

Outrageous



Norah-Jean  
Perkin

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To my Mother,  
who, by word and example, taught me  
the true meaning of love.



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# Chapter One



It was the shoes that settled it. The ugly black Doc Martens jutting defiantly out from under Alix St. Germain's long, chiffon skirts, as defiantly as her raised chin juttet out from under her spiky, ink-black hair.

Matt Erickson swallowed hard. He might have been able to accept the fact that Miss St. Germain was younger than he wanted, and to accept the hairstyle and the multi-studded ears. Perhaps he might have been able to ignore the individual approach to fashion, to pretend he didn't see the shapely legs faintly visible through diaphanous skirts, to pretend the violet eyes staring at him out of a pale face had no effect on him.

But not the shoes. Never the shoes. Not on the nanny for his children. Not after all the problems he'd had.

Shock and disappointment started to give way to anger. The air in the outer office area of Waldrum's Home Help Agency, so cool only

moments before, now seemed overly warm. He turned to the woman at his side, who had been watching the wordless exchange with interest.

“Clarisse,” he said with a mildness he did not feel, “we have to talk.”

“Certainly,” Clarisse replied, nodding reassuringly at Miss St. Germain.

Once more Matt looked at the young woman on the other side of the room. She stood tall and uncaring, but now there was a hint of puzzlement in the amazing eyes.

“Excuse us, please,” he said. “There’s something Miss Waldrum and I have to discuss in private.”

Without another glance, he gripped Clarisse’s arm and ushered her into the next room. He released his grip once the door was shut behind them, and waited with a deceptive quiet for Clarisse to sit down behind her smoked glass and steel desk.

How different Clarisse Waldrum was from the woman in the next room, he thought. Sleek, blonde, as smoothly professional and confident as the woman in the next room was dark-haired and eclectic, a woman whose very stance shouted out a brash challenge.

With a shake of his head, he dismissed the disturbing image of the woman in the other room. He rested both hands on the cool glass of Clarisse’s desk.

“Clarisse,” he said quietly, no longer trying to

keep the frustration out of his voice, “what are you doing? This girl isn’t what I asked for. You know I wanted someone middle-aged, responsible, someone stable and mature.” *Not young and flighty like that girl out there*, he finished in his head.

“You’re right,” Clarisse said without missing a beat. She leaned back in her butter-soft leather chair, her grey eyes cool and confident. “She isn’t what you asked for. But she is what you need. And what your kids need.”

Matt bridled at her words. “Don’t tell me what I need,” he started. “I’ve had too many—”

“But that’s why you came to me, remember?” Clarisse cut him off as she rose to her feet. “You wanted a referral agency with experience, with a good track record. The best home help agency in Toronto. You know we specialize in hard-to-match cases, and we’ve got a great success rate. And that’s why I’ve picked this nanny for you.”

“Look, Clarisse.” Matt fought to keep his temper under control. No matter how tired he was, or how much his expectations had been dashed, getting mad wouldn’t solve his problem, or help his kids. “It’s precisely because I’ve listened to people at other agencies I’m in the mess I’m in now. That’s why I came to you, a friend. I trusted you to find me the kind of nanny or housekeeper I needed, to do what was best for us.”

“And I have,” she argued.

He had to hand it to Clarisse. She didn't give up easily.

She waved a manicured hand towards her steel filing cabinets. "You've seen Alix's references. They're wonderful. She only left her last employers because they were moving out of the country. She's—"

"No."

"Matt, please." Her tone softened. "I know she's younger than you wanted, but she *is* responsible. Besides," she added, her lips curving flirtatiously, her eyes taking on an extra gleam, "what about our date Friday night? What will you do for a babysitter?"

"No."

Clarisse crossed her arms, bit her lip, and looked at the floor. With a sigh, she sat in her chair again, then looked up at Matt. "All right. I'll find you someone else. But it's going to take some time, two or three weeks, maybe even a month."

Matt's mouth hardened into a grim line. It was his turn to cross his arms. He leaned back against the door. "And what am I supposed to do in the meantime? The kids are out of school at the end of next week."

Clarisse's brow creased. "Hmm. I don't have anyone else free, not for a temporary assignment, anyway."

She looked up at Matt, her eyes far too wide

and innocent. A tiny smile played around her lips.

“No one, that is, except the woman in the next room.”



Alix lounged against the back of the pickup's seat, trying to ignore her grim, if temporary, employer as he deftly maneuvered his way out of the press of Toronto's downtown rush hour traffic. She watched the passing store fronts with unseeing eyes, trying to act as cool and callow as he obviously thought she was.

*Not suitable!* Clarisse's words rang inside her head, wounding her deeply. *Not suitable!* She shut her eyes, trying to blot out the inarticulated fears that crowded the edge of her consciousness, trying to bolster her courage with red-hot indignation. So Mr. Matt Erickson found her unsuitable, did he?

She opened her eyes and turned toward her stone-faced employer, banging her knees against the battered suitcase wedged on the floor between them. Slowly and coolly she examined him, not caring if he noticed, not caring whether it was impertinent or not.

She might have found him handsome, she mused, if it wasn't for the fact he'd rejected her out of hand. The features in his tanned face were strong and uncompromising, his light brown hair

appealingly streaked by the sun, the blue eyes clear and vivid. Even the bits of plaster in his hair, the white coat of dust on his arms, and the grease-stained jeans didn't detract from the immediate impression of lean strength and confident masculinity he'd made with her in the first seconds they'd met.

On his left wrist, she noticed the narrow bracelet of braided leather, dark and burnished with age, and partially covering a paint-spattered watch. Curiosity flared, but Alix squelched it, turning away to resume her unseeing gaze out the window.

*Why* had he rejected her? Miss Waldrum—Clarisse—had told her he was a widower with three kids. He wanted someone older, someone more mature. Apparently he'd had some problem with a younger nanny.

But I *am* twenty-five, she thought indignantly, not all that young for a nanny. And my references are terrific.

She exhaled. It didn't seem to matter. He wasn't even willing to give her a chance.

Momentarily deflated, Alix sighed. Maybe she should have accepted the Holdens' invitation to accompany their family to Chicago, and forgotten about her schooling and her college degree for the moment. But it was too late now, she thought, playing with her earrings. Now she had no place to stay and no choice but to live with Matt Erickson and his family. At least until Clarisse

came up with a replacement for him and a new job for her.

Alix blinked, noticing for the first time they were no longer caught in the crush of noisy traffic, auto exhaust, and gasoline fumes. The straight, wide, congested business avenues had turned to curving, leafy streets bordered by gracious old brick homes in a wide range of styles and sizes.

Rosedale, thought Alix. Who would have thought a self-employed renovator like Matt Erickson could afford to live there? It was probably one of the smaller houses, she told herself. One he'd renovated himself.

They turned onto a wider street, the first to have a boulevard down the middle. The houses here were more substantial, with a tasteful array of Victorian and modern features. Many of them had double and triple garages.

Suddenly, the pickup slowed and Matt turned into a circular drive before a massive, ivy-covered yellow-brick home. Slim white columns guarded the entrance to the double doors while sparkling leaded glass windows graced the ground floor of the two-story home. Arched windows in the dormers suggested a finished third floor.

Alix barely restrained a gasp as the truck stopped before the gleaming oak double doors. He lived here? In this mansion? Even her previous employers, the Holdens—both doctors—hadn't lived in a house like this.

Her eyes full of the house, Alix didn't notice when her unhappy chauffeur jumped out of the truck, yanked her suitcase out after him, and came around to her side. The passenger door swung open and she almost fell out onto the paved drive.

Matt's hand shot out to steady her, grasping her arm with a disconcerting firmness. She flinched and pulled back out of his grip, fixing him with a disgruntled glare.

His fingers worked as his arm fell to his side. He looked at her, his blue eyes questioning, his brow creased. "Not having second thoughts, are you? About working for me for a couple of weeks?"

"No," Alix gulped out. Then, "Of course not," more matter-of-factly. She smiled as brightly as she could. Let him think she had bubble gum for brains. She'd die before she'd let him know how just the size of the house had shaken her to the roots, had made her wonder what she thought she was doing.

She jumped out of the truck, reining in her impulse to gawk at the impeccable landscaping, the beautiful brick work, and the gleaming leaded windows. I can do it, she told herself smartly. I'm as capable as anyone of acting as if I'd been born with a silver spoon in my mouth.

