voice.

“We even have a name picked out,” Nathan inserted. “It’s one of Amy’s favorites.”

“Yes. I like Amber,” Amy said.

“Fine name,” her father replied.

“Well, let’s go downstairs and get your luggage,” her mother said. “We’ll get you settled at the condo and then head on out. This time dinner is on us.”

Her father nodded. “Yes. We can’t have you paying for everything all the time.”

“That’s right,” Amy told Nathan as they walked down the corridor. “And you’ll just have to deal with it.”

On Christmas Eve, Nathan scanned the mini golf course and looked at Amy’s dad. “This isn’t quite what I had in mind, Terry.”

Terry chuckled. “I know. That’s why I wanted to see your face when you got here. I should have specified that

Ruth Ann Nordin

Tyrone Johnson is bringing his two grandsons along. He and I go way back to when we were kids.”

Nathan sighed with relief. He didn’t feel so bad playing a man’s game on a kiddie course with actual kids. One day, he’d have to take his children out and train them to putt the ball before taking them onto bigger courses.

“Don’t worry. Tomorrow, we’ll go to an actual golf course,” Terry assured him.

“Hi there, Terry!” an African American man called out with two boys in tow who looked to be in elementary school. “It’s a good thing I brought the sunglasses. That shirt is even brighter than the last one.”

Terry glanced at his bright orange shirt with palm trees on it. “I got a good deal on this one.”

Tyrone laughed. “They were practically giving it away, huh?” He leaned forward and shook Nathan’s hand. “So, you’re the son-in-law who gave Terry here a run for his money on the golf course up in Omaha.”

“Oh? Was I that good?” Nathan’s eyebrow rose as he glanced at Terry.

“Besides Tyrone here, you came closest to beating me.”

“One of these days, I’ll succeed,” Nathan good-naturedly promised. “If there’s one thing I love, it’s a challenge.”

Terry laughed. “Good luck on that one, son.”

“So, what are your names?” Nathan asked the two children.

“Billy,” one said. “And he’s Ron.”

“Think you can beat Terry?” Nathan nodded to Amy’s father.

“That’s not a fair question,” Terry argued. “I’m the best.”

What Nathan Wants

Nathan guessed that Terry was going to purposely shoot close enough to a low score but would let one of the kids win, and as it turned out, he was right. The course was fun enough, and Nathan tried to visualize what it would be like when he and Amy brought their kids out to a mini golf course. The thought made him smile.

He'd long ago forgotten his dreams of having a happy family, one he could come home to after a long day at work and spend his time with. But now it was all neatly coming together, and he couldn't have asked for a better wife to make that happen. He recalled how Tyler referred to her as average when Nathan insisted on the interviews. It seemed to him that Amy was much more than average. She was the best of all the women out there.

When the game ended and they went out to eat at the place Billy, the winner, picked, Tyrone turned to Nathan. "I hear you specialize in travel."

Nathan swallowed his food and nodded. "Yes. I own Rudolph Travel Agency."

"I also hear that you took a bad turn with Jack Bently and his cruise line."

Nathan glanced at Terry who most likely discussed this with Tyrone. Looking back at Tyrone, he said, "Things did not work out as I'd hoped."

"To be honest, I'm very selective in who I do business with. I have my children and grandchildren to be an example to, and I take that responsibility seriously. From what Terry's told me about you, you'd be the right kind of person to offer my own vacation packages through."

"You're in travel?" Nathan asked and glanced at Terry again.

"Oh. Did I forget to mention that?" Terry's eyebrows rose innocently. "Must have slipped my mind."

Ruth Ann Nordin

Nathan grinned at him, surprised but pleased the man thought well enough of him to recommend him to his good friend. Directing his attention to Tyrone, Nathan waited for Tyrone to reply.

Tyrone gave Terry a knowing look and told Nathan, "I know a man who owns a private island he wants to offer family getaways to, and I think he might like to make a deal with you." He took out a business card from his shirt pocket. "His name is Zane Shermon."

"I'll give him a call," Nathan replied. "And thank you."

Terry wiped his mouth with a napkin and leaned forward. "I should have also mentioned that Tyrone works at a cruise line."

