

*Miniature
Rose*

Last Rose Of Summer

I
Love
You a Latte



Bronwyn Storm

I Love You A Latte

by

Bronwyn Storm

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I Love You a Latte

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Dedication

To my husband, who is everything a hero should be and to my friends and family who love and support me through all the ups and downs of the writing process.

Praise for *I Love You a Latte*

I Love You a Latte quenches a parched spirit with humor and witty writing. Grabbing you from the first page, this story mirrors the average woman's internal thoughts and shows that a plus size doesn't dampen love but makes it a plus too. Thoroughly enjoyable, I look forward to more from Ms. Bronwyn Storm.

~Stacy Dawn, author of *The Apple of His Eye*

'I LOVE YOU A LATTE is like a double shot of caffeine on a cold day - it's fun, feisty and full of sparkle!

~Amanda Ashby, author of *You Had Me at Halo*

Annie Langdon huddled in her late model Camry, and contemplated the option of curling up in the back seat and letting the warm air from the vents soothe her to sleep. Bills waiting to be paid, however, acted as a stimulant that even the tan upholstery and firm padding of Toyota's most brilliant engineers couldn't hope to compete with.

She gave the passenger seat one last, longing glance, and with a quick tug at the control top pantyhose digging into her waist, she heaved herself from the driver's seat. The car's alarm chirped its goodbye as she opened the door to her café and snuck into the brilliantly lit kitchen.

The sounds of Michael Buble crooning "Fever" intertwined with the aroma of fresh brewed coffee. Scents of apricot scones and low-fat cranberry-lemon muffins curled past Kanika, who crouched in front of the oven, wound around Annie and pulled her closer with enticing fingers of cinnamon and brown sugar.

"Mmm, Kannie, breakfast smells delicious." She shrugged out of her hooded sweater and into an apron, then poured herself a cup of full-city roast coffee.

"There's a miracle," Kanika snorted. "You're the cook, not me. I had to improvise when you didn't show up on time." She gave Annie a stern look from over top her half-moon bifocals.

Contrition deflated Annie's spirits and made the coffee taste like sludge. "Kannie, I'm so sorry. I-I—" Her thoughts raced to find a plausible and sane excuse for her lateness, but at five in the morning, her brain didn't race so much as it plodded.

Kanika checked the batch of muffins on the rack, then slid them back into the Maytag. She stripped off the silver mitts and shoved the oven door closed with a practiced bump of her slim hip.

"Oh Lord," Kanika mourned as she caught sight of Annie watching her. Michael sang his last chord and the

kitchen settled into silence. “Not the David Hasselhoff dream. Please tell me you’re not late and you did not make me *bake* because you decided you had to dream about Knight Rider.”

The words sounded contemptuous, as though baking was the root of mankind’s ills, but the smile on her partner’s lips, and the twinkle in her eyes, conveyed she wasn’t truly mad.

“Actually—it was the Baywatch dream, and it woke me up at two this morning.”

The trademark Kanika eye-roll followed Annie’s confession. “Lord. Like that’s so much better.” She reached for a mug and poured herself a cup of coffee. Kanika took a deep pull of her drink, the drip of water into the ceramic sink the only sound that broke the stillness. A glare fired from her dark eyes and hit the taps. Annie was sure she could see the silver spout quiver in fear, and suck back the drop of water hanging from its base.

“The same dream where you’re drowning in the ocean and he has to rescue you?” The pointed tone in Kanika’s voice challenged Annie to deny her words.

“Yes,” she sighed. “And the entire time he’s hauling me back to shore, he keeps panting *this’d be a whole lot easier if you were petite instead of plus-sized*. Then he turned into Ed and complained that his alimony payments should be reduced on account of the café doing so well.”

“And for this you were late.”

“Freud said that dreams are often most profound when they seem the most crazy.” Annie reached for an oatmeal cookie cooling on the counter. “I thought if I tried lucid dreaming—”

“I’d be happy if you’d try some lucid waking,” Kanika muttered as she adjusted the red checkered apron around her knit sweater.

“The point is that my experiment went a little wonky and I slept through the alarm.” She tried to glare Kanika into submission, but Annie had a better shot at filling the Grand Canyon full of coffee, than intimidating her five foot tall friend.

“You want to stop dreaming about your scuzz-ball ex-

husband and Mr. Baywatch? Try going on a date, lady. You'd be amazed at how a man's kiss can help you sleep through the night."

"I don't want a man's kiss," Annie mumbled, feeling her friend's stare penetrate her spirit and see that it was shyness, not self-sufficiency, which kept her alone at night.

"Dang, girl! It's been thirteen months. Don't you ever get lonely for the feel of a man's hands around your waist?" Kanika turned her back to Annie, wrapped her arms around her shoulders, and ran them along her body. "Oh, baby! Baby!"

With a laugh, Annie tossed a dishtowel at her. "Go and get the muffins out of the oven. The customers will be here soon, looking for their bagels and coffee, not the dating advice from Kanika Laverne Jefferson, hit and run driver on the highway of love."

Annie left the kitchen, crossing into the restaurant area to unlock the glass entrance door, and flip the cardboard sign to "open." She looked out onto the quiet St. Paul street. Trees lining the pavement still carried the bare, desolate look of winter's touch, but on their branches, tiny slivers of green buds reached out to the rising sun. She turned back and gave the cafe one final assessment before the rush of work-day commuters descended on the shop.