Matt opened the door and preceded her into the airy, high-ceilinged entranceway. Still holding her suitcase, he kicked off his workboots, slid open a

mirror-lined closet door and shoved them inside.

Alix knew she should remove her shoes. She'd caught the quick frown Matt had directed at her feet. But her hurt and insulted ego revolted. Why should she worry about propriety now? After all, she'd already been judged and found wanting.

Instead, she smiled gaily, swiped superficially at the mat, and swung into the vestibule, her flowing skirts swinging saucily about her legs. She wasn't going to let a mere house intimidate her. Or a man who didn't like anything about her.

Suddenly a small body hurtled by, missing her by inches and slamming into Matt's legs.

"Daddy!" the child squealed as a pair of plump brown arms wrapped around his leg. "You're home!"

"That's right, pumpkin."

He dropped the suitcase and swung the giggling child upwards for a giant hug. Alix watched, transfixed, as the disapproval and grim stoicism apparently reserved for her dropped from his face like a mask, replaced by sheer pleasure at the little girl's greeting. His eyes, a clear and vivid blue, sparkled, and his broad smile shone with tenderness. He kissed the child lightly on one chubby cheek, then on the tip of her nose. "Where's your brother, pipsqueak?"

"Over here."

A boy, about seven, with the same rosy complexion and curling white-blond hair as his sister,

stuck his head out from the side of the staircase. He smiled at his father, then turned his blue eyes on Alix. “Who are you?”

Alix couldn’t help it. She smiled. “Alix,” she said simply. “Alix St. Germain.” She was going to explain that she’d be their nanny for the next few weeks, but Matt cut her off.

“Where’s your sister?” he asked the boy, as he lowered the little girl to the floor. The child stared up at Alix solemnly while her brother responded.

“Upstairs. In her room. Doing her hair.” The curl of the boy’s lip and the scornful look he shot at Alix made it clear just what he thought of that.

“Just a moment.”

Matt walked over to the stairs, then mounted them two at a time. He disappeared around a bend in the staircase.

A tug at her skirt drew Alix’s attention back to the children. She looked down to find the little girl gazing up at her. “Are you our new nanny?” she asked.

“Not exactly.” Alix crouched to the little girl’s level, and took her warm, chubby hand. “I’ll be staying with you for a couple of weeks. Until your daddy finds another nanny. Until then, I’ll do everything a nanny would do.”

The child blinked, clearly not understanding. It didn’t stop her from chattering on. “My name is Ariel. I just had a birthday. I’m four.” She pointed at the boy, who gave Alix a self-conscious grin.

“That’s Josh. He’s seven. He thinks he knows everything. But I know he doesn’t.”

Alix smiled warmly. The one thing she’d always loved about little kids was their honesty. And these charmers were no exception. It was too bad—

“Alix. I like that name,” the little girl continued. Her hazel eyes, ringed with pale lashes, lit up. “I know. Maybe you can have the room next to mine.”

A heavy tread on the rose-carpeted staircase made Alix and Ariel look up simultaneously. Matt, followed by a willowy teenager with shoulder-length dark blonde hair, was almost to the landing.

“Daddy,” cried Ariel, dropping Alix’s hand. “Can Alix—”

“It’s Miss St. Germain,” Matt interrupted.

Alix rose to her feet. “It’s all right,” she said, “they can call me Alix. I—”

“It’s Miss St. Germain,” Matt continued as if she hadn’t spoken. He turned to the children. “I can see you’ve already met Ariel and Josh. This is Jessica. She’s thirteen.”

Jessica shrugged and gave Alix a bored look. The expression on her flawlessly beautiful face made it clear she had better things to do than waste time meeting the new nanny.

Alix smiled tightly, trying not to let the girl, or her father, get to her. She only had to put up with

this for two weeks. Just two weeks.

“Miss St. Germain is going to live with us for the next two weeks or so until we find a full-time nanny,” Matt continued, his voice flat. “In the meantime, she’ll be taking care of you when I’m at work, taking you to school and any special activities or camps.”

His gaze gentled as he looked from child to child. “I want you to be polite to her, and to mind what she says. Help her out whenever you can. You understand?”

The last words he aimed at Jessica. She acknowledged his comments with the slight raising of one fair eyebrow and the tightening of her lips, then turned and started back up the stairs.

Alix watched as a shadow crossed Matt’s face. It disappeared as he turned to her, his expression now that of a pleasant but uncaring stranger. “I’ll show you to your room now, before I shower. Dinner will be ready in about an hour.”

He picked up Alix’s suitcase again, and started up the stairs. Alix followed, Ariel chasing after her like a puppy dog.

Matt waited at the upstairs landing, a large central area off which ran hallways to both sides of the second story.

Before he could say anything, Ariel began again. “Daddy, can Miss—Miss—Miss Saint sleep in the room beside mine? Can she?”

Alix expected a brusque denial. Instead, Matt

hunkered down to the girl's level. It was clear he didn't like squelching the child's hopes, even when they involved Alix. "I'm sorry, pumpkin. Not this time. Miss St. Germain won't be here for long, so the best place for her is the guest room at the end of the hall, the one with the bathroom attached."

"But Daddy—"

"Shh, pumpkin. Enough. I've got things to talk to Miss St. Germain about. You go downstairs. See if you can convince your brother to let you play with his Batman figures."

The child hesitated, but the lure of Batman was too great. "Okay, Daddy."

She skipped off, sliding down the carpeted stairs on her bottom.

The tenderness dropped from his face as he rose to face Alix. He nodded to the hall to the left. "It's down there. Right at the end."

Alix walked ahead of Matt, passing several closed doors before she reached the last one. Matt reached past her, his arm brushing hers, to open the door.

Alix inhaled sharply. The room was a splendor of pale yellows, greens and pinks above a gleaming wood floor, with frothy lace curtains on the twin windows and matching spread on the double bed. It was the kind of room she'd always dreamed about as a child. A rocking chair, with a hand-knitted throw over one arm, faced a small television.

Nearby was a room-size fridge, and a delicate-looking secretary's desk. An oak door stood open to what appeared to be a small bathroom.

"Is everything all right?"

Alix was about to burble out how wonderful it was when she remembered why her stay was only temporary. "It'll do," she said offhandedly, walking to the middle of the room and gazing about critically.

Matt frowned. He bent his tall frame to put the suitcase down, then straightened, flexing his hands. For a fleeting moment, Alix was struck by how weary he seemed.

Then he looked straight at her, his blue eyes troubled. Inexplicably Alix's pulse quickened. She wondered uneasily what he was going to say now.

He ran a hand through his collar-length hair, not noticing when he dislodged bits of plaster. "Look," he said slowly, "I know this is awkward for you. It's awkward for me, too. And Clarisse is right. You're probably a very good nanny."

Alix's spirits lifted slightly, only to fall again with his next words. "But I just can't take any more chances. Not with the kids. Not again."

"But—"

He held up his hand. "The important thing is to make the best of a bad situation. We'll try to make your stay here as pleasant as possible. I appreciate the fact you're doing us a favor by

coming at all when what you really want is a permanent position. But I also think we need to get a few things straight if this is going to work.”

He cleared his throat. Although Alix was certain she would like what he had to say next even less, she was impressed by his honesty and directness. In her experience few people, particularly men, stated their position as clearly as he just had. But her reluctant admiration died with his next words.

“This week I expect you to take Josh to and from school, and Ariel to her daycare center. You have to be there for them, keeping an eye on them, including Jessica, when I’m not. Beyond that, you’ll be responsible for the laundry, a little housework, and meal preparation on the days the cleaning lady doesn’t come. But that’s as far as it goes.”

His tone grew harder, more clipped. “Your work day will end after supper each night. The children must continue to call you Miss St. Germain.”

His blue eyes, dark now with disapproval, seemed to drill right through her. “Most important of all, I want you to promise me you’ll stay out of their lives. I don’t want them to get attached to you in any way, do you understand?”

Alix grew still under his steely gaze, understanding all too well. *Not only didn’t he like her, he didn’t think she was good enough to care for his children, even for a few days.*

Hurt welled up in her again, but she hid it the way she always did, with a cocky smile and a jut of her chin.