"I don't own it though, Terry," Tyrone clarified.

"Maybe not, but he does have a position of influence," Terry added.

Tyrone shrugged. "It's a small world." Then he smiled at Nathan. "I look forward to working with you."

Nathan returned his smile and continued eating.

That evening, Amy and Nathan joined her parents at a Christmas party at her uncle's house which was on the beach. Christmas carols played softly in the background as the majority of Amy's relatives sat in the large living room in front of the Christmas tree or talked in the kitchen. The rest ventured out onto the large deck where they could sit on the chairs and enjoy the sunset.

Amy and Nathan decided to take off their shoes, roll up their pants, and walk along the beach. The sand was cool and the wind blowing against their jackets left Amy feeling nippy, but she wanted to enjoy a nice romantic stroll along the water.

What Nathan Wants

She didn't think she'd ever want to go for another walk on the beach when Sean died since they had done it many times when they dated and after they were first married, but it was time to replace some of the older memories with new ones.

"The water really is emerald, isn't it?" Nathan mused as he stared out at the Gulf of Mexico where the clear blue-green water lapped lazily up to the shore.

"I told you," she said and gave his hand a friendly squeeze. "I used to come here every Christmas Eve when I was growing up and imagine what the next year would be like."

He glanced at her. "Are you doing that now?"

She smiled. "I can't help it. Old habits die hard."

"So what do you think will happen?"

"Good things. Many good things."

He laughed. "That's a tad bit vague."

"I know. But I already know I'm going to be happily married with a baby. What else is there?"

"Not much, I guess. My life is complete."

As they strolled along, she inhaled the familiar scent of saltwater. Part of her missed being here along the Florida panhandle, but she loved Omaha more and couldn't imagine her life anywhere else. All it meant was that she would look forward to visiting her parents.

"I made a decision," she finally said.

"About what?"

"Whether or not to work after I have the baby. I want to work. I like Danielle, and my days wouldn't seem the same without her."

He nodded and smiled. "Alright."

"You're not disappointed?"

"Why would I be? It just means that I'll get to set up a playpen in my office and spend more time with our daughter."

Ruth Ann Nordin

She shook her head. "Why do I have the feeling that she'll be a daddy's girl?"

"Because she will be."

"You're not allowed to spoil her. We have to teach her responsibility, hard work, and cooperation."

"I won't argue with you. Whatever you say will go."

"Nathan," she playfully admonished, "we're going to work together at being parents. We're a team."

"Whatever you say, dear." He stopped walking so he could wrap her in his arms and kiss her.

She groaned but couldn't quit smiling. "I'm serious, Nathan. We work together."

"Yes. I know. I'm agreeing with you. That is allowed, isn't it?"

"Well...yes. But I don't want you to think I intend to take control of the situation."

"I know."

"You agree with me a lot."

"Yes. Is that wrong?" he asked, amused.

"No. I guess not. It's just surprising, that's all."

"What's so surprising about it?"

She shrugged. "I don't know exactly. I assumed that you'd be more insistent that things would always have to go your way."

He kissed her again, longer this time and silencing her ramblings. She melted in his arms and leaned into him, her arms circling his waist.

When the kiss ended, he whispered, "I owe you a beach fantasy, if memory serves."

"Oh." She blushed as she recalled telling him she'd dreamt of having sex on the beach. She took in her surroundings. "I change my mind."

What Nathan Wants

“I didn’t mean right now. I meant later. When we could be in a deserted location.”

“No. I still don’t want to. Look at all this sand. There are places that sand could go that wouldn’t be comfortable.”

“We could use a blanket.”

She thought it over and shook her head again. “It still doesn’t seem comfortable. I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you join me on our private balcony later tonight and we’ll call it even. Deal?”

“I love how practical you are. Okay. Deal.” Keeping an arm around her shoulders, he turned and led her down the beach so they were now going toward her uncle’s house. “Amy, I was wondering... Did you know that your dad set up an unofficial meeting for me and Tyrone Johnson?”

She snuggled closer to him. “My mom mentioned something about it.”

“I thought that was nice of him.”

She chuckled. “He has his moments.”

“Your parents don’t think our company is going through the same problem it went through this past summer, do they?”

