



JANA RICHARDS

ROMANCE SAMPLER

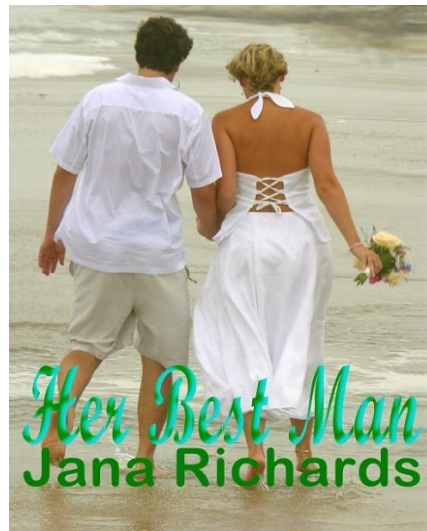
LEFT AT THE ALTAR SERIES

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Her Best Man

Book 1 Left at the Altar Series

Sarah Stevens experiences a bride's worst nightmare; being dumped at the altar. When she goes on the Caribbean cruise meant to be her honeymoon in order to lick her wounds, she discovers her ex-fiancé has sent his brother, Will Marshall, the former best man, on the cruise as well. Everyone on board thinks they're newlyweds, and Sarah is too embarrassed to set them straight. How is she supposed to share a tiny cabin with a man she barely knows? How is she supposed to pretend that she and Will are on their honeymoon? Even worse, how can she keep from falling in love with him? Sarah discovers the best man for her really is the best man.



Chapter One

"Do you Brad, take this woman Sarah, to be your lawful wedded wife?"

Will Marshall waited expectantly for his brother's "I do" along with the bride and the guests assembled in the church. A few seconds passed, and then a few more, and still Brad remained silent.

A murmur reverberated through the church. The minister cleared his throat.

Will couldn't see Brad's face, but he caught the tremor that shook his brother's shoulders. He glanced at the bride and their gazes locked for a second. He'd only met Sarah Stevens the previous evening at the rehearsal and didn't know her, but he easily read the anxiety in her eyes. She stood completely still, her body rigid as if bracing for a crash. The only movement Will detected was a slight quiver of petals and ribbons as her bouquet of red roses trembled in her hands. Will shifted his

attention away from Sarah and stepped beside Brad. He touched his brother's shoulder.

"Are you all right?" he whispered.

Brad roused himself from his trance. "Yes, yes, I'm fine." He turned to the minister. "Can you repeat the question?"

The minister nodded slightly, his smile attempting to reassure the congregation that he'd dealt with nervous grooms before. "Okay, let's take it from the top. Do you Brad, take this woman Sarah, to be your lawful wedded wife?"

Will watched his brother's mouth open, the words ready to tumble out. But nothing came. Brad appeared shocked by his inability to speak. Will was pretty surprised too. Calm and steady Brad was the last guy he expected to fall apart at his own wedding.

Suddenly Brad's face turned an alarming shade of red. "I can't do this." He stepped away from Sarah. "I'm sorry, but I can't marry you."

For a second no one moved or made a sound or even breathed. Then everyone began talking at once. Isabelle Stevens jumped to her feet. Sarah's mother had appeared high-strung when Will met her last night, but now her strings had completely snapped. "What do you mean you can't marry Sarah? We've got dinner waiting for a hundred guests at the hotel. Sarah's cousins flew in all the way from Vancouver. I had an ice sculpture of two lovebirds made for the head table. Do you know how much an ice sculpture costs? You have to get married!"

Brad backed away from the wild-eyed woman. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Stevens."

"Sorry? You're sorry?" She advanced on Brad. "I'll give you sorry."

Before anyone could react, Isabelle Stevens slipped off her high-heeled shoe and began whacking Brad with it. "How dare you humiliate us this way? How am I going to explain this to anyone?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Stevens. I didn't mean to hurt you or Sarah. Ow," Brad cried, as the pointy heel of her shoe hit him in the chest.

"Mother, please," Sarah said, her face and voice full of mortification.

Isabelle hobbled on one shoe as she followed Brad around the front of the church. Sarah's father got to his feet and grabbed her by the shoulders. "For heaven's sake, Isabelle. You're making a spectacle of yourself."

All the angry energy rushed out of her like the air from a punctured balloon, and she began to wail. "Oh, how could this happen? How could he do such a thing to us? What'll I tell my bridge club?"

While Isabelle's hysterics captured everyone's attention, Brad took the opportunity to make a run for a side door, turning back one last time to look at Sarah before

making his getaway. Will stood immobile, stunned by this turn of events. To say this behavior was out of character for Brad was putting it mildly. He'd never heard his brother utter so much as an unkind word to anyone.

The bridesmaid put her arm around Sarah for support. Sarah stared at Will, shock and humiliation replacing the fear he'd seen in her eyes moments ago. She looked desperately fragile and completely helpless, as if on the edge of breaking. Her wedding gown added to the picture of fragility; the fine, white fabric seemed to shimmer and float around her, giving her an ethereal quality.

For a second Will felt an overpowering urge to hold her in his arms and comfort her. He even found himself moving towards her before he abruptly stopped. What the hell was he doing? He was no white knight bent on rescuing damsels in distress. His first loyalty belonged to his brother.