“Sure,” she said. She took a step backward and bounced onto the bed, then looked up at him again as brassily as she could.

“Anything you say, Mr. Erickson.”

## Chapter Two



As Matt pulled his pickup into the combined garage and workshop, he could not only hear the cranked up music, but could feel the vibrations of the pounding bass grinding out one of Madonna's older songs.

He swung out of the truck cab and slammed the door. Dammit! It wasn't just that he already had a headache. Or that he wasn't in the mood for dinner with Clarisse. He'd told Jessica a dozen times not to play her CDs at ear-drum-splitting levels. Especially not Madonna, the least suitable role model he could think of for a young girl.

He opened the door and cringed as a deafening blast of music assaulted him. He cursed again. Where was that nanny, anyway? Things had gone amazingly smoothly since her arrival three days earlier, but this was too much.

He knocked off his boots and strode along the hallway between his office and the living room from where the offensive noise was blasting. He

turned in the doorway, prepared to level a blast of his own at Jessica, then stopped in shock.

Jessica was there all right, sprawled on the couch reading a magazine, though how she could read with this racket was beyond him.

But it was the sight of the others that stopped the words on his tongue. Ariel, giggling, her curly blonde hair flying, was leaping about the room performing a series of exaggerated moves that would have done a backup Madonna dancer proud, moves she certainly hadn't learned in weekly ballet class. Josh, his hair pushed back from his face in spikes too much like the nanny's to be a mistake, was heatedly playing an imaginary guitar like a stand-in for Alice Cooper. And Miss St. Germain....

Miss St. Germain! Her black hair spiked, her face flushed, she wore a brief pair of cutoffs and a black t-shirt that bared her midriff, and she was smiling and laughing and swaying to the music with the same heated abandon as Ariel and Josh.

Involuntarily Matt's gaze flew to the long, slender, untanned legs swaying provocatively across the living room carpet. His eyes swept from her shapely thighs to her slim ankles, one of which sported a large square bandage. Except through the veil of several layers of chiffon, it was the first time he'd seen her legs. Legs that were even more spectacular than he'd imagined.

But it was her face he couldn't take his eyes

away from. The violet eyes were huge with laughter; the smiling lips lush and full of a joyous passion and love of life that drew him like a moth. A passion he hadn't felt or wanted to feel since Ginny's death.

A spurt of desire, intermingled with a yearning that was sharper and more bittersweet than anything he'd ever felt before, took him by surprise. For a moment, he just drank in the wild, spontaneous scene before him. He let himself wonder about running his hands along those long, smooth legs, capturing all the life and the heat of those luscious lips, feeling the texture of the damp, spiky hair, filling his gaze with those violet eyes.

Until he remembered *where* he was, and *who* he was. Appalled, he cut off his train of thought. This was the kids' nanny, a temporary nanny, he was fantasizing about.

He strode through the room with sharp, purposeful strides. With a snap of his wrist, he turned off the music, plunging the room into silence. He turned to find four sets of eyes staring at him.

"Jessica, I thought I told you not to play anything that loud. Especially not Madonna." In the silence, his voice sounded unnaturally loud and demanding.

Jessica sat up, her long hair swinging about her face. "But Daddy, I wasn't—"

"You heard me. It was too loud."

Jessica's bottom lip jutted out. She threw down

her magazine, jumped up and stomped from the room and up the stairs. A door slammed and Matt grimaced.

In the loud silence that followed, Ariel piped up, “Daddy, Alix and I are dancing. Look what—”

“Ariel,” Matt said sharply, “I told you not to call the nanny by her first name. It’s Miss St. Germain, remember?”

Ariel, her chubby face in a pout, looked as if she were going to object, then thought better of it. “All right, Daddy,” she said in a voice that made it clear she didn’t think it was all right. Then, in amazing imitation of her older sister, she flounced out of the room.

Josh, who had been continuing his imitation of a red-hot guitarist, had missed the change in atmosphere. “Can we order a pizza for supper, Daddy?”

“No!”

Matt’s bellow startled Josh. He dropped his imaginary guitar and scuttled from the room.

Matt turned to the nanny. Even the second time around, her appearance unsettled him. The attractively flushed face, the faint sheen of perspiration above those lush lips, the enticingly bare midriff and equally bare legs. His blood was pounding in his head and racing through his veins, causing totally inappropriate stirrings.

“Did you teach Ariel to dance like that, Miss St. Germain?” he snapped out.

Her face registered a combination of surprise and bewilderment. “No, we were just fooling around to Jessica’s CD. The kids were really hyper when they came home from school and I thought—”

Impatient, Matt cut her off. He didn’t have time today to listen to what she thought. “Have you started supper yet, Miss St. Germain?” he asked abruptly.

“No, I—”

“Well you’d better get started. I don’t like the kids to eat later than six. And I’d like a bit of time with them before I go out this evening. And another thing.”

“Yes?” Alix raised one dark eyebrow.

“Your attire.” Even as he said it, Matt felt like a fool. To compensate, his voice grew harsher. “In the future I’d appreciate if you’d dress more appropriately.”

Alix looked startled. She appeared about to say something, then thought better of it. Instead, she shrugged her slim shoulders, and smiled with a sweetness that bordered on insolence.

“Sure,” she said, then turned and sauntered out, her hips swaying provocatively.

Matt watched her disappear. In the silence that followed, the ticking of the clock on the oak wall unit sounded thunderously loud.

He sighed, rubbed one of his aching temples, and then looked around the room. Only a moment

ago, it had been full of fun, full of life. In the space of two minutes he had managed to bring it all to a halt and send everyone running.

He headed for the stairs and the cooling shower he so badly needed. His mouth tightened into a thin line. He'd done the right thing, he thought stubbornly. He knew it.

But if that was true, he wondered as he climbed the stairs, why did he feel like the world's biggest grouch?

In the dining area off the kitchen forty minutes later, Alix could feel Matt's assessing gaze on her back. She'd changed to a t-shirt and jeans, not because she truly believed there was anything wrong with her clothes, but simply because there was no point making waves during such a short stay.

That didn't mean she had to like it. She yanked open the door of the oven, and pulled out a pan of battered fish and french fries, the best she could manage in such a short period. Maybe the music had been too loud. Maybe the kids shouldn't call her Alix. Maybe the dancing had been too wild. But that was no reason for him to come down so hard on them. Or on her.

The pan still in her hand, she padded out of the kitchen to the foot of the stairs. "Jessica! Ariel! Josh! Supper!" she yelled, then returned to the kitchen.

She fixed Matt with a brazen glare, daring him to comment on her shriek up the stairs, but he ignored her. Despite herself, she couldn't help noticing how wonderful he looked, especially now after he'd showered and changed. With his dark blond hair casually slicked back from his tanned face, the open-necked sports shirt and the tailored slacks, he looked like the perfect father, the perfect date. But it was all a facade, she told herself sharply.

As the kids filed into the kitchen, Alix positioned the pan on the table beside Matt. To think she'd been foolish enough to believe he would change his mind. Despite the rocky start, the last three days had gone so well. The kids, even Jessica, had behaved, and their stunningly good-looking father had started to loosen up and act human. She'd started to believe he no longer thought her unsuitable.

But he obviously could. And did.

Alix ladled the fries from the pan onto Matt's plate, accidentally dropping several of them onto the wrist that sported the intriguing braided leather band.

"Oh, I'm sorry—"

"It's all right." Matt brushed the fries onto his plate, then emptied it back into the pan. "I don't need any of this anyway. I'm having dinner at Clarisse's—Miss Waldrum's. I'm just sitting here to keep the kids company during dinner."

Alix silently served the children and herself. As she passed Matt on the way back to her seat, she noticed the subtle but definitely appealing aftershave he was wearing. *It must be for Miss Waldrum*, she thought cattily, then frowned at herself in annoyance. What difference did it make to her what aftershave he wore? Or for whom he wore it?

Despite Matt's expressed wish to keep the kids company, Alix and the children ate in silence for the first few minutes. Matt appeared lost in thought.

Eventually, the irrepressible Ariel, who could never remain quiet or angry for long, started to regale her father with tales from her daycare center. When she'd exhausted that topic, she peppered him with questions about his date with Clarisse.

"Are you having supper at her house, Daddy?"

"Yes."