Couches shared the oak floors with wooden tables and high-backed chairs; all had the worn and welcoming look of well-loved furniture. Metal legs of stools gleamed and the reading rack stood to attention like a proud butler, its shelves stocked with newspapers and glossy magazines. She dusted an offending speck off a table and stepped behind the tiled front counter. With the creaking bones of middle age, she bent down, trying to arrange the napkins and plastic cutlery into some semblance of order.

"Anyway, I don't get lonely for a man's arms," she called back, resuming the previous conversation with her co-owner. "There's nothing a man can give me that I can't get from a vibrator."

The bang of an oven door slamming shut met her ears, followed by Kanika's holler of, "What?"

She paused in the act of sorting the knives into one

pile and yelled, "I don't get lonely for a man. There's nothing a man can give me that I can't get from a vibrator."

"What about scintillating conversation?" asked an unfamiliar, but very male voice.

Her muscles tensed; the hairs on the back of her neck rose. Too mortified to move, let alone run, she remained crouched against the counter, praying her ears had played tricks on her. Maybe Kanika had developed a sudden frog in her throat—as well as the ability to throw her voice.

"Or do you prefer the strong, silent type," the southern drawl undulated into the silence; amusement weaved its way through his words.

Annie stared at the shelving, thinking if only her body size was more petite than plus, she could have crawled into the cubby hole and stayed there until he left. This plan of action made moot, she peeked over the pristine white counter-top, and saw a pair of long legs in faded denim jeans. Her gaze traveled upwards, past a grey wool coat and teasing smile, and came to rest on a pair of sparkling eyes.

"I didn't hear you come in." She rose, painfully aware of her coffee-stained apron, faded t-shirt, and baggy jeans, and made a mental note to install a set of chimes above the entry door.

"I'm sorry if I startled you," he said with the delicious grin of a born flirt, "but I'm dying for a good cup of coffee. When I saw your shop light, it seemed a godsend."

While his presence invaded the rest of her senses, her gaze ran the gauntlet of his body again. From the sensual tenor of his voice, to the faint scent of cedar in his cologne, he did more to jump start her libido than the strongest espresso ever could.

"The coffee's just in the back. Do you want it to stay or go?"

Eyes the color of hazelnuts twinkled at her. "To stay. Definitely."

An image of him tangled in her Egyptian cotton bed sheets electrified her skin. She wondered what it would be like to hold him, and be caressed by those long, elegant fingers. "Do you like it bold?"

He blinked at her.

“Your coffee,” she stammered, her cheeks warming because she really hadn’t been talking about coffee at all. “Do you want it strong or mild?”

The man put his hand into his pocket and, cocking his head, smiled at her. “I think however you make it, I’m going to like it just fine.”

He shrugged out of his jacket. Her mouth went dry. The vibrator’s selling points quickly dwindled in the wake of broad shoulders and a muscular chest, wrapped in a scrumptious black crewneck sweater.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll wait at one of the tables until you’re free.” He melted her with another high-watt smile as he walked away.

Annie gulped and nodded.

She took a deep breath, her fingers groping into her apron for the notepad and pencil. “Wait, I can—I can take your order, if you’re hungry.” Her low-heeled shoes clunked a quick rhythm against the floor as she hurried to where he sat. “Welcome to Grounded for Life. What would you like?”

“What I’d really like,” he replied, “is to know why a beautiful woman like you is so down on men.”

“Cause her scum-sucking-too-much-life-in-his-pants-can’t-pay-his-damn-alimony-on-time-ex-husband got his mistress pregnant,” boomed Kanika.

Annie’s face, already warmed by embarrassment over the vibrator comment, burst into flames. She cast a glance towards the kitchen, wondering if her partner had the sonic hearing of a bat and found her friend leaning against the front counter, a ceramic mug of coffee—full of her fire-engine red lipstick marks—in her hand.

The sound of the man clearing his throat drew Annie’s attention back to the object of both her attraction and her humiliation. His gaze searched her face, seeming to delve beneath the surface of her flesh and reach into her heart. The empathy in his eyes *should have* soothed the anxiety swirling inside her. However, it was coupled with the smile on his mouth, which curved in the most delectable, kissable way. Put together, these characteristics stoked the dying embers of her libido back to a full roaring blaze. “I’d like a latte, please, and a blueberry muffin.”

"I'll go and see what we have." The pounding in her ears, plus the inability to take a proper breath, turned her voice to a high-pitched squeak.

She brushed past Kanika and retreated to the kitchen. The smell of freshly baked cinnamon buns scented the air with a calming lullaby of brown sugar and frosting. She gripped the edge of the steel sink, squeezed her eyes shut, and tried to make the hammering in her heart slow to a more manageable pounding.

"What's going on with you?" Kanika's warm breath hissed against her cheek. Annie pried one lid open to find her friend's ebony gaze boring into her. Her partner's lips screwed up with exasperation. She grabbed a plate, put the muffin on top with a pat of butter on the side and shoved the lot into Annie's hands. "Get back in there!"

"There? With him?" The lion inside her devoured the mouse, turning her squeak into a roar. "How am I supposed to follow your big mouth?"

Kanika shook her head. "Lord, help me; the girl's got no sex instincts. You waste too much time cutting out quotes from Oprah and Einstein, pasting them on your walls, and not enough time living them. He's digging on you."

"Digging? I haven't dated since Ed—" Dawning horror made her knees buckle. She gripped the countertop for support. "Oh Lord. The last time I dated, Elvis was still touring and pleated mini-skirts were all the rage." Hands clammy with sweat, she gazed imploringly at Kanika. "What am I going to do?"