Sarah lifted her chin with dignity, her voice so soft Will could barely hear her. "You're the best man. You need to look after the groom."

As their gazes locked once more, Will rethought his earlier assessment of the bride. She might look fragile, but he suspected Sarah Stevens possessed a core of pure steel.

With a curt nod at Sarah, Will sprinted out the side door. He ran to the sidewalk, looking down the street both ways. His brother was running down the snowbank-lined Ottawa street and Will started after him. He fought for balance on the icy walk, cursing his slippery, rented shoes. Luckily, Brad's shoes were just as slippery. He lost his balance and fell flat on his back. When Will finally caught up to him, Brad was still lying on the street.

"With any luck," he said, looking up at the sky, "a snowplow will come along and bury me."

Will extended a hand to pull him up. "Let's get out of here before *you* turn into an ice sculpture."

As he helped Brad to his feet, he couldn't help thinking of the irony of the situation. For the first time in their lives, Will was helping Brad out of a sticky situation instead of the other way around. He was the one who usually screwed up.

At least he'd never dumped a woman at the altar.

* * * *

Sarah led her mother's cousin Mabel to her front door. "Thank you for coming. I appreciate your support."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of leaving you alone at a time like this." Mabel's beady eyes shone with pure delight. She did her best to conceal her glee, but it was clear she reveled in Sarah's, and especially her mother's, misfortune. Sarah was sure the old woman hadn't had this much fun since the last stock market crash.

"I think Mother needs some rest now," she said. Actually Sarah was the one who needed a rest. The afternoon had dragged interminably with a steady stream of guests. She pasted a smile on her face as she gently steered Mabel towards the door.

"I'll drop by tomorrow with my special chicken soup," Mabel said as Sarah helped her put on her coat.

"No!" Sarah's stomach knotted at the idea of going through this endless trail of visitors again tomorrow. She couldn't stand their pity and their insatiable desire to know all the details of the most humiliating experience of her life. Unfortunately, her mother thrived on the tea and sympathy routine. She'd invited her friends and family to come to the apartment to retrieve their wedding gifts and commiserate with her. All Sarah wanted to do was run and hide.

Mabel fixed her with a glare. "Is there something wrong with my special chicken soup?"

Sarah's smile felt like it was breaking her face. "No, of course not," she said. "I just wouldn't want you to go to all that trouble."

Mabel's small, dark eyes gleamed with malicious pleasure. "Oh, no trouble at all, dear. I'd be happy to help."

Sarah's heart sank. What she longed to do was to tell the old lady where she could stick her chicken soup. But she was far too polite and, if she were truthful with herself, far too fearful of confrontation to say and do what she really felt. How could she go through this again tomorrow without going stark raving mad?

"Goodnight, Mabel."

"Goodnight, my dear. I'll see you tomorrow." Sarah was sure she heard the old woman cackle as she closed the door.

"Old witch," she muttered.

"Do you mean dear cousin Mabel?" Sarah's best friend and almost bridesmaid Daniela DiPietro stepped into the front hallway with a cup of tea. "That dear, sweet old lady? I'm sure she wouldn't kill a fly. Maybe torture it bit, but never kill it. Where's the fun in that?"

Sarah laughed in spite of herself. She gave her friend a hug. "Oh Dani, what would I do without you?"

"I shudder to think." Dani took Sarah's arm and led her into the kitchen. "Come sit down and have a cup of tea with me. You look dead on your feet."

Dani was right. Weariness threatened to overwhelm her, but she still had her mother to deal with. "I should check on Mom, make sure she's okay."

Her friend laid a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Sit. Your mother is just fine. She's holding court in the living room with her bridge buddies, giving them all the gory details. Trust me, she's enjoying herself immensely."

Sarah dropped into the nearest chair. "It was bad enough being dumped in public by my fiancé, but having my mother go postal on him in the church is beyond humiliation." She shook her head. "How did she manage to turn this around so that she's the injured party? You'd think Brad broke up with her."

Dani sipped her tea and said nothing, but her eyes spoke volumes. Sarah and her friend had debated the subject of her mother ever since Isabelle had moved herself into Sarah's apartment following her parents' breakup three months previously. Dani was of the opinion that Sarah should kick her mother out and let her learn how to look after herself. It wasn't that Isabelle couldn't afford to get her own place; she'd received a sizable inheritance when her own mother had died. But Isabelle had never once lived on her own. She constantly told Sarah how lonely she'd be, rattling around an apartment by herself.

"Okay, I know she's something of a drama queen, but she's still my mother. You can't expect me to just kick her out in the snow."

Dani flashed her a look of injured innocence. "I didn't say a word."

"You didn't have to. Those eyes of yours are saying plenty."

Isabelle chose that moment to poke her nose through the kitchen door. "Could you girls put on another pot of tea? And maybe set some of those cookies that Mabel brought on a nice china plate, not that tacky everyday stuff you have." She sighed dramatically. "I'd do it myself but I'm just so exhausted." She turned on her heel and left, having issued her royal command.

The two young women stared at one another, until Dani finally said, "I'll do it. Why don't you go to your room and try to get some rest? We'll likely have a long day tomorrow, returning gifts and dealing with guests."