"What are you having for supper?"

"I don't know."

"What about dessert? Are you having ice cream? I love ice cream."

After several minutes of chatter, Matt urged Ariel to finish her supper. In the ensuing silence, Jessica spoke up. "Dad, can I go to the show with Casey and Vic tonight?"

"No."

Jessica's hopeful expression turned sullen. Alix looked at Matt, wondering how he'd handle this.

"I'm sorry, Jess," he said more gently. "Not

tonight. You know I'm going out. I don't like you to be out on nights when I'm not home."

"But Miss St. Germain can take the car and pick me up." Jessica's gaze shot to Alix. "You do drive, don't you?"

Alix had barely started to nod when Matt interrupted. "It doesn't matter," he said firmly. A muscle twitched in his square jaw. "I've already told you I don't want you going out nights when I'm not home."

"But you let the other nannies pick me up!" Jessica wailed.

"I don't mind, Mr. Erickson," Alix slid into the conversation anxiously. If she could avert another fight between these two, she'd do it.

Matt shot her a black look. "Whether you mind is not the point, Miss St. Germain," he said coolly, then turned back to Jessica. "I already told you you can't go. That's final. Besides, we're going to Ontario Place tomorrow. I don't want you to be late."

Josh and Ariel started to crow with excitement over the unexpected visit to the lakeside childrens' amusement area and water park, almost drowning out Jessica's scornful comment.

"Ontario Place. That's for little kids."

"It is not." Matt looked as if he were going to explode. His mouth was a tight line and his fists were clenched. With an obvious effort, he controlled himself, spitting out each word as if it

were a nail. “Ontario Place is for families. We haven’t done much together as a family lately. And anyway, you’re only thirteen.”

“Ontario Place is for kids,” Jessica repeated stubbornly. “And I don’t want to go. Miss St. Germain will be home tomorrow. I can stay here with her.”

Alix blinked hard, trying not to show her surprise at Jessica’s suggestion. Since her arrival, the girl had basically ignored her. Why the sudden desire to spend time with her now? Was it simply a matter of avoiding an unwanted family outing?

Matt glared at Jessica. “Miss St. Germain isn’t working tomorrow, or Sunday either. And it doesn’t matter. You’re going with us. That’s all there is to it.”

“No, I’m not.” Jessica jumped up. Her fork hit the plate with a clatter. “And I’m not eating either.”

She stomped out of the kitchen. Alix heard her footsteps running up the stairs, and cringed as the door slammed, more loudly than it had an hour earlier.

She glanced at Matt. His blue eyes were filled with pain, his fists clenched on the tablecloth, the extent of his upset over his problems with Jessica clearly evident. Her heart went out to him. He meant well, even if he handled it badly.

“Mr. Erickson?” she said quietly.

“Yes?”

“I really don’t mind taking Jessica to the show tonight, or staying here tomorrow.”

The cool mask dropped back into place, locking her out as clearly as his words.

“It’s really none of your business, Miss St. Germain. If I want your opinion, or your help, I’ll ask. And if you’ll notice, I haven’t asked.”

He stood up. “It’s about time I left anyway.”



Matt glanced at the luminous face of his watch as he swung the Mercedes quietly into the garage. Only 11:45 p.m. Even by his standards, that was an early night.

He frowned as he cut the engine, and the garage plunged into darkness. A disaster, that’s what it had been, from start to finish. And it certainly wasn’t Clarisse’s fault.

Matt sighed as he eased his long body out of the car. No, it wasn’t Clarisse’s fault. She’d pulled out all the stops, first with a tremendous gourmet dinner. Then, well... between one of the most seductive dresses he’d ever seen outside of the movies, and the mood lighting and music, it was clear Clarisse had been intent on moving their relationship beyond the friendship where it had hovered for so long. Before tonight he thought he’d been ready, too. But somehow....

He swore softly as he quietly clicked the car

door shut. He'd been too tired, too edgy, too pre-occupied. He'd hardly tasted the food, much less noticed Clarisse's considerable charms. Despite her protestations, she'd been disappointed when he left. But she would have been even more disappointed if he'd stayed, he told himself gloomily.

He frowned again as his argument with Jessica resurfaced, as it had continually throughout the evening, upsetting him more each time. Why did every conversation with that girl turn into a fight? And why did he always handle it so badly? It wasn't as if he didn't care. He cared, dammit, but all the caring in the world wasn't enough. It was starting to get as bad as the fights between him and his father. He smiled grimly. And he knew where *that* had led.

He unlocked the door to the house and entered, relocking the door behind him. He walked carefully along the hallway, not wanting to wake anyone. The kids would be asleep, he knew. Hopefully, the nanny, too. He wasn't in the mood for conversation.

A faint light emanating from the living room made him glance that way, then stop. At one end of the couch, Alix lay curled up on her side, asleep, her hands cushioning her head like a child's. On the floor beside her lay a book, face down.

Matt walked over to the couch, and bent to pick up the book. Despite himself, he smiled when he saw the cover. *Child Psychology*. Even if

she wasn't the right person to care for his kids, she obviously took her job seriously.

He glanced at Alix as he reached to waken her. His hand stopped in mid-motion. In the half-light, Matt was struck by the sweet, almost innocent beauty of her features. Bold black lashes punctuated violet eyes—too often flashing at him defiantly—in repose, dusting the blossoming cheeks. Full rosy lips, more than once turned his way in an impudent grin during the past three days, now relaxed in a gentle smile. Inky hair, usually as insolent in style as the rest of her, softly framed her face.

A bittersweet pang of desire curled around his insides, once again taking him by surprise and shocking him with its fierceness. How could he be feeling this for Alix, when he hadn't felt a thing for Clarisse all night? Clarisse, whom he'd known since childhood. Clarisse, who had been so supportive in the months after Ginny's death.

But somehow, for some reason he couldn't begin to fathom, Alix was a hundred times more seductive to him, asleep in her jeans and t-shirt, than Clarisse had been all evening in her expensive, slinky little dress and beckoning smile.

Matt swallowed. He didn't deny the attraction, as unlikely as it was. But that didn't mean he had to do anything about it. Another good reason to be glad Alix would be leaving in a week or two, to be replaced by a sober, middle-aged woman.

More roughly than he'd meant, Matt shook Alix's shoulder. "Miss St. Germain, wake up." He stood back several feet.

Alix startled, then sat up unsteadily. What happened next shocked Matt. Alix's eyes darkened with what could only be described as terror. She cringed back into the couch, trembling. Her terrified gaze rose up his legs and torso to his face. She blinked several times, focused, and finally recognized him. With recognition came relief, and she sighed.

"Are you all right?"

"Of course." She stood up and smiled flippantly. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Nonplussed, Matt shook his head. He must have imagined the terror. Just as he'd imagined her innocence while asleep. Terrified and innocent were hardly words he'd apply to the cocky young woman now standing before him, amusement tinting her violet eyes, her lips twitching with suppressed laughter.

Matt ignored the question. "I just got back. I didn't think you'd want to sleep on the couch all night."

"Thank you." Alix bent to retrieve her book. "I must have fallen asleep." She looked from the book to Matt, then smiled self-deprecatingly. "This book is interesting, but it's not exactly riveting."

"No, I wouldn't think it would be." Their eyes met, and he found himself smiling warmly.

“Maybe you’d like to borrow it?” The offer was as surprising as the shy manner in which it was made.

“Well, than—no, thanks,” Matt corrected himself quickly. He couldn’t let a pair of dark, shimmering eyes and an endearing smile influence him into changing his well-considered plans. “You’ll be leaving soon and I wouldn’t want to accidentally keep your book. I’m sure I can get it at the library.”

Alix stared at him for a moment. She started to say something else, then stopped. She shrugged. “Anything you say, Mr. Erickson. See you tomorrow.”

Without another word, she slipped from the room. Matt heard her bare feet padding softly up the stairs, then a few seconds later the quiet click of a door shutting.

Matt sat down on the couch, still warm from where Alix had lain curled only moments before. He spread his arms across the back, flung his head back and shut his eyes.

It was bad enough he’d been as responsive to Clarisse as a wet dishrag, he thought wearily. Now he was having wild fantasies about the kids’ nanny, seeing things that couldn’t possibly be there.