"When in doubt, use my Three-F Plan: Feed him, Flirt with him, Fawn over him." She grinned wickedly. "It's really the Four-F plan, but you're not ready for the big F. Yet."

"I c-can't." She pushed the plate at her friend. "You do it. I'm so humiliated—" She peeked around the corner of the doorway. His handsome profile sent her heart into over-drive and her stomach doing a set of somersaults and flips. "I'm out of my depth. Milton is more my type. But this guy? He should be in a fashion magazine!" She pulled away, slumping against the cold drywall and tossed a defeated look at Kanika. "Don't forget, he wants a latte."

"Milton has chronic halitosis, and the only thing that

gets his blood racing is filing our tax return.” Kanika’s long turquoise nails with diamantes embedded in them, prodded Annie in the chest. “The guy is flirting with you. Get out there.”

“No. No! I bet he only did it because he felt bad—or because he wanted good service. Maybe he’s just flirtatious in general.”

“Lord give me strength,” her friend muttered. She held out the saucer with the muffin. Annie refused to take it. Kanika smiled, a Cheshire cat grin, and let go of the plate.

“Kanny!” She dived for the plate but before she could steady herself, her friend’s iron grip was on her elbow, propelling her out the door.

Annie stumbled in to the front area. The man looked up, smiled, and she almost lost her grip on the plate. Too aware of her frizzed hair that was in serious need of a dye job and that she hadn’t bothered to wear any make up today, she shuffled to his table.

“Here you are, ah—”

“Devon McMaster.” He held out his hand and she took it. His touch sent heat speeding from the tips of her fingers straight down to soles of her feet.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Annie Langdon, part owner of Grounded for Life. Kanika Jefferson—” She nodded towards the kitchen, “is the other owner.”

“It’s a great shop,” he said. “I like the way you mixed wood, chrome and the spider plants. It’s simple but sophisticated.” His warm gaze traveled a quick route along her body. “I suspect it takes after its owners.”

“Ha!” Kanika’s whiskey voice sounded from behind Annie. “What a catch—gorgeous and blind!”

Annie tossed a dirty look at her friend. But typical Kanika, she just grinned, plunked down the latte with a wink at Devon and sashayed back into the kitchen. Annie turned back to her sexy customer, and found him watching her with an encouraging smile. She wanted to say something flirty and witty...but the only thing that came out was a strangled, “Do you want cream with your coffee?”

His shoulders dropped slightly, though his smile remained fixed in place. “Yes, please.”

The hour and a half it took for him to eat breakfast was a test in pleasure so exquisite, it was torture. His effortless charm and amazing body tossed her usually ordered emotions into chaos, and sent her oath to keep her heart to herself into the garbage.

The last man who had made her feel this way was her husband Ed—and look how that turned out. The muscles of Annie's heart tightened, pulled taut by the memory of betrayal and love lost. If Devon McMaster ever came back into her shop, she promised herself, she'd put him in his place and set him straight on her motto: stay away from anything that went to her hips.

That included chocolates, belts, and most of all, men!

As days passed into weeks and then months, and Devon's visits became a daily part of her life, Annie found her tongue refused to obey her. Rather than a polite, "Mr. McMaster, I'm not interested in your flirtations or your compliments,"

Her internal war between attraction and the fear of losing at love, tied her tongue into knots when he asked her anything. When the two opposing factions of desire and insecurity were bested by the fleeting moments of self-confidence, she found herself laughing at all the jokes he made, drooling over him when he wasn't looking, and wondering why a woman who owned a café found it so hard to ask a man out for a cup of java.

The thought of asking Devon on a date—casual or not—sent tremors of "what if he says no," coursing through her body, and had her dismissing the rash thought of initiating a relationship so fast it left acceleration tread-marks on her brain. She shoved dark-roasted Columbian beans into the grinder and watched as blades chewed them up into powder. How she wished that she could do the same thing with her heart. Had it no learning curve? It should chase after someone who was...safe, mild, and secure—like her accountant. Milton was sweet, a little boring, but he was a safe bet. He wouldn't stray and he wouldn't have women chasing after him.

But Devon? The tall, charming, civil rights attorney who volunteered with Habitat for Humanity? Forget

about it. The line of women who wanted him probably stretched around the block. Annie held out little hope that she could hold her own against slimmer, smarter competitors. Logic, she told herself with silent, severe tones, dictated she keep her emotions in check and her attraction locked away for midnight fantasies.

The chimes on the door announced Devon's entry into the cafe. With him he carried all of the summer's warmth and light in his stride. The action of smiling lit his face and sent her resolutions scurrying out the door.

"Good morning, Annie my girl."

Her heart jerked at the endearment.

After taking off his baseball cap, he ran his hands through his hair. Her fingers twitched with the desire to do the same. She grabbed a dishtowel and scrubbed at the clean counter top, hoping it would distract her fingers and her heart. "Your usual latte and muffin, Devon?"

He hesitated. "Sure—listen Annie, I didn't come here for breakfast. I want to talk to you." Devon reached across the counter top and pulled her hands into his grasp. "I owe you a very large apology."

"You do?" she asked, trying to concentrate on his words and not the delicious feel of his hands in hers.

"I've acted like a boor, coming in here, hitting on you."

"No, you haven't. You've been charming, kind—and...I enjoyed the compliments." Her heart dived at the confession of the pleasure she found in his company. Her stomach followed suit.