Sarah's stomach began to protest, and panic clawed at her brain. "I can't do this again tomorrow, Dani. I need to get away somewhere where nobody knows me and I can think and try to figure out what to do."

"I know," Dani said, sympathy shimmering in her dark brown eyes. "You must be feeling heartbroken over Brad."

"Please don't mention that man's name," Sarah said. "Right now I'm so angry at him I could spit." She concentrated on the anger so she didn't have to think about her deep embarrassment and humiliation. What a cliché she was, the poor, pathetic bride jilted at the altar.

Speculation and gossip had probably already spread among her relatives and co-workers with the speed of an infectious disease. Even her young students in her

kindergarten class would wonder why their teacher was still Miss Stevens instead of Mrs. Marshall.

She could just hear the whispers. *Brad was in love with another woman. Brad was in love with another man. Brad had finally realized how frightfully boring she was. Brad had slept with Sarah and discovered how miserably inept and inexperienced she was.*

Ha, she thought, the laugh is on them.

She and Brad had never slept together. She'd wanted to wait until they were married and Brad had respected her wishes. Sarah felt a twinge of remorse. To be honest, having sex with Brad hadn't been a high priority for her. Maybe if she'd just done it, they'd be together right now. The fact that she was spending what was supposed to be her wedding night making tea for her mother and her friends wasn't lost on Sarah.

"I don't blame you for being angry," Dani said. "I'd be angry too if a man did that to me, especially someone I loved with all my heart the way you loved Brad."

"If someone dumped you at the altar, your six big brothers would make your groom look like a gory Italian pastry."

Dani's eyes lit up. "Now there's an idea. What do you say? I make a few calls, and Brad gets his ass kicked."

"You're not serious," Sarah said.

"They'd only hurt him a little, I promise. Just enough for him to appreciate the error of his ways. A few bruises, but no broken bones."

"Dani!" Sarah didn't know whether to laugh or to be appalled. She also didn't know how seriously to take her friend. Dani was as peace-loving as the next woman, but every once in a while her hot-tempered Mediterranean heritage bubbled to the surface.

"Thanks for the offer, hon, but I think I'll pass." She had a sudden picture of herself in her wedding gown and high heels, kicking Brad's butt all the way down the aisle of the church. The visual pleased her immensely.

"Suit yourself," Dani said with a shrug. "But I still think it's a crummy way for a person who says they love you to behave."

Sarah swallowed hard. This talk about love made her wonder why she was more upset at the way Brad broke up with her than the idea of losing Brad himself. She hadn't even cried yet. Was it a delayed reaction or was there something wrong with her? She'd just lost the love of her life. Hadn't she?

Glumly, she wondered what happened to her now. Would she end up a pathetic spinster with a house full of cats, serving tea and cookies to her mother and her

friends for the rest of her life? Was there some flaw in her personality that made her unlovable? She pushed the tea away, suddenly nauseated by the smell.

"What about the cruise?" Dani asked.

"The cruise?" Sometimes her friend's mind worked so quickly she had to scramble to keep up.

"You know, the honeymoon cruise in the Caribbean, the one Brad booked for the two of you. You showed me the ticket."

Dani's face lit with excitement. "Your passport is ready and your bags are all packed. You could go yourself. Brad wouldn't dare use his ticket after what he did to you."

She shook her head. "No, I couldn't do that." The thought of being captive on a boat for seven days had seemed claustrophobic to her but she'd gone along with it because Brad had seemed so excited about the idea, and had promised to take her to see some Mayan ruins.

"Well, okay then. Maybe we can find you a hotel room downtown somewhere for a couple of days. You could stay at one of those places with a spa and let them pamper you. You need some serious relaxation therapy." Dani poured hot water into a teapot and swirled it around to warm the pot before making the tea. "We might have a hard time getting a room. The hotels get pretty booked over the Christmas holidays."

It had seemed so romantic to get married the day after Christmas. Sarah had talked Brad into the Christmas wedding because it had felt vitally important back in September to have the ceremony as soon as possible. If he had misgivings about the hasty wedding he never mentioned it to her. The plan had been for Sarah to move in with Brad after the wedding, while her mother stayed in her old apartment, at least till she found something she liked better. Sarah had been counting the days until her move. Once or twice she'd had the disquieting thought that she was marrying Brad more because she wanted to flee her mother than because she loved him.

Her mother entered the kitchen carrying the cordless phone, a pleased expression on her face. "Good news, Sarah. Mabel's daughter Constance is coming to stay with us next week. Mabel didn't want us to be alone. Isn't it wonderful to have family who cares so much?"

In that instant Sarah saw her future flash in front of her eyes. For the next week she'd be expected to wait hand and foot on both her mother and Constance, who was only slightly less predatory than her mother. They would moan constantly about how Sarah had been dumped at the altar while a steady stream of her mother's friends and relations dropped by to witness the car wreck her life had become. She wouldn't even be allowed to escape to work because school was

closed for the holidays. In that moment of crystal clear insight she knew exactly what she had to do.

"Well, I hope the two of you have fun," she said, "because I'm not going to be here. I'm going cruising."

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There Goes the Groom

Book 2 – Left at the Altar Series

Eight years ago Tony left Olivia at the altar, sure she didn't really want to marry him. Now he's back, and they're forced to work together.