He sighed heavily. *What the hell was wrong with him today?*



The shrieks of laughter and loud splashing drew Alix to her bedroom window early the next evening. She set aside her book and peered out into the still bright sunshine.

It took a moment before Alix recognized, through the shouts and splashes that filled the sparkling blue backyard pool, that the Erickson family was engaged in friendly combat over a large red rubber ball. Water polo, she thought with delight, as she leaned against the window frame.

Matt, darkly tanned and tall in the water, and Ariel, who at four swam like a fish, were managing to keep the ball out of the hands of Josh and Jessica, who chased them fruitlessly amidst much laughter around the pool. Even Jessica, who had spent the day under protest at Ontario Place, appeared to have dropped her sullen resentment and joined wholeheartedly in the game. She splashed lustily at her father, who smiled wickedly before he dashed off with the ball.

The lighthearted happiness of the Ericksons at play, the obvious love shared by this single-parent family, touched Alix deeply.

She blinked as tears suddenly brimmed in her eyes; pangs of loneliness and emptiness stabbed her insides. She swallowed hard. Nothing had affected her like this for a long time. She thought

she'd come to grips with her life, accepting what she hadn't had and likely never would.

She sniffed. It must be this temporary placement, and the fact she really wasn't wanted here, all combining to make her feel lonelier than ever, as if she didn't belong. An outsider, looking in. Always an outsider.

She sniffed again and started to turn away from the window. She'd go out, that's what she'd do. No point staying here tormenting herself.

"Hi, Alix!"

Alix looked down toward the sparkling pool. Ariel was waving frantically at her window. Alix smiled back and waved. Let Matt berate Ariel for calling her Alix again, she thought belligerently. She didn't care.

"Come down and go swimmin' with us, Alix," Ariel called, her little cherub face raised hopefully toward Alix's window.

"Yeah, come on down Alix. Jess `n me need somebody else on our team," Josh joined in.

Alix shook her head. Sure, go down there and suffer Matt's cold-lipped anger for intruding. Never. "No, thank you," she said stiffly. "See you tomorrow."

Quickly she drew back and cranked shut the window. Before she could change her mind, she walked to the closet and stepped out of the drop-waist cotton sundress she was wearing. She pulled on black tights, a black midriff-baring top,

followed by a black lace overshirt that fell to her hip.

She surveyed herself in the closet door mirror, then jerkily reached for a black kohl pencil and some mascara. A moment later her eyes were defiantly rimmed with black, her lashes stiff with mascara in her pale face. All she needed, she thought, was some gel in her hair and she'd be—

A tentative knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. "Who is it?" she asked belligerently.

"It's me. Matt. Matt Erickson." Through the thick door, his deep voice sounded strangely tentative.

Reluctantly, Alix opened the door.

Matt—Mr. Erickson—loomed awkwardly in the doorway. His wet hair was slicked darkly back from his face, and a towel hung over one shoulder. The towel did little to hide his tanned and leanly-muscled chest, the dark hair that whorled downward in a vee toward his hip-hugging trunks, and his long tanned legs.

But it was the smile that shocked her. Mr. Matt Erickson was actually smiling at her. A sheepish smile, maybe even a reluctant smile, but a smile all the same, one that creased his smooth face in fascinating patterns and brought new light into his blue eyes.

"You really should come for a swim," he said, his mouth turning up with a quirkiness that made her heart beat faster. "The kids would love it."

When she didn't respond, his eyes, a vivid blue full of shifting and shimmering lights, caught her gaze and held it for a second too long. "I'd like it, too."

For a moment Alix could only stare, overwhelmed by the simple invitation. An invitation that cost him little but for reasons he would never know meant everything to her.

She wavered on the brink of saying yes. Yes to not just a swim, but to the privilege of joining his family, the privilege of belonging if only for a few golden moments.

Her gaze followed his motion as he rubbed one wrist, the wrist still bearing the leather bracelet. As her gaze focused on the water-darkened leather, reality intruded, harsh and cold. Who was she trying to kid? *They didn't want her here.* All the swims in the world wouldn't change that.

"No, I can't," she said, in a voice that sounded too loud, too brassy, even to her ears. She walked to the dresser and picked up her multi-colored leather purse. "I've already made arrangements to meet some friends downtown."

She slung the purse over her shoulder and walked back to the door. She looked at him with a bold brightness she didn't feel. "The bar scene, y' know. Heavy metal. Grunge rock. My kinda scene."

She slipped past him through the open doorway, aware she was shaking, hoping desperately he

wouldn't see.

She started jauntily down the hallway, then turned.

“Shut the door, will you? Thanks.”

Matt stared after her, surprise, shock and a vague sense of disappointment flickering through him. He didn't move until he heard the front door slam, then dropped his hand to the doorknob and quietly shut the door to Alix's room.

He shook his head, not sure whether he should laugh or get mad. It wasn't as if he'd *wanted* to ask Alix to come swimming with them. He'd only given in, and reluctantly at that, to the pleas of Josh and Ariel.

So why was he feeling miffed and disappointed that she'd said no? That she'd chosen other company over him and his children?

He shook his head again, ready to dismiss his foolish wonderings about the flippant Miss St. Germain, when he remembered the moment. The fleeting moment when those amethyst-hued eyes had opened wide with pleasure at the invitation, the moment when those lush lips had started to curve upwards in an impish smile.

But then it had stopped. As suddenly as it had begun. Her eyes had narrowed suspiciously, her smile had flattened. She had shrugged carelessly.

“*Shut the door, will you? Thanks,*” he mimicked her as he started along the hall, annoyed once

more at her bold presumptions, her careless impertinence.

*Well, thanks to you, too, Miss St. Germain, he thought in irritation. Thanks a lot!*

## Chapter Three



It was Wednesday night, and the large, wood-paneled room Matt used as a home office was quiet, save for the steady, reassuring tick of the mahogany grandfather clock. The clock had been in his family for more than one hundred years, faithfully marking the passage of each minute and hour.

If only, Matt thought in frustration, if only *he* could make his points in the same calm, measured fashion, steadily pressing forward his arguments, and reiterating them in a reasonable, even manner until he'd convinced and placated his daughter by sheer constancy, if nothing else.

But no. No, despite a thousand lectures to himself, he'd done it again. Over-reacting, exploding in anger. Saying things he wished he could take back. Screwing up something that should have been simple.

He shut his eyes and slumped back in the rich ox-blood leather office chair, reliving the angry

words he and Jessica had hurled at each other only moments before. An argument that had ended the way they all did, with Jessica stomping up the stairs, tears streaming down her face, and then the slamming of the door.

Remembering, he frowned, and rubbed his temples against the throbbing pain. If only Ginny were still alive. She'd always known what to do. She'd always been so much better, so much gentler with the kids than him. He tried. But when it came to this kind of thing, he just didn't seem to have the patience. He was turning out to be as bad with Jessica as his father had been with him.

And it wasn't as if he wasn't right. No one in his right mind would allow a thirteen-year-old girl—a girl not even in high school—to celebrate the end of school by going camping for the weekend with a bunch of fifteen and sixteen-year-olds without adult supervision. But somehow he never seemed able to get through to Jessica.

He shoved the chair away from the desk with his foot and gazed out the sliding doors to the deck and backyard. From here he could see the pool, glittering with reflected light from the house between dark shadows thrown by the surrounding trees and foliage. Though the noisy, busy downtown streets were only a few blocks away, the backyard was an oasis of cool serenity.

Suddenly, the dark-paneled office seemed constricting, the air stale and choking. Matt stood

up, sending the chair rolling across the room. He had to go outside, if only for a few minutes. Maybe he'd go for a swim.

Quietly, he slid open the door and stepped outside onto the deck that wrapped itself around the back of the house. He closed the door behind him, and just stood, breathing deeply.

He raised his head to search for the first glimmer of stars in his own private patch of quickly darkening sky. It was then he saw her, a shadow sitting in a lawn chair in front of the doors off the kitchen. She was watching him, but as soon as she realized he'd noticed her, she stood up.

"The deck is yours," Alix said quietly, her expression hidden by darkness. "I was just leaving."

"Oh. You don't have to leave."

"It's all right. I—"

"No. Really. It's such a nice night. There's plenty of room out here for both of us," Matt said awkwardly. He hesitated, then plunged on with something he'd had no intention of saying. "Besides, I'd like to talk to you. About Jessica."