"No, you haven't." His sad smile rebuked her. "Every time I flirt with you, you look like you want to run and hide. I like to pride myself on being an enlightened and somewhat sophisticated man, but I've acted like a schoolboy with you. I may not have pulled your pigtails or chased you around the playground, but I think I've been more of a bully than a friend."

Annie couldn't think of a response. He must have taken her silence as confirmation because he said, "I'm truly sorry. Please tell me I haven't totally screwed our friendship." His fingers tightened against hers, earnest and sincere.

"Of course not." Her voice sounded rough in her ears.

Annie cleared her throat.

He squeezed her hand. "I was insensitive—I failed to weigh the pain of your husband's betrayal properly."

"Ex-husband," she clarified. "It wasn't so much finding out about the affair—our marriage had been an empty shell for years. It was finding them having sex on his desk. The same desk I bought him for our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary and had to work overtime for months to make the payments!"

She laughed sharply. The sting of Ed's adultery had been worn down by time, introspection and the feelings Devon stirred within her, but the memory still pricked. "I guess when he said he'd had opposing council bent over backwards and had hammered her with his case, he wasn't just speaking metaphorically."

She looked down at their intertwined fingers, index laying on index, pinkies curled into each other, and felt a sense of belonging so powerful, it took her breath away. The warmth of his personality, the security of their friendship and the possibility of "more," prodded her to tell him that he didn't have to stop flirting—that she wanted him to continue, but she found herself croaking, "Are you sure I can't fix you breakfast?"

Self-loathing bubbled inside. Can I fix you breakfast? Way to take the chance, Annie.

She tried again to tell Devon how she felt, but insecurity felt as heavy as a fifty-pound sack of coffee beans. Lifting her courage past the weight proved impossible.

"No, thanks. One of my buddies, Joe, insists that two years of being a widower is making me into a grouch, so he's setting me up with one of his co-workers." Devon grimaced. "I picked a meeting over breakfast—it seemed less intimidating than dinner, but not as trivial as coffee."

"You're going on a date?" she asked, incredulous and horrified all at once. All the moments in the past, when she could have said something, *should have* said something, crowded her mind and heart. Had she really lost him before she ever had a chance to get him?

Devon's eyes, intense and all-seeing, held her gaze like a vise. His fingers tightened against hers. "Yes—unless you can think of a reason for me to cancel. Can

you, Annie? Can you give me any reason why I shouldn't go out with this woman?"

She wanted to give him one, but though she could get her mouth to open and close, she couldn't get her voice box to kick in. Hope, fear, rejection, chances, all her emotions broke to the surface, kicking and swirling and blocking all sound and thought. So she stood in front of him, gaping and floundering like a fish tossed from its bowl. After a minute of long, painful silence, Devon let go of her hand. He smiled sadly and left the café, leaving her heart lurching after him.

The ledger book lay on the table, but Annie couldn't see it for the pile of crumpled papers strewn on top. How could she have been so stupid? She let insecurity bind her mouth and now Devon was dating other women. And if that wasn't a big enough blow, he insisted on telling her all about them, asking her advice and treating her as a confidante, a friend—which she was, because she'd been too dense to say anything and make herself more! The only thing saving her sanity was that none of the women seemed to keep his interest past the first date.

All Cindy did was complain about her sisters. He felt guilty about taking Bella from the bedside of her ailing father. Then there was Rose and Holly and Ivy. At times she wondered if he was dating women, or plants?

She'd been an idiot, but no longer. Devon was in Washington for a symposium on the Rights of Refugees. She had a couple of weeks to figure out how to tell him that the reason all the women he dated didn't catch his interest was because they were wrong for him. She and he were meant to be together. If he would only give her a chance, she could prove it.

Annie chuffed as she glared at the words scrawled on the paper, then wiped away her latest "Devon, I love you" speech with vicious swipes of her eraser. She crumpled the sheet and sent it sailing through the air to join previously discarded attempts in the recycling pile. She'd get this right, and "Operation: Get Devon" would see them together for Christmas and New Year's. She was determined, true to the cause.

Besides, Kanika kept quoting Oprah and saying,

“Think like a queen. A queen is not afraid to fail.” Between the two of them—three, if Annie included Oprah, love was simply a matter of time.

The door chimed and Annie looked up. A tiny woman, bundled in layers of worn and ripped winter gear lurched inside, looking as though it was a battle to stay upright against the gusting wind. Gold and red leaves, brittle from autumn's biting cold, swept into the café. A frigid, howling wind followed the lady, and chilled Annie's skin.

The woman toddled, trying to see through the narrow slits left by the ragged scarves, unwound masses of wool and yarn, and with weary steps headed to the counter. Annie got up and greeted her with a smile. “What can I get for you?” she asked and handed her a tissue.

“Thanks.” Her voice, low and gravely, scraped out the word. She sniffed and rubbed her red nose. Watery blue eyes scanned the large board on the wall. “I'll just have a small coffee.”

“No problem.” Annie pulled a large paper cup from the bottom wood shelf.

The woman's eyes narrowed into slits as they locked on to the cup; her bony fingers raked through her flattened hair. She sat up straighter and adjusted her hole-filled sweater around her thin frame. “I have every right to be here,” she rasped, jerking a gnarled finger at the disposable cup. “You can't kick me out just because I'm poor. I have the money and I intend to sit and enjoy my coffee!”

“Refuse you—oh, the cup.” Annie laughed, hoping her voice didn't betray her concern for her only customer. “Our ‘stay’ cups are awfully small. I thought a big cup to warm you up. On a day like this, with such little business, I need to do all I can to keep my customers comfortable.” She nodded towards the window where the November wind howled and hurled litter, leaves and twigs against the panes.