“No. I told them you were able to pull out of that and have plans to expand again.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “I thought your dad did that because he thought we were still in that sticky situation.”

“No. I think he did it because he likes you and thinks you’d make a good business match for his friend.”

“That means a lot to me that he thinks so highly of me,” he softly admitted.

She huffed and rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Both of my parents have adored you ever since they first laid eyes on you. It was disgusting.”

“Is it disgusting now?”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“No. Now it’s disgusting that I adore you,” she joked and threw her arms around his neck. “I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather be with, Nathan. I love you.”

“How can a woman be disgusted because she adores her husband?”

“I don’t know, but it’s true.”

“Well, I’m disgusted that you’re disgusted but happy that you adore and love me. And as undisgusted as I am to admit it, I adore and love you too.”

She laughed. “Nathan?”

“Hmm..?”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

“Anything you say, dear.” Then he obeyed her.

February 23

Omaha, Nebraska

Amy held her newborn daughter in her arms and laughed when Danielle entered her maternity suite with a vase of flowers. “Good luck.”

Danielle paused and glanced around the room. “Where am I supposed to put this?” she asked, motioning to the countless number of flowers that covered the entire place.

“If I knew, I’d tell you,” Amy replied. “Nathan went a little crazy.”

“A little?” Danielle rolled her eyes and sat with the flowers in her lap. She scooted the chair closer to Amy so she could see the baby. “Oh, she is so adorable. Sometimes I miss newborns, but then I remember the sleepless nights, the midnight bottle feedings, the constant demand for my time...”

What Nathan Wants

She glanced at her flowers. "Maybe I should send a 'get through this stage soon' card."

Amy shook her head. "Babies are so cute."

"Have you been pooped on or spit up on yet?"

"Are you trying to ruin my moment here?"

Danielle chuckled. "I'm just teasing. Yes, it's great. But I'm still glad it's over. My kids are a lot more interesting now that they can have a conversation with me. I can actually do things with them."

"Well, I love looking at Amber and singing to her while I cuddle her in my arms. When she gets older, she'll realize I can't hold a tune and run off if I sing anything."

"I'll be sure to buy her a kid MP3 player so she can enjoy the cool stuff, like the Spongebob theme song."

"Spongebob? Isn't that your husband's favorite show?"

"He started watching it because of the kids. But yeah... Now he's hooked."

"You want to hold her?"

Danielle set the flowers by her feet and took the baby in her arms. "I forgot they were this light and tiny." She cooed at Amber who watched her with wide eyes. "I'm glad you'll be coming back to work. It wouldn't be the same without you."

"No, it wouldn't. I think this suits Nathan just fine. He already got his office baby proofed. He's looking forward to hanging out with her."

"He's the boss. He can do whatever he wants."

"Do you believe he's already changed a dirty diaper? I asked but I didn't think he'd actually do it."

"Wow. Rich, good looking, and changes diapers. How did you luck out?"

"She answered the questions the best," came Nathan's reply.

Ruth Ann Nordin

Amy looked up at him and grinned. "I want another one!"

Danielle grunted and rolled her eyes. "Wait until this one crawls and gets into everything. Then decide if you want another one or not."

"You have two," Amy reminded her before she looked at Nathan. "Did you talk to my parents?"

Nathan sat in the chair on the other side of Amy's bed and took her hand in his. "Yes. They'll be here tomorrow. They're pretty excited about seeing their grandchild."

"Almost as excited as you were," Amy reminded him.

"Oh please." Danielle snorted and glanced at the baby. "Your mother could talk of little else but you," she told Amber. "You are definitely one well-loved little girl." Smiling at Nathan and Amy, she said, "Congratulations." She stood and Nathan took the girl. "I'll come back tomorrow." After giving Amy a hug, she added, "We'll have to do some more shopping and introduce Amber to the world of womankind," and left.

Nathan sat down on the bed next to Amy, so she snuggled up to him. She held her finger out to Amber who grasped it with her hand.

"Everything's perfect, Nathan," she whispered, staring in awe at their daughter.

"Almost." He reclined in the bed and put his arm around Amy's shoulders. Giving her a kiss, he said, "Now it's perfect."