"Oh. All right." She sat down again.

Matt unfolded a chair leaning against the side of the house and put it down beside hers. He didn't know what had possessed him to say he wanted to talk to her about Jessica.

He settled stiffly into the chair, then looked out at the pool, and the dark shadows of the lilacs and apple trees beyond it. The heady smell of lilacs

filled the night air.

“Nice night, isn’t it?” he said uncomfortably, twisting the braided leather bracelet on his left wrist.

“Yes, it is.” Her voice, low and steady, without the cocky edge that usually marked her conversations with him, had a strangely soothing effect on his nerves. She was silent for several moments before she spoke again. “That bracelet? It’s quite unusual. Where’d you get it?”

Her questions jangled the nerves just starting to relax. He stopped toying with the bracelet. “It’s from Kenya,” he said stiffly. “Ginny bought it for me while we were there on safari.”

He fell silent. He still found it hard to talk about Ginny, even to the kids. He’d have to change the subject and—

“Your wife.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Alix rest her chin on her hand and turn toward him, an intent look on her face. “How long has she been dead?”

“Two and a half years.” Only a few words, but Matt had to force them out.

Alix surveyed him slowly. “The kids really miss her,” she said.

“Yes.” *So do I*, he wanted to cry out. For a second, his gaze caught Alix’s, and he was surprised by the quiet understanding he saw there. He looked away, forcing back the whirl of emotions threatening to drown him. “That’s partly why I

wanted to talk to you,” he continued, as evenly as he could.

Alix’s eyes widened but she said nothing.

Matt nodded toward the kitchen, grateful she had masked her justified surprise at his comment. “I’m sure you heard the screaming and yelling that just went on between Jessica and me a few minutes ago.”

“Yes.”

He rubbed his hands on his thighs and grimaced unhappily. It was hard to say this to a stranger, especially a stranger who’d already seen ample evidence of his arguments with his daughter. “Well, it’s been like that more and more lately, and it’s getting worse.” He hesitated, then plunged on. “I’m afraid—that is, I worry it’s going to get so bad something drastic will happen.”

“Drastic,” she repeated. “What do you mean, drastic?”

Matt exhaled. “I guess I mean like running away from home. Or getting into heavy-duty drugs, and messing up at school and everywhere else. Anything to show she’s right and I’m wrong.”

If Alix was startled by his revelation, she didn’t show it. She paused. “What makes you think she’d run away?”

“Because I did. When I was fifteen. After being tossed out of two private schools.”

This time he couldn’t miss the surprise in her

eyes. Matt smiled grimly. “Oh, I came back again. But only after my father agreed I could attend public school. Even then, I didn’t hang around home much, and I left again as soon as I was through.”

Matt turned to Alix. He hunched forward in his chair. “You see, my father and I never got along. If he said it was black, I said it was white. Everything had to be done his way or not at all. Eventually we couldn’t even talk about the weather without getting into a fight.”

He slumped back into his chair, the old memories flooding him. He looked out at the pool. “And now, I’m afraid the same thing is happening with Jessica and me. She looks like her mother, but she’s like me, stubborn and hotheaded. And every time she crosses me, it’s like someone waves a red flag in front of my eyes. I overreact, just like my old man used to do.”

He sighed again and looked out to the now dark waters of the pool. “It was fine while Ginny was alive. Ginny had a way of cooling everyone down, of slowing the conversation and making you see the funny side, or what was really important. She did it with my father. She could do it with the kids. And with me.”

He shook his head. “But I can’t,” he said almost to himself. “I just don’t seem to be able to do it.”

In the silence that followed, he heard what

should have been comforting night noises: the slamming of a car door, the bark of the neighbor's German Shepherd, a woman's laughter. If only—

“You're a good father. Anyone can see it.”

The words—softly, yet firmly spoken—hit him with an impact far beyond their meaning. It was the last thing in the world he would have expected someone as breezily cocksure as Alix to say.

He looked over to find her gazing at him intently.

A little embarrassed, and unwilling to be mollified, he snorted. “Yeah. Sure. That's why Jessica just ran up to her room and slammed the door for the fourth time in two days.”

“No. Really.”

He caught the end of a quickly suppressed smile, a smile that inexplicably lifted his spirits.

“You *are* a good father,” she continued firmly. “And believe me, as a nanny I've seen several up close. But you are a pretty lousy communicator.”

“What?”

“That's right. You're a lousy communicator.”

His bewilderment must have been evident, because she grinned impishly, her eyes sparkling.

“There's nothing wrong with the decisions you make or the rules you want to enforce,” she said. “It's the way you get them across, or rather, *don't* get them across that's the problem.”

Speechless, Matt just looked at her. Her grin grew wider. Suddenly, she narrowed her eyes,

hunched her shoulders and rubbed her hands together. “But ve have vays of fixing zat. Ve do.”

For a second, Matt wondered if the nanny had gone crazy. Then he realized she was teasing him. Despite himself, one side of his mouth started to turn upwards.

“All right, Miss Child Expert,” he said, feeling the tension inside start to fade, “You’ve got all the answers. You tell me. What do I do?”

Alix smiled gently, then shook her head. “It’s not as easy as that. Besides, I don’t think you want instruction from me, your temporary nanny. But there are some really good books available about talking to your children, and listening to them. And courses, too.”

Matt sat back, frowning. Books. Was that all? He really didn’t—

“And they work, too,” she said fiercely, obviously sensing his disbelief. Her eyes flared with conviction as she jumped to her feet. “Wait here. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Before he could say anything, Alix was up and into the house. A moment later, she was back. She thrust a paperback into his hands.

Matt looked down at the book. *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*. He had trouble believing a book could solve his problems—one never had before—but he was grateful Alix had taken his concerns seriously. Most people just clucked sympathetically and

offered useless platitudes.

Tongue in cheek, he looked at her. "So you think reading this book will solve my problems?" Alix looked so pleased with herself he had trouble not smiling outright.

"It will help," she said gravely. "It will help if you follow the strategies. But it takes time and practice. And nothing works overnight, or all the time, but it can only make things better."

"Thank you," said Matt softly, more touched by her small but helpful gesture than he had been by anything in a long time. "I'll read it right away and give it back to you."

"No." Alix shook her head emphatically. "It's yours. I can get another one, Mr. Erickson."

Matt looked at her, wanting to communicate his gratitude, to see again the engaging intentness in those beautiful violet eyes, the intentness that was such a contrast from her usual flagrantly uncaring attitude. He began to suspect there was a great deal more to Miss St. Germain than appearances led one to think.

"Thanks. I'll take it. On one condition. Stop calling me Mr. Erickson. It makes me feel a hundred years old."

It was Alix's turn to look startled. But she recovered quickly, smiled sweetly, and shot back, "Oh, I thought you *were* a hundred years old."

Matt laughed, his first real laugh in weeks. He looked at her wryly. "Thanks a lot. Actually, I'm

not that much older than you. I'm only thirty-five."

"Only thirty-five?"

Alix paused. Matt could see she was trying to suppress one of the grins he was starting to find immensely appealing.

"Well, Mr.—I mean Matt, I guess we can't all be young and beautiful."

Matt choked on a spurt of laughter. Why was he suddenly in such a good frame of mind? He ignored Alix's taunt. "Alix," he mused, forgetting his orders to his children to address the nanny as Miss St. Germain. "That's an unusual name, especially with that spelling. Is it short for something?"

Alix shook her head. "No. It's just Al—Alix," she said so quickly she stammered. "That's all."

"Alix," he repeated. "Alix." He cocked his head and looked at her again, suddenly wanting to know more about this young woman who had responded to his tale of woe with surprising gentleness and tact. "Why did you become a nanny?" he asked. "Are you from a big family?"

"No, only a sister," she responded, not meeting his eyes. She switched immediately to the first question. "I guess I always liked kids. I... I don't like to see kids hurt, or neglected. I guess I thought if I could make life better for even a few kids, it would make everything worthwhile. I don't know," she finished, looking uncomfortable.

The difference between the brash young woman who had breezed nonchalantly into his house, and the woman who now seemed so uncomfortable revealing her inner feelings intrigued him. “What about your family?” he pressed. “Do they live in Toronto?”