“Oh.” The woman relaxed, though her eyes still held the wary light of a spirit too often on the receiving end of cruelty.

“If you prefer a proper cup, it's no problem.” Annie grabbed the largest mug she could find, chagrined that it wasn't nearly big enough to put warmth or substance into

her customer. "My cook screwed up. Can you believe it?" She sighed as she poured the coffee. "The fact is, she made too many chicken pot pies. In this weather how am I supposed to get rid of two extra pies? They're going to go into the garbage, and I just can't bear the thought. Would you do me a favor and help me eat some? It would have to be on the house, of course. I have no intention of making a customer pay for my mistake."

"On the house?" Her tone was wistful; her stomach rumbled and growled its encouragement.

"With some salad," Annie added as an afterthought.

The woman blinked rapidly, the sharp lines of her jaw worked up and down as her lips trembled. "I suppose it's the least I can do." Unshed tears in her voice made Annie's heart ache with a desire to do more than feed her.

"Thank you. Why don't you go and have a seat—I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Sally."

She smiled. "Sally. I'll get a plate ready for you."

Annie followed her to a booth and set the cup of coffee on the table. "Settle in here. That's it. Make yourself comfortable. I'll be back soon with your dinner and another cup of coffee."

She spun on her heel, and nearly collided with Devon. The rush of blood coursing through her at seeing him scattered her emotions like confetti on the wind. "Hi, I didn't hear the door chime."

He nodded towards the woman in the booth. "You were busy with more important things."

He unbuttoned his wool jacket, pulling his thick cable-knit sweater away from the strong column of his neck. Annie had to close her mouth before she started drooling. He draped the coat over his arm. "I'll find myself a seat. When you have a moment, though, I would appreciate one of your fantastic egg-nog lattes."

"Of course."

Feeling her cheeks flame, Annie rushed past him. What the heck was he doing here? He was supposed to be in Washington. Lord, of all the times for her to wear comfortable sweatpants instead of a sexy pair of jeans. She wasn't even wearing foundation today.

She cut a huge slab of chicken pie, making sure it

was bursting with enough carrots, potatoes, chicken, and gravy to permanently line the woman's stomach and protect her from the cold. Then she piled salad on to the plate, grabbed a cup of coffee full to the brim and deposited the meal in front of Sally. "Will you be alright?"

The woman glanced at the plate and coffee, and nodded, as she shovelled the food into her mouth.

"No, I meant—" Annie hesitated. "I mean, with it being so cold—"

Sally's throat worked up and down as she swallowed. "I'll be fine." She pulled out a thick, white business card from the pocket of her tattered coat, jerking her chin in Devon's direction. "He gave me this. It's the name of a shelter I can go to, and they'll find a bed for me. He told me to give them his name..." Wispy grey eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Derrick, Donald—"

"Devon." How sweet his name felt on her tongue. "His name is Devon."

Sally made a sound, halfway between a laugh and a sob. "More like 'Angel'." The fork clattered to the plate as she dropped it to grasp Annie's hand. "You too. You're both my angels."

"Not an angel. Just someone who knows what it is to be alone, and feel the cold." She gave Sally a pat on the shoulder. "You're welcome here, anytime."

Annie stepped away from her, and gave into vanity which had been whispering in her ears since Devon walked in. She dashed to the employee washroom and did her best to rearrange her hair into some semblance of order. Thick and curly, without the aid of hairspray and gel, it was relegated into its usual loose knot. She growled in frustration—she didn't even have a tube of lipstick to color her lips. With a sigh, Annie headed back to the front counter and fixed Devon's drink. "Here you are."

"Thanks. You're a life-saver. I've been trying to get in some early Christmas shopping, but between that grey sky and overstressed shoppers, I needed an oasis of peace to retreat."

"What are you doing here?" She bit back the accusing note in her voice. "I thought you were in Washington."

"Oh, that." He stirred the latte with thoughtful movements of the spoon. "I had some last minute things

to take care of. Do you have time to sit for a little while?"

"I think I can take a break," she smiled.

"What you did for that lady, it was awfully nice." He smiled at her. "That's so like you; kind and thoughtful." Devon held her gaze, admiration in his eyes. Seeing the warmth in the bitter chocolate iris, coupled with the sexy upward turn of his mouth, the old, familiar smoldering began deep within her belly. She swallowed hard.

After eight months of his smile and charm, she thought she would have been used to the flames that erupted inside whenever he was around. But sitting across from him now, she felt a prime candidate for human combustion.

"Um, thank you. But you were just as kind."

He dismissed her comment with a shrug. "I just gave her a piece of paper." His eyes softened as they took a slow, leisurely study of her face. "You fed her."

She looked away before his gaze could prompt her to do something impetuous like vault across the tabletop and into his arms. "How's Cindy?"

He looked at her, face as blank as a freshly washed menu-board. "Who?"

"Cindy. Isn't that the name of your girlfriend?"

"Oh. Her." Comprehension smoothed out his face. "We're no longer together. Didn't have enough in common. She wasn't as solid a character as I would have liked."

"Mr. McMaster, you go through women the way I go through sponges. Cindy, Rose, Bella—when are you going to settle down?" She said it because she figured it was the comment a good friend would make. But the truth was, she hoped Devon wouldn't settle down until he was in her arms. If only she could find the courage to put her mouth where her heart was and tell him that she loved him.

"As soon as I find the right one."