Coming home isn't easy for Tony. The choices he's made with his career and his life have resulted in an uncomfortable relationship with his father. Even before Tony's return, Olivia began questioning the depth of her love for her fiancé, a man she chose because he was safe and reliable. The last thing she wants is a faithless marriage like the one her parents suffered through.

When Tony, who never stopped loving her, insists her fiancé is the wrong man for her, Olivia sets out to prove him wrong. But the sexual chemistry between them is still strong, and so are her feelings for him. Even so, how can she break her engagement, hurt her fiancé as she was once hurt? And how can she trust Tony not to abandon her like he did before?

If anyone does the jilting this time, she will.



Prologue

She was going to faint. Or throw up. Or trip over her dress. Perhaps all three, possibly at the same time.

Olivia Taylor's legs trembled as she walked up the aisle of the church on her father's arm, a smile frozen on her face. Was she out of her mind? She was barely twenty years old. What did she know about marriage?

Olivia amended that thought. In the past few weeks she'd learned more about marriage than she cared to know. She stole a glance at her father, so tall and distinguished, his smile confident and relaxed, as if he didn't have a care in the world. Olivia shuddered, her limbs shaking with anger. How could he act as if nothing had happened? How could he pretend nothing had changed?

Everything had changed.

Tony stood at the altar looking handsome in his rented tux. Her heart lightened. Her beautiful, wonderful fiancé. She loved Tony DiPietro with all her heart. He was smart, funny, kind, and his touch sent her hormones into overdrive. Tony was everything a potential husband should be.

But did she want to marry him?

Her bouquet quivered in her hand. Where had that thought come from? Of course she wanted to marry Tony. She loved him and she knew he loved her.

But was love enough?

She wanted to scream at the little voice in her head to shut up. She forced her smile to shine a little brighter.

Olivia and her father reached the front of the church and her father handed her over to Tony. Tony's hands were cold and clammy, and she noticed a bead of sweat on his brow. He managed a smile for her and she beamed back at him. Her mother's voice played in her brain. "Nobody needs to know your world is falling apart." Olivia felt her smile dim a little.

The minister began the marriage liturgy in a loud, monotone voice, droning on about loving and obeying, forever and ever, Amen. Soon they came to the part where the vows were to be said. Tony and Liv faced each other while the minister recited the vows. Tony repeated the words after him.

"I, Anthony James DiPietro, take you, Olivia Jane Taylor, to be my lawful wedded wife, from this day forward, till death do us part."

The impact of the words hit Olivia. They were promising to love each other for the rest of their lives. How could anyone make a promise like that? How could she possibly know at twenty how she would feel at forty?

She swallowed and closed her eyes for a moment, thrusting the thought from her mind. All she knew was that she loved Tony. They'd have to figure out this marriage thing as they went along.

Like her parents figured it out?

Something inside Olivia snapped, like an elastic band reaching its breaking point.

What if she and Tony didn't make it?

The minister continued the liturgy. "Olivia, repeat after me, 'I, Olivia Jane Taylor—"
"I can't marry you."

Olivia stared at Tony, stunned by his words.

"What do you mean you can't marry me?" Olivia whispered. The idea that Tony didn't want to marry her stung her pride.

Tony shook his head, his eyes full of misery. "I can't."

The minister looked from Tony to Olivia, his round face turning an alarming shade of red. He mopped his brow with the sleeve of his vestments.

"Wait a minute," he asked. "Are you certain about this?"

Olivia looked into Tony's dark eyes. She saw sadness there, but also conviction.

"Yes," he said.

For a moment the church remained deathly quiet, then suddenly exploded in a cacophony of excited voices and shouts. The organist took the noise as her cue to begin playing 'O Promise Me'.

"Are you out of your mind?" Nick, Tony's brother and best man, cuffed Tony on the shoulder. "You can't just walk out of your own wedding!"

Tony's sister Daniella hitched up her bridesmaid dress with one hand and smacked her brother Nick in the chest with her bouquet. "Leave him alone, Nicky."

Nick and Dani began a spirited argument to which his other four brothers, their wives and Olivia's three other bridesmaids eagerly and loudly entered. The minister put up his hands and raised his voice in an attempt to quell the dispute, but was soundly ignored. She heard Tony's mother crying quietly in the front pew and her parents quarrelling noisily in the pew beside them. Olivia felt strangely disconnected from the melee surrounding her. She and Tony faced each other in the eye of the storm.

"I'm sorry, Olivia," he said. "You deserve so much more than I can give you. I'm sorry, it just won't work."

Panic rose in her throat. "Tony, don't do this, please."

"I know you're not happy, Liv. I just want you to be happy."

Tony leaned forward and kissed her cheek, his lips soft and warm on her skin.

"Take care of yourself." His voice caught on a sob and he swallowed. "Be happy, sweetheart."

With a final squeeze of her hand he turned and walked out of the church.

While the arguments raged around her, Olivia stood motionless, unable to process exactly what had just happened. Had Tony really told her he didn't want to marry her?

Her first reaction was intense sadness, followed closely by anger. How dare he humiliate her like this? How dare he tell her he loved her only to abandon her?