Once again Alix paused. Then she shrugged, reasserting some of her nonchalance. “My parents are dead.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” he said, truly apologetic.

“It’s all right. It’s been a while.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“What?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Matt repeated. He winced at his blunder in voicing the question that had occurred to him more than once since Alix’s arrival. “I guess that’s none of my business.”

If Alix was offended, she didn’t show it. She looked at him oddly, however, before she shook her head, smiled faintly, and focused her attention on the tatters in her jeans.

“That’s all right,” she said, pulling at some loose threads. She broke several off then started on another clump. “I don’t mind. No, I don’t have a boyfriend. What with going back to school part-time, and trying to get settled into a new position, I don’t have time.”

Matt stirred in his chair. For some reason, the fact that she didn’t have a boyfriend raised his spirits. It occurred to him he’d like company for

that swim he'd been planning. Alix's company. He cleared his throat. "Say, would you like to go for a swim? It's still warm and—"

"No. No thank you." Alix stood up abruptly, almost knocking the lawn chair over. She stumbled and Matt automatically reached out to steady her.

He stood up, too, his hands grasping her arms as he stopped her fall. He should have let her go then. But he didn't.

Instead, he breathed deeply, smelling the clean, fresh scent of her tousled hair. He could feel the heat of her body so close to his, and was aware of the gentle rise and fall of her breasts with each breath.

His eyes rose to her shadowed face. It would be such a simple thing to brush his fingers across her silky cheek and down along her slim throat, to lower his head to her soft lips, to still the trembling he could feel in her limbs even now, to—

Abruptly he let her go. He clenched his fists and stepped back, blinking. *What the hell was he doing? A few kind words from the kids' nanny and his imagination was going crazy. Stark, raving, crazy.*

"I—I've got to run," said Alix. She reached for the handle of the sliding glass door. "I've got reading to do," she continued brightly, not looking at him. "You know, summer reading lists for fall courses. I'm already behind."

He smiled stiffly. "All right," he said, knowing

he should be relieved she had refused his invitation to swim. But he wasn't.

He watched her slide open the door and slip through, shut it, smile, and walk quickly out of sight.

Upstairs in her room, Alix heard the splash as Matt dove into the pool.

He must have gone for that swim after all, she thought dejectedly, standing up and tossing her book aside. She didn't look out the window. Instead, she flung herself onto the bed, rolled over, and stared at the ceiling.

To think that for one foolish moment she'd actually thought Matt—Mr. Erickson—was going to kiss her. That moment when he'd caught her mid-stumble, and held her, for what had seemed an eternally long, tension-charged minute.

She screwed shut her eyes and forced herself to go on. And worse, to think that she had *wanted* him to kiss her. She—the temporary nanny—had wanted her employer to kiss her.

She shuddered at her foolishness. It must have been the shock of Matt opening up to her, she told herself, the shock of him actually asking *her* for help with Jessica. She'd been touched by his pain and hopelessness at his lack of success with Jessica. And her heart, always too soft, had gone out to the girl who missed her mother so much, a girl who reminded her in some ways of herself.

Alix opened her eyes. And she, of course, had rushed in with advice and a book. She grimaced. A regular little social worker.

She let her eyes wander the ceiling, looking for cracks, cobwebs, anything to distract herself. She sighed.

Unfortunately it went deeper than that. And she knew it. The trouble was, she'd *liked* talking to Matt. It had been fun teasing him, seeing the surprise in those vivid blue eyes, and watching the too-serious but still incredibly sexy face dissolve into laughter. She'd *liked* it when he teased her back. Even his awkward personal questions, the ones she usually sidestepped, hadn't put her off.

Alix groaned and pulled the pillow out from under her head. She hugged it to her chest.

The truth was, she thought miserably, tonight she'd *wanted* Matt Erickson to like her.

And she'd wanted him to like her much, much more than any man should ever like his children's nanny.

The next morning, dew still heavy on the expansive lawn, Alix watched with secret pleasure as Matt left for work, his hard hat and metal lunch box clutched in one hand, the book she'd given him in the other.

The pleasure faded as she padded back up the carpeted stairs to wake the kids for their last day of school. She cringed again at the memories of

the disturbing feelings Matt had provoked in her last night. Feelings no nanny should ever have for her employer, she reminded herself, particularly an employer who had made it clear he thought her unsuitable.

Now, almost eleven hours later as Alix herded Ariel, Josh and Jessica into the stifling subway car, crowded with supper-time rush hour commuters, she told herself it was just as well she was leaving in a few days.

She gazed down at Ariel and Josh, their chubby hands tightly clutching the metal pole beside her, their newly-shorn locks still neat and shining from their after school appointment at the hairdresser's. All three of them lurched into the surrounding passengers as the subway jerked into motion.

Ariel looked up and grinned, her face flushed from the heat. The grin went straight to Alix's heart, wrenching it painfully. How could she have gotten so attached to these kids, in so short a time, especially when she'd known all along she was leaving?

Even Jessica. Alix glanced over at the girl, clinging disdainfully to another subway pole, obviously uncomfortable with her position crushed between a large man in a too-tight suit and three women loudly discussing the failings of their husbands.

Alix couldn't help smiling at the girl's typically teenage discomfort. Though Jessica had treated her

with about as much interest as a stick of furniture, Alix would have liked the opportunity to crack her facade of disinterest. After the talk with Matt last night, her heart had gone out to the girl suffering through growing pains without a mother. She wondered what it would take to befriend Jessica.

Or her father. The unexpected resurfacing of that disturbing thought, one she'd already taken care to bury deep inside, sent a new wave of heat flaring across her already flushed skin.

"Are we there yet? It's so hot in here."

Ariel tugged unhappily at Alix's chiffon skirt, interrupting her thoughts. Immediately Alix focused her attention on the child. The air in the hot car was stale and heavy with body odor, french fries, and other unidentifiable smells. She smiled at Ariel reassuringly. "It's only a few more minutes. After this stop, there's only two more."

"I'm hungry." Josh added his complaint to Ariel's. "We're not going to be too late to go to grandma's for supper, are we?"

Alix glanced down at her watch. It was a few minutes before six. "No," she said quickly. They were supposed to be home by six, but a few minutes wouldn't matter. "If we walk fast when we get off the subway, we'll be almost right on time. Your Dad may not even—"

Her voice trailed off as she caught sight of someone she'd prayed never to see again.

With the impact of a volcano, revulsion and

fear erupted inside. She started to shake. Her skin turned cold and clammy as an almost irrepressible urge to flee—to escape before he saw her—rose in her throat.

She swallowed hard, calling on every ounce of her self-control to keep from bolting. She swallowed again and cautiously turned her head until she could see the man whose unexpected appearance in the crush of bodies near the next door of the subway car had instantly provoked fears she'd been certain she'd overcome. She had to be sure it was him.

She ignored the children tugging at her and forced herself to focus on the source of her terror. He was smaller than she remembered, no more than five foot eight, and his stocky build had started to run to paunch. He had the same dark European good looks, but they seemed more forced now, with his thinning hair and jowly face. The frightening dragon tattoos still glistened in deadly fashion on the bulging muscles of his arms.

Despite her fear, Alix made herself look at his face. Immediately, she shut her eyes and turned away. It was him all right. It was Tony. Tony Lacapra, her mother's boyfriend for the last dozen years until her death twenty months ago. Alix would recognize that smug, scarred face anywhere.

Unreasoning fear bubbled up inside her once

more. The crowded car seemed to close in on her, cutting off her air.

“Is this our stop?” Tired, hot and petulant, Ariel tugged at her skirt again.

“No. I mean, yes, yes.” Abruptly Alix realized the train was slowing as it entered the station. This was her chance. She could escape. “Come on, let’s go. It’s time to get off.”

She grabbed both children’s hands and started to push her way toward the door, keeping her head down. “Come on, Jessica,” she shot over her shoulder. “We’re getting off here.”

“But this isn’t our stop. We don’t get—”

“Come *on!*”

Not stopping to see if Jessica would follow, Alix reached the door just as the subway came to a stop. When the door slid open, she rushed out, pulling the children with her. Head down and heart pounding, she started to walk rapidly along the platform in the opposite direction from Tony.

Behind her she could hear Jessica grumbling. But Alix couldn’t stop, couldn’t worry about Jessica’s complaints. She had to get away before Tony saw her. She couldn’t let him see her. She couldn’t take the chance he might find her.