Here it was, her moment. Tell him! Say, 'Devon, I'm that right one. Please go on a date with me. I know I'm not skinny or particularly beautiful, but I know how to love you and I make great coffee.'

Air filled her lungs, and though she couldn't hear a sound above the slamming sound her heart made as it crashed against her chest, she knew—*knew*—she could get this out.

“Devon—”

“And I think I have.”

Her breath locked in her throat, making her feel like she was choking. “What?”

He smiled, huge and happy, and said, “I found the one for me.”

Oh God. Say it’s me, say it’s me. “Really?” She pushed out the question. “What’s her name?”

“Donna Neilgan.”

With that, every fantasy Annie had created, from being under the mistletoe with him, to opening Christmas gifts together, to kissing him as the bells chimed midnight on New Year’s Eve, evaporated in one sharp, painful breath.

“Donna? That...sounds like a lovely name.”

His eyes went dreamy and unfocused, and the emotion in them cut into her shredded heart. “She’s a lovely woman.”

“Did Joe set you up?”

Devon chuckled. “No, I found her all by myself. And thank God, if I had to endure one more lecture on the benefits of dating and relationships, I was going to go crazy!”

Annie pressed out a laugh, but it sounded thin and full of edges.

Devon rubbed his hands together. “Annie, my girl, I’d like some pie and a latte. Then come back so I can tell you all about Donna and we can figure out how I can catch her interest.”

Putting business before a broken-heart, she headed to the kitchen with leaden steps.

“Devon, how are you?” Annie forced a smile, the same way she forced herself to be cheerful since his announcement two weeks ago.

“Great, just great. I saw Donna yesterday.”

Right. Donna. The woman Annie had never met, but had hated from the moment she knew of her existence. Based on his praises of her beauty and character, Annie was sure Donna read to blind people and dabbled in gourmet cooking—when she had time in between performing heart surgery, doing Pilates, and taking auto

mechanic classes.

"Oh Devon," she sighed as she handed him a latte. "Not her again."

"I know, I know. I'm either a hopeless romantic or a complete idiot. Luckily, it's hard to tell the difference." He gave her a toothy smile. Annie rolled her eyes, but smiled back.

"I tell myself it's a losing battle, that she's not interested, and I should just move on." He frowned. "Then she goes and does something wonderful and I'm right back where I started."

She hated the woman even more, then felt a rush of guilt. Kindness wasn't Annie's sole possession. Other people had a right to it—but why did it have to be *Her*?

"Honestly, Devon, you can make life so complicated. Why don't you just ask her out, instead of mooning about and hoping for her to make the first move?"

"Because she's shy and unsure of herself. I'm waiting for her to find the courage in herself, to believe that she's as amazing as I think she is and ask me out." He frowned as though his plan was unsound, and tapped the spoon gently on the edge of the cup before placing it on the serviette.

"How amazing can she be, if she's not picking up on your signals?"

"She's had a rough go of life. A long-time relationship ended, and with it, she's had to reinvent herself, find strength that she didn't know she had."

"We all have our rough times. I married my high school sweetheart and look how that ended."

"Exactly. The two of you have so much in common."

Annie snorted. There was one large difference between the two of them: Donna had Devon's heart. "I'm different. The last time I went on a date, a blackberry was just a fruit. I hate to think of you wasting away while waiting for someone who doesn't have time for you." Liar, liar, a soft voice whispered in her ear. You're jealous of her and angry at yourself for never taking the chance with him.

Devon gave her a half-smile. "Good things are worth waiting for, and for a great woman like Donna, I'd wait forever. Joe went to the Bahamas. I was supposed to go,

but I thought I'd make a last ditch attempt to win her heart. Does that make me a fool?" He looked up, the most adorable expression of sheepishness on his face, and Annie had to marshal all of her resources not to reach across and kiss him.

"No, it makes you human." She forced on a bright smile, feeling like her face might crack from exertion. "So, what's your great plan? Wait—let me freshen your drink. I swear, Devon, no one drinks coffee as slow as you."

She got up and used the time to compose herself. He was her friend, Annie told herself in stern, silent tones. And more than that, she loved him. If he was happy, shouldn't that make her happy? Logic said 'yes,' but right now, that sentiment sounded a lot better on a Hallmark card than in her heart.

"So?" She set down the mug and forced her slumping shoulders into an upright position. "What's the plan?"

"Well, at the moment, my Grand Plan is to darken her doorstep until she takes pity on me."

"That's it?" Disbelief made her voice rise to the ceiling. "You volunteer with Community Theatre, paint in your spare time, send poems to magazines and this is the most creative idea you can come up with?"

"Well...I do have a Plan B, but it's even worse. In my defense, it's not my fault. There's something about her. When I think of her, see her, every synapse in my brain explodes. I can barely form a sentence around her, and I always have to have something to play with—just to distract me from making a total fool of myself."

"That sounds like love to me," Annie murmured. Devon caught her gaze and smiled. He looked back at his latte and it gave her a moment to drop her guard, to breathe, then force her face back into a mask of interest and hide the hurt that threatened to overwhelm her.

"When Marissa died, I thought, well that's it. I've had my chance at love. When I met Donna, it felt like waking up after a long slumber. She makes me happy, Annie, and she makes me feel alive. But I'm starting to wonder if I just misread her," Devon said. "Maybe she's just not interested in a relationship—maybe I'm letting my emotions color her actions and words."

"If that's true, then you need to move on." Her throat

felt dry and it ached like the time she caught the flu and had to be in bed for a week.