On the heels of that thought came her second reaction. Profound relief made her lightheaded, almost giddy. She didn't have to get married today.

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Always a Bridesmaid

Book 3 – Left at the Altar Series

Dani Dipietro has always considered herself an ugly duckling in a family of swans. She's the bridesmaid her friends count on, but never the woman any man wants for his bride. So she plays the funny girl and guards her emotions, and her secrets, closely.

When Zach Morrison was dumped at his wedding, Dani was there to help him through the humiliation. A year later they meet again and once more Zach needs her help. To fend off the unwanted attentions of his former fiancé, he asks Dani to pretend to be his girlfriend. They play their roles a little too well, and make believe turns into reality. But their relationship comes crashing down around them when Zach's trust issues cause him to accuse Dani of cheating. Telling the truth means that Dani will betray a friend, something she will never do. But keeping her secrets means she may be destined to remain a bridesmaid forever.



Chapter One

This was it. Definitely. She'd never be a bridesmaid again. She really meant it this time.

Daniella DiPietro pasted a smile on her face as she walked slowly down the aisle to the strains of "Here Comes the Bride." The three inch heels the bride insisted she wear pinched her toes, and the bridesmaid dress, though stylish, was an uncomfortable size too small. When Chantal Campbell's first bridesmaid suddenly backed out and Dani reluctantly accepted the job, she was stuck with the ill-fitting dress, since there was no time to order one that fit properly. A seamstress did her best with alterations, and a sturdy pair of Spanx helped contain her curvy figure within the slim, strapless column of bright pink satin, but the sweetheart neckline exposed much more of her ample cleavage than she felt happy showing. She felt like an exhibitionist, with her breasts practically spilling out of the dress. One false move and she'd flash the congregation.

Dani clamped down on her embarrassment. The things she did in the name of friendship.

Friendship? Though they'd been friends in university, she hadn't spoken to the bride in years. But she'd remained friends with Fiona, Chantal's sister, and when she begged her to help, Dani simply couldn't say no. What a soft touch she was.

She watched Zach Morrison, the groom, as he waited at the front of the church for his bride, his eyes focused on the door through which she was about to enter. Lordy, he was even more gorgeous now than the last time she'd seen him, some eight years ago. His thick, dark hair was a little too long to be considered proper business length, but not so long as to fall into Eighties rock star territory. The dark strands curled around his ears and the nape of his neck, and one lock fell rakishly across his forehead. A long list of attributes completed the picture: prominent cheek bones, a strong jaw and an elegantly shaped mouth, not to mention broad shoulders, slim hips and blue eyes to die for. But even more important, Zach was a nice guy. Maybe too nice for Chantal.

This wasn't their first trip to the rodeo. Eight years ago, they'd been engaged until Chantal had called it off, and then unexpectedly married someone else.

But here they were, eight years and two divorces later--both Chantal's--and about to marry. Perhaps it was meant to be. For Zach's sake, Dani hoped Chantal treated him right this time.

Finally she reached the front of the church and took her place. A moment later, Fiona joined her. Tall, slim Fiona looked like a runway model in the bridesmaid gown instead of an overstuffed pink sausage like her. Despite starving herself the last couple of weeks, the dress was still too tight. As if reading her thoughts, her stomach rumbled ominously. She was hungry enough to gnaw off her own arm.

Finally the bride made her entrance through the church doors on her father's arm, looking radiant and gorgeous. As usual, Chantal was the most beautiful woman in the room. Her elegant strapless gown was a white silk confection that fit her perfect size two figure flawlessly. Her glorious blonde curls had been artfully arranged in a chic updo that showed off her long, graceful neck and creamy shoulders.

Dani swallowed her rising envy. She felt as though she'd been tossed in a time machine and sent back eight years to the days when she'd played ugly duckling to Chantal's beautiful swan.

She didn't enjoy feeling envious any more than she enjoyed feeling like an ugly duckling, not when she'd worked so hard to get past both emotions.

Chantal reached the altar and took Zach's hand. The minister began the marriage liturgy, the usual stuff about love being patient and kind, bearing all things, and so on and so on. Dani stopped listening, too uncomfortable to concentrate. Besides, she'd heard the spiel more times than she cared to remember. She occupied herself by calculating the number of hours until she could peel off the gown and throw on a pair of comfy sweatpants.

Suddenly the doors of the church crashed open. A man shouted, "You can't marry him, Chantal! I love you and I know you love me!"

Dani turned to stare, along with everyone else in the congregation. The man in the doorway wore a rumpled grey suit, with his red-and-blue striped tie hanging askew. His blonde hair stood up on end and his hands were fisted at his sides.

"Who the hell is that, Chantal?" Zach's question was urgent. "What's he talking about?"

Chantal's face turned whiter than her dress. "He's my first husband," she said in an undertone. Turning to the blonde-haired man, she yelled, "How dare you disrupt my wedding, Harry! Go home."

Harry strode down the aisle toward Chantal. "No! I can't let you make the biggest mistake of your life by marrying this guy. You know it would be wrong."

Zach moved to stand between Chantal and the intruder. "What's he talking about, Chantal?"

Harry stopped and raised his hands. "I don't have any quarrel with you, Zach. She's never going to make you happy. She still loves me. She told me so last night."