“But I don’t want to. I care a great deal for her. Sometimes I see this look in her eyes—what does a man have to do to get a woman to love him?”

“Be yourself.” It was trite and forgettable, but all she wanted was to end this conversation. Annie resented the woman for being everything she wanted to be but couldn’t.

“If I could have one Christmas gift,” he said, his fingers playing with the handle of the cup, “it would be to have her in my life forever.”

“Why don’t I get you a slice of pie and we can hash this out? I wouldn’t be much of a friend if I didn’t try to help you get what you most want for Christmas.” She forced a bright smile on her face and hoped if he saw the shine in her eyes, he would chalk it up to the light’s reflection, and not unshed tears.

“I am five feet ten and feel like an idiot. Why do I need such high heels?”

Kanika pulled and adjusted the fit of the flowing scarlet tunic around Annie’s waist. “Because it’s hip, and they make your legs look fabulous.”

“Who wears open-toed shoes when there’s a blizzard outside?”

“A woman who wants to do more in bed than fantasize about a man’s arms around her, but feel it as well. Besides, the snow’s not that bad.”

Annie cast a baleful gaze at the thick white flakes that swished past the kitchen window and kept her customers away from the café. Well, she thought with a surge of adrenaline and nerves, almost all her customers.

“I’m not comfortable with this outfit,” she hemmed. “Look at all this cleavage.”

“Then why did you buy it?”

“Because it looked good on the mannequin and I have no willpower against a cute sales guy telling me that I look hot.”

“He said it because it’s true.” Kanika took a step back. “You look gorgeous. Go out there, fix your Prince

Charming another latte, and win his heart.”

Annie peeked around the doorframe to where Devon sat in thoughtful contemplation of the newspaper in his hands. “I don’t know,” she hemmed again. “All he talks about is Donna.”

“If he’s so in love, why is he spending most of his time mooning around this place?” She gave Annie a hard shove. “Go!”

She stumbled out the door, regained her footing and walked—cautiously—to where Devon sat. “Hi.”

“Hello, my girl. Take a look at this article and tell me what you think.” He looked up with an absent-minded smile on his face, before going back to his papers. Then his head snapped back and he stared at her. His eyes wide, he dropped his newspaper. “Annie?”

She smiled self-consciously and twirled—slowly—as she struck a model’s pose. “What do you think?”

“I think you look marvelous.”

Her heart melted at the sincerity in his words. She tucked a strand of her newly straightened hair, dyed with a color the hairdresser called “chocolate sunset,” and reached for the papers. “Ed never asked for my opinion.” She tried to remember everything Kanika had told her about eye contact, playing with her hair, and other physical gestures to demonstrate she was interested. “What did you want me to read?”

“Uh,” Devon blinked and turned back to the papers. He shook his head. “I can’t remember.” He faced her with a bemused smile on his lips.

She grinned as she sat down beside him. Take that Donna Neilgan!

“So, how are things going with Donna?”

“They’re not.” Devon stretched, arching his back. His fingers brushed against her arm. He seemed oblivious to the way his movement and touch made her senses tingle, and the way his cologne’s subtle woodsy fragrance made her libido dance. “I think she cares for me—she certainly acts like it. But she won’t tell me, and I’ve come to the conclusion I’m just wasting my time. I should move on.”

“That’s what you said two days ago. Yesterday, you changed your mind.”

He chuckled. “There’s a fine line between love and

insanity.”

Still in love? With this Donna? That wasn't what Annie needed to hear. Her brows pulled together in a frown. He continued, oblivious to the damage his words inflicted. “Donna's so amazing, but she doesn't see herself that way.”

Her resolve faltered. Maybe “Operation: Get Devon,” was a lost cause; maybe she had lost her chance, and flirting with him was overstepping the bounds of friendship. Then again, there was a reason they said that all was fair in love and war. “What do you think of my hair?” she asked, inwardly cringing at the girlish question, but needing it to further her flirtation ploy. “Do you think it looks good straightened?”

“Uh.” His eyes darted everywhere but her and her hair. “Do you think it smells nice?” She brushed a few brunette strands against his face.

“I—ah—” He cleared his throat. “I think whatever you do with your hair, makes you look beautiful. It looks—nice, very nice when it's straightened.” He moved a few inches from her.

His actions and his confusion flustered her, and made her forget what she was supposed to say. Not wanting to lose the ground she'd gained with him, she grasped for anything to fill the silent breach, but all she could remember was what the hairdresser had told her about straightening her hair.

“All I really needed was to get a good blow job.”

Devon choked on his latte and Annie, her face redder than her top, fled back to the safe confines of the kitchen.

“It's alright,” Kanika sighed as she sped past. “There's always tomorrow.”

But tomorrow led to another tomorrow, and through the passing days, all that seemed to happen was Annie embarrassing herself and Devon staring at her with total befuddlement on his face. She knew what she wanted to say, she'd practiced it every morning in front of the bathroom mirror, but as soon as she saw Devon, her mouth and her brain shut down. Through it all, time passed with the tick-tock of the Grim Reaper, telling Annie her chance for winning Devon was fading. The

silver bells of the door chimed and Annie looked up from the glass jar of biscotti that she was refilling.

"Devon!" She put down the steel tongs. "What are you doing here so late on Christmas Eve? Oh, popping in for a visit before going to see Donna?"

"Something like that." He slid into one of the booths.

"What's wrong?" She perched on the padded seat across from him and fiddled with the sugar containers to keep her fingers busy.

"It's Donna. I don't know what to do about her."