Dani heard everyone in the congregation gasp in unison. Was Chantal in love with this guy? If she was, why were they all here, supposedly celebrating her union with Zach? The thought must have also occurred to him. She had a front row seat to the disbelief clouding his eyes.

"Is this true? Are you in love with him?" he said.

"No! I love you! You've got to believe me."

"Tell him the truth, Chantal. Tell him you were in my bed just two nights ago. Tell him!"

She bit her lip. "I swear, it didn't mean anything. Last minute nerves got the best of me."

For a moment Zach said nothing. His face betrayed no emotion. But Dani saw his throat work, as if he were holding back a torrent of feelings.

"So what he's saying is true? You've been sleeping with him since we got back together?"

Chantal lifted her chin and raised tear-filled eyes to his. "It was only the one time, I swear! I didn't mean for it to happen."

For several long seconds he stared into her eyes as if trying to delve into her innermost thoughts. Finally he straightened his shoulders and gave her an almost imperceptible nod. "If you want him, then go. I'm done." Without another word he marched to a side door.

"Zach wait, I'm sorry! Please, don't go! I love you!"

He opened the door and left the sanctuary. The click of the latch echoed in the quiet church.

Shocked silence greeted his departure. Dani stood motionless, too stunned to even breathe. Mike, one of Zach's groomsmen, quickly left through the same side door. Dani hoped he found Zach and made sure he was okay. Her heart ached at the thought of the devastation he must be experiencing.

Chantal remained at the front of the church, still staring toward the side door. Harry approached her and touched her hand.

"Come with me, darling. Let's get out of here."

She recoiled from his touch. "Don't you dare touch me! This is all your fault!"

"I couldn't let you marry him. I love you."

"You've ruined everything!"

She began to cry, tears running down her cheeks and ruining her makeup. Dani put her arm around her shoulders. Though she hated what she'd done to Zach, Chantal was genuinely hurting, and Dani couldn't bear to kick a girl when she was down.

Todd, the second groomsman and Fiona's boyfriend, grabbed Harry's left arm while Chantal's father grabbed his right.

"It's time for you to go," Foster Campbell said as he pulled Harry away from his daughter. "You've caused enough trouble for one day."

"Chantal, I love you! We can make it work this time, I know we can. Call me!" Harry cried before they tossed him out the door.

Fiona leaned close to her sister. "Is it true? Did you really sleep with Harry just two days ago?"

Chantal raised her chin defiantly. "I made a mistake, okay? Everybody makes mistakes."

"A mistake? A mistake is when you put too much sugar in your coffee, not when you cheat on your fiancé! That's something else entirely."

"And of course you're so perfect, you've never done anything wrong."

"At least I've never humiliated my family in front of everyone they know." Fiona snapped.

People in the congregation watched with keen interest, some of them pulling out cell phones to take pictures. In minutes, this fiasco would be all over the Internet. Dani could imagine the title of the YouTube video: *Two-timing Bride dumped at the altar*.

She stepped between Fiona and Chantal and whispered, "Let's save this argument for somewhere a little less public."

Todd returned and escorted Chantal and Fiona to one of the waiting limos. Chantal kept her chin up, her expression haughty, as if daring anyone to remark on her behavior.

Dani gave her high marks for having plenty of nerve.

Chantal's parents followed closely behind them. Foster practically carried his sobbing wife down the aisle.

"What's going to happen to all the flower arrangements? And the reception? My beautiful reception is ruined!" It was so like Margaret Campbell to worry about flower arrangements and receptions when her daughter had just broken a good man's heart.

Shaking off her uncharitable thoughts, Dani gritted her teeth and headed back up the aisle. As the only member of the wedding party left, it fell to her to usher the guests from the church, since the minister didn't seem capable of doing it. She held up her hand to get everyone's attention.

She raised her voice. "Excuse me please. As you've probably already guessed, there will be no wedding today. The family requests that you all please leave the church quietly and quickly. Thank you for your cooperation and patience."

Fortunately, Mike returned and he helped her shepherd the guests from the church.

Once people began leaving, she took him aside. "How's Zach? Is he okay?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I couldn't find him. He must have hailed a cab and gone back to his apartment."

Her heart went out to Zach. He had to be traumatized by this turn of events. A wave of anger swept over her. How could Chantal do this to him? "You'll check on him, make sure he's okay?"

"As soon as we're done here." He nodded toward the front of the church. "What about Zach's mom and Chantal's grandfather? What should we do with them?"

She followed his gaze to the front pew where an older gentleman sat alone with a dark haired woman, both looking upset and bewildered. Despite all the tumult, they hadn't left their seats. Dani had met Chantal's grandfather, Campbell J. Campbell, years before and had found him to be a rather intimidating character. But at the moment he looked frail and vulnerable. She took a deep breath. "Don't worry, I'll look after them. You see about Zach."

"I will."

Whispering and gossiping, the congregation filed out of the church. Soon it was empty. Dani said goodbye to Mike, giving him her cell phone number so he could call her when he'd found Zach. She felt uneasy about him being alone, and wouldn't relax until she knew he was with friends.

But worrying about Zach would have to wait. She still had things to take care of.

She approached Zach's mother and Chantal's grandfather. Mr. Campbell was holding Adele Morrison's hand. Zach's mother had worked for years as Camp Campbell's housekeeper and personal assistant. Their association had been the reason Zach and Chantal had met in the first place.

"There's a car waiting outside," Dani said gently. "It can take you back to your house. Why don't you let me help you to it?"

Adele blinked back tears, clearly fighting to hold herself together. She rose to her feet and helped Camp get to his. The elderly gentleman leaned heavily on his cane as he offered her his arm.

"Chin up, my dear. We have nothing to be embarrassed about."

Adele took a fortifying breath and looped her arm through his. "Yes, you're right. Let's get out of here."

They walked out of the church and down the steps to the sidewalk, their heads held high. Dani was struck by their dignity, although she sensed in Camp a repressed anger waiting to be unleashed. For her part, she only wanted to escape the church and get away from the curious stares of guests still milling about, no doubt hoping to hear some juicy gossip.

By the time they reached the second limo, the car carrying Fiona and Todd and the others was pulling away from the curb. Dani helped Camp, and then Adele into the vehicle. She was about to enter the limo herself when Adele let out a cry.

"Oh no! My purse! I must have left it in the church."

"I can find it for you," Dani soothed. "What does it look like?"

"It's a small black beaded clutch." She looked close to tears again. "I'm so sorry to be such a nuisance."

"Of course you're not a nuisance." Dani gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "I'll find it and bring it to you, okay?"

Adele gave her a tremulous smile. "You're very kind. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She knocked on the window to get the limo driver's attention, and asked him to wait while she ran inside and looked for the purse. Hiking up her dress, she trudged back up the stairs of the church, her toes screaming in protest. The only good news about this fiasco was that she could ditch the killer shoes and devil dress sooner than she'd expected.

The minister was alone in the church when she reentered. He hurried down the aisle toward her, vestments flapping.

"My goodness, what a turn of events!" he said. "I've never had anything like this happen at one of my weddings. It's very disconcerting for me."

"I'm sure it is." *It wasn't exactly a bowl of cherries for the bride and groom either.*

"Some people just aren't cut out for marriage. I blame it on the Internet. It's the Devil's tool, you know."

She wasn't sure how to respond to that. Edging around the minister she said, "If you'll excuse me, I need to retrieve a lost purse."

"Of course," he said, as if giving her his blessing. "I have an appointment I need to get to as well. Good day, miss."

She breathed a sigh of relief, glad he was leaving. "Good day."

As soon as he left the church, she hurried to the front pew where Adele had been seated. Sure enough, a small beaded bag lay on the floor under the second row of pews. First she tried to move the bag with her foot, but her dress was too tight to allow much leg movement. So she hitched up her dress and got down on her hands and knees to retrieve it. Her legs and feet instantly tangled in the fabric. "Damn it all to hell. I hate this bloody dress!"

"What are you doing down there?"

Startled, she banged her head on the pew.

"Ouch. Damn it."

Instant embarrassment filled her. She was on the floor on her hands and knees with her rear end facing the man, not exactly her best feature.

But at least he wasn't viewing her from the front. The dress could barely contain her bosom as she leaned forward. Why couldn't she have normal-sized boobs like everybody else?

"I just need to pick up this purse. I'll be out of here in a jiffy."

As she stretched out her hand to grab the bag, her knee caught in the material. Before she could disentangle herself, the sound of fabric ripping in two echoed in the empty church. A moment later she felt a rush of cool air across her backside. Her stomach lurched in panic.

"Oh God!"

She reached a hand behind her and felt the large hole where the seam had given way. She desperately tried to pull the two pieces of material together while tears of humiliation threatened to fall. But she'd be damned if she'd cry in front of whoever was currently behind her and getting a close up view of her underwear.

How exactly did she gracefully get herself out of this ridiculous situation?

"Do you need help getting up?" His voice sounded so familiar. Was it Zach? *Oh God!*

"No, no, I'm fine. Just give me a minute."

She tried to get to her feet while holding the torn dress together with her left arm. But her legs kept getting tangled in the fabric. She simply couldn't get enough leverage with one arm. She felt like a turtle that had been rolled onto its back and couldn't right itself. Worse still, the more she struggled, the lower the bodice of the dress slipped, threatening to expose her completely.

The man gave an exasperated sigh. Dani felt strong arms around her waist, and let out an indignant squeal as he lifted her up and set her on her feet. Could this situation get any more embarrassing?

Apparently it could. Her mortification quadrupled when she turned around and confirmed that Zach was her rescuer. If she had to have a wardrobe malfunction, why did he, of all people, have to be there to witness it?

Please God, let a black hole swallow me right now.

He shrugged out of his tuxedo jacket. "Here, take this."

Keeping her face averted, she reached for the jacket, grateful to find that on her it reached nearly to her knees, long enough to cover the split seam. This wasn't the first time she'd been embarrassed because of her weight and her over-large chest,

but it was probably the most humiliating. The only saving grace was that the dress hadn't ripped in front of the entire congregation.

After wrapping the jacket around herself like a security blanket, she felt brave enough to meet his gaze. "I thought you'd left." If she'd been the one dumped at the altar, she would have found the nearest bar and drunk herself into oblivion. Which would have taken all of two drinks.