Dump her immediately, came to Annie's mind, but she repressed the thought, and instead asked, "What exactly don't you know?"

Devon sighed. "What would you do with a woman who seems to enjoy spending time with you, who acts like she's interested, but never actually says that she's interested?"

"I would walk away—run, actually," she said, slamming the sugar jar on to the table.

"But shouldn't love be patient?"

"Not when the woman you love is an idiot!" Annie burst out, her frustration and anger at herself poured out of her and drenched the object of Devon's desire. "If she's too stupid to see what a fantastic man you are, how kind and funny, then she's a waste of time!"

Devon's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "She's not a—"

"She is an idiot. I'd have you in a second! Oh!" Her eyes widened as she slapped both hands to her mouth. Annie bolted upright, embarrassment sent her scuttling backwards.

He caught her hand and held it. Devon stared at her for what seemed like hours. Then he grinned.

"About damn time, woman!"

"Wha—what?"

"Annie, all I've wanted, was you. And all these weeks of thinking that you were flirting—hoping that you were flirting, but you never said anything. I didn't know if you really cared, or if my heart was coloring everything I saw."

"Me?" She squeaked.

"Yes, you. You've had me pining forever."

She looked into his eyes and saw the sincerity of his

words written in them, but she couldn't believe her Christmas wish was actually coming true.

"Me?" She asked again, feeling stupid for the repetition.

"Since the moment I walked in here and had my heart electric-paddled into life by that smile of yours, it's been you. I've been throwing myself at you and feeling like a total jackass because all you seemed to want is friendship."

"That's not true! Devon, you've dated. What about all those women—how was I supposed to know you cared?"

He pulled away, looking at her with his eyebrows cocked in disbelief.

"Are you telling me that you never picked up on—didn't you find something strange about all the women?"

"Strange?"

"Ms. White, who was dating other men; Cindy who had problems with her family; Bella who sacrificed all for her father?"

Annie shook her head in confusion.

"Snow White, Cinderella, and Beauty."

"Fairy tales! Oh Lord," she groaned. "I was jealous of fairy tales?"

"And I thought I was being so transparent! I've never dated anyone, Annie. And the only reason that I came up with fictitious girlfriends was because of Joe. He said my hanging around the café, mooning after you like a teenager made me look desperate. Joe suggested I tell you that I was dating because it would make me seem more attractive. I didn't think it was a great idea, but having been out of the dating scene since the Carter era, I figured it was worth a try. But damned if you weren't the supportive friend, always trying to help me and my fictitious girlfriends work out our problems!"

"But what about Donna Neilgan?"

Devon released her hand, a blush colored his face from the base of his neck to the roots of his hair. "She's you."

Her jaw dropped in disbelief and surprise.

"If you rearrange the letters of your name, you'll see, it spells Donna Neilgan." He held his hands up in apology. "You seemed like you wanted nothing to do with me. But I

couldn't date anyone else, when all I wanted was you. So...I made up Donna as a way to talk to you, tell you how I saw our conversations and see what you thought. Please don't be angry with me," Devon pleaded. "I just didn't know what else to do."

Her heart raced, her stomach flipped, then flopped. All this time, it had been her. She'd been jealous over herself!

"I think we need some coffee and to talk."

Devon blushed. "Since we're being totally honest," he said, "I don't like coffee."

"What?" She squawked.

"You make great drinks, Annie, but coffee gives me a headache."

"But you've been here for months, drinking every latte I make!"

"Because I'd guzzle anything else out of sheer nervousness! It gave me time to watch you, talk to you."

Her shoulders shook with laughter. "Oh, Devon."

His grin was lopsided. "What can I say? I love you and a man in love is liable to do all sorts of crazy things."

Love. He loved her. The thought, the reality of it all was too sweet and beautiful to be real.

"You don't believe me," Devon watched her. The desire in his eyes darkened them into a deep, rich brown. "I can tell from the way you're worrying your lower lip. Stop that." The pad of his thumb massaged her lips. "They're too beautiful for such torture."

And then his kiss claimed hers in sweet exploration, his tongue mapped the territory of her mouth with languid, thorough strokes that set all her nerve endings firing.

"I just can't believe I'm the one that you were talking about," Annie breathed when they finally parted. "All this time—all this effort." She gazed with wonder into his eyes. "You really do love me?"

He stroked her cheek with the pad of his thumb. "With everything in my heart and all the words in the world will never describe how wonderful I think you are. What do you say, will you spend Christmas with me?" he asked.

Her smile felt too big for her face. "Of course—I was

hoping...I still can't believe my Christmas wish is coming true," she said, suddenly feeling shy in the glow of his love.

Devon's lips touched hers again, feather light and gentle at first. Then his kiss deepened, a sensual, smoldering journey that had Annie's doubts melting into oblivion.

"Wait." She pulled away and looked at him. "You told me once that you had two plans. One was to darken my doorstep. What was Plan B?"

His blush seemed to turn even the roots of his hair red. He reached down and pulled out mistletoe from his coat pocket.

"I was going to chase you around the café with this." He handed her the flower.

Annie laughed, her joy filling her entire body until she felt as light and bubbly as soda.

"I tell you what." She gave the mistletoe back to him. "I'll run slowly."

Then she backed away. She didn't even manage two baby steps before he caught her in his arms.

"Annie Langdon," he said. "You're the best Christmas present a man ever had. And now that I have you, I'm never going to let you go."

Annie smiled. "Devon, I don't intend to let you." Then she linked her hands around his neck, pulled his head towards hers, and suited action to her words.