He shrugged a broad shoulder. "I was in a back room. I just needed to be alone for a while."

"Sorry for the interruption."

"That's okay. I was just leaving." He bowed his head, his shoulders drooping. "I was waiting for everyone to leave. I didn't want to talk to anybody about...about what happened."

Her heart cried for him. Zach was a good guy. He didn't deserve the humiliation Chantal had heaped on him. She wanted to tell him how badly she felt for him, wanted to let him know that she would gladly listen if he felt like talking. But their relationship had always been superficial, one that didn't include intimate heart to heart conversations. Offering sympathy would only embarrass him more.

So she'd do what she did best. She'd make him laugh.

"I realize you've had a bad day, but hey, look at me. I got squeezed into a dress that makes me look like an overstuffed Barbie doll. My shoes are killing me, and then to top it all off, the dress from Hell splits across my ass so the whole world can see my underwear."

One corner of Zach's mouth quirked in a brief grin. "Yeah, you've got it all over me. I've only been cheated on and humiliated on my wedding day. For the record, the whole world didn't see your underwear, just me."

She did her best to keep a straight face. "I happen to take my semi-nakedness seriously, even if there's only one person to witness it."

He chuckled, a deep rumbling sound that warmed her heart and did funny things to her insides. But despite his laughter, his blue eyes were full of pain. Dani wished there was something more she could do for him.

"Thanks for the loan of the jacket," she said. "Can I hang on to it for a while?"

"Of course. Thank you for providing a diversion."

"Always glad to provide comic relief." She lifted a handful of the neon pink satin spilling out from beneath the tuxedo jacket. "It wasn't a much of a stretch, seeing how I was already dressed like a clown."

Zach's lips twitched. "It's not that bad."

"Please. This pink is bright enough to be visible from space."

He laughed out loud, and she was struck by the warmth of his smile. Once upon a time, she'd had a secret little crush on him. He was way out her league and had been devoted to Chantal, but what red-blooded woman wouldn't lust after a man as handsome as Zach just a little bit, in the privacy of her bedroom?

"The best thing about this dress is that someone else paid for it." Dani was saving her money for something special and nothing was going to stand in her way.

"Chantal said she wanted the bridesmaid dresses to make a statement. In my case, the statement was, 'Get a different dress.'"

Hearing his fiancée's name instantly wiped the smile from his face. "She shouldn't have made you wear a dress you felt so uncomfortable in. Don't be so hard on yourself, Daphne."

Her heart fell. "Actually, it's Daniella, Daniella DiPietro. Everyone calls me Dani." She knew this was probably the longest conversation they'd had in their acquaintance, but it still hurt that he didn't remember her name.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Of course I know your name. I don't know what's the matter with me. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You've had a hell of a day. Not as bad as mine of course, but still lousy. It's not a big deal."

"It's a big deal to me. I'm really sorry."

Dani brushed aside his apology with a wave of her hand, trying not to let her disappointment show. She wasn't the kind of woman men remembered. Men remembered women like Chantal, beautiful, tall, slim blondes, with cute little turned up noses. Not short, dark, pudgy women with prominent Italian beaks.

"I should go. Your mother and Camp are waiting for me in the limo. Would you like a ride home with us?"

Zach shook his head. "Thanks, but I think I want to be alone for a while longer. Please tell my mom I'm fine."

"I will," she said. "Can I ask you to do one more favor for me? I promised your mother I'd bring her purse to her, and we both know what'll happen if try to crawl under there again." She pointed to the little beaded bag on the floor beneath the pew.

"Of course." He bent to retrieve it, giving her a close-up and personal view of his gorgeous, tight butt. She swallowed and looked away.

Zach straightened and handed her the bag. "There you go."

"Thank you. How do I get the jacket back to you?"

"Just drop it off at the rental place." He told her the address.

"Okay, I'll do that. Well, I have to go home now and burn this dress. Goodbye Zach."

"Goodbye, Daniella."

It surprised her that he called by her full given name. She blinked and looked into his face. The desolation she saw felt like a punch in the gut. He'd obviously loved Chantal and she'd hurt him deeply. Without thinking, she laid her hand on his arm.

"It's going to be all right."

He placed his hand over hers. Closing his eyes for a brief moment, he took a deep breath. "I know. I just..."

Wanting nothing more than to comfort, she wrapped her arms around his waist in a hug. He held her tightly, pulling her against him and burying his face in her neck. Dani inhaled the intoxicating scent of spicy aftershave laced with underlying notes of warm, clean male. How could Chantal treat a wonderful man like Zach this way?

She gently pulled away, keeping him at arm's length. "You're going to get past this, Zach."

"It doesn't feel like it right now."

"I know, but someday, when you're old and grey, you'll be sitting on the front porch with your wonderful wife of fifty years, and you'll say 'Thank Heaven Chantal cheated on me or I never would have met you.'"

He made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "Fifty years, eh?"

"Trust me."

Some lucky girl would snap Zach up in a minute, and if she was smart, she'd shower him with the love and consideration he deserved.

Some lucky girl, but not me.

Reluctantly, she took a step back. He squeezed her fingers before letting her go. With her heart pounding in her chest, and regret nipping at her heels, she hurried from the church.

Before she did something stupid, like kiss the jilted groom.

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