Not after all this time. Not after all she’d done to get away.



“So, what do you think?” Clarisse sat on the edge of her smoked glass and steel desk. Her decidedly impressive legs, sheathed in expensive silk stockings, were crossed at the knee. She looked at Matt expectantly.

“About what?”

Clarisse rolled her eyes, then sat forward. “Why, Mrs. Gardener, of course. She’s exactly what you wanted. Mature, matronly, years of experience with the same client. And best of all, she can start Monday.”

When Matt didn’t say anything, Clarisse braced her hands on the desk. She looked straight at Matt, her grey eyes sharp. “Well, she is, isn’t she?”

Matt slumped farther back in the chair, his legs stretched before him. This should have been an easy call, but for some reason it wasn’t. “Yes,” he allowed.

“You don’t sound very enthused.”

“No.”

“Matt Erickson, what *is* the problem?” Clarisse stood up, smoothed down the skirt of her tailored suit, and advanced on him in exasperation. “I can understand you didn’t want the first nanny. All right. So I got you another one. But this one’s exactly what you asked for, right down to the grandmotherly appearance.”

Clarisse hung over Matt, waiting for a response. Suddenly a light appeared in her eyes

and she frowned. "It's the girl, isn't it? Alix? You're starting to change your mind. The children like her a lot, don't they?"

Matt sighed, and rubbed his jaw. He needed time to think. But he had to say something to Clarisse now. He cleared his throat.

"The kids do like her, especially the younger two. You're right. But it's more than that," he said slowly, trying to marshall his thoughts, to be fair to Clarisse, and to Alix.

"I... I've started to wonder if I was wrong to judge her so quickly. Like you said, she does have good references. And she's given me some good advice about handling Jessica. Maybe she *is* more responsible than those other girls."

Clarisse returned to her desk, sat on it, and crossed her arms. She looked at the floor, thinking, then suddenly looked up at him, her expression thoughtful.

"And maybe," she said softly, "maybe you like her, too? Right, Matt?"

"What?" Matt sat bolt upright, not liking the direction the conversation was heading. "Of course I like her. She's the kids' nanny. She's an okay young woman. Why shouldn't I like her?"

"That's not what I mean, Matt Erickson, and you know it. *You like her*. As in man likes woman. I saw the way you looked at her when you met her here last week."

"Don't be ridiculous. She's the kids' nanny."

Matt stood up, more annoyed than he should have been. He walked over to the window and stared out. From Clarisse's twentieth floor office, he could see the blue waters of Lake Ontario glittering in the sunshine. Even if it was true—and it wasn't—he'd never make that kind of mistake.

He heard Clarisse come up behind him. Though her voice was low, it held a strident tone he'd never heard before. "You did talk about her and the kids a fair bit last Friday. It wouldn't be the first time a single father has developed a personal interest in the woman who takes care of his children. In fact, I've had at least one client marry his kids' nanny, and I've heard of others."

Clarisse placed a cool hand on his bare arm. He stiffened but didn't turn around. "Well, it doesn't happen with me," he said through his teeth. "I've had enough employees to know better than to blur the line between employee and friend."

Clarisse said nothing for a moment. Then Matt heard her sigh. She removed her hand from his arm, and turned and walked back to her desk. "All right," she said, her voice now brisk. "You've got the weekend to decide about Mrs. Gardener. I need an answer Monday. I've got a family that's interested in Alix, too."

"Fine." Matt turned around and walked over to Clarisse. "Look, Clarisse. I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I don't want to be difficult. I just don't

want to make a mistake again, that's all. You know how much it has upset the kids."

Clarisse's expression softened. She sighed. "Yes, I know."

She stepped closer to Matt and ran one finger along his collarbone, then looked up at him. "I've got two tickets for the opera Saturday night. Want to come?"

Matt took her hand in his and smiled genuinely, even as he was shaking his head. "Thanks a lot, Clarisse. But this is the kids' first weekend out of school. I'm thinking of taking them up to the cottage."

He looked down at her. "How about a rain check?" His smile took on a wicked edge as he remembered Clarisse hated baseball about as much as he hated opera. He winked at her. "Maybe we can take in a ball game at the Sky Dome?"

Matt paced back and forth in the living room. Where were Alix and the kids? They should have been home forty minutes ago. Here it was, twenty to seven, and not even a phone call. He'd told Alix this morning how important it was they be on time for dinner at his mother's.

He went to the window and peered out for the dozenth time, but there was still no sign of them. He resumed his pacing, his mind working furiously. Maybe it was just as well this had happened, he

thought. It proved what he should have known all along. Alix was too young, too flighty, and too irresponsible to be counted on, especially with his children. It made what he had to do all the easier.

He heard the unlatching of the door, turned immediately and strode into the foyer.

“You’re late,” he snapped as Alix came through the doorway, the children behind her.

“Yes,” she started, “I’m—”

“She made us get off the subway two stops early,” Jessica broke in scornfully as she stepped around Alix. “I *told* her it was the wrong stop, but would she listen?” She cast Alix a dirty look. “No. She made us walk all the way home.”

Startled, Matt glanced at Alix, expecting some kind of cocky comeback. But Alix said nothing, just stood there biting her lips, her pale complexion unnaturally flushed, her eyes downcast.

“Well,” Matt said uneasily, “we’ll talk about this later.” He looked at the children. “Josh, Ariel, Jessica, I want the three of you to go out and get in the car. Now. I’ll be there in a minute.”

The children, Jessica sniffing as she passed Alix, tumbled out of the foyer to the living room and hallway to the garage. Without looking at them, or at Matt, Alix moved to go around him and up the stairs.

Matt turned, frowning. There was something very strange about Alix’s behavior. And she looked almost feverish. “Miss St. Germain?”

“Yes,” she said, only half-turning.

“Are you going to be in later this evening? About ten?”

“Yes.”

“I’d like to talk to you then.”

“All right.”

She turned away quickly, but not before Matt saw the glitter of tears in her eyes.

Perturbed, he stared after her as she climbed the stairs.

In her bedroom a few hours later, Alix sat in the intricately carved cherrywood rocker, compulsively rocking back and forth. She kept telling herself to relax. Tony hadn’t seen her. It was all right. It was all right.

“And even if he had seen me, so what?” She said the words out loud to the empty room, as if saying them would make them true. It had all happened such a long time ago. Probably he didn’t even remember.

But she did. Even now, she could see his sneer, made more frightening by the scar slashing out from one corner of his mouth. She could hear the threats he’d made the night she left. She winced and shut her eyes, hearing again her mother’s softly urgent pleas, his angry, taunting words, followed by the inevitable shoving, the slaps and then the sharp crack of knuckles connecting with cheekbone. Her mother’s disconsolate sobbing.

With the memories, as clear and as hard as the armrest she was gripping, came the unreasoning terror, the panic that Tony would find her. It didn't matter that, after all this time, her fears were likely irrational. She gripped the arms of the rocking chair so tightly her knuckles turned white.

For a while, she'd managed to convince herself she was safe. She'd convinced herself Tony was out of her life, he couldn't hurt her anymore. Even at her mother's funeral, she'd managed to outwit him. To get away without revealing her new name, her new address. To escape without giving in to his wheedling request for money, a request she knew would soon have escalated into a demand for more. And more. Always more.

Voices downstairs interrupted her thoughts and she grasped at the sound with relief. Ariel's sweet little voice, carrying up the stairs. Josh and Jessica's lower voices, Matt's firm bass. Normal voices. Good voices. Voices belonging to people she'd started to care about too quickly, and too much. Voices of people to whom she knew she'd be saying goodbye very soon.

Alix wasn't surprised to hear the knock at her door about thirty minutes later. The kids were in bed now and Matt had said he wanted to talk to her. She was afraid she knew about what.

"Miss St. Germain?" Matt's voice, polite and far too formal, came through the door. If she'd

had any doubts, Alix knew for certain now he was going to tell her the job was over. He'd found someone "more suitable".

She pulled open the door, ready to treat him to her coolest gaze. But she wasn't ready for the disconcerting effect just seeing him had on her. His shirt more rumpled than usual, his hair askew, he still radiated strength and honesty and kindness, as well as the engaging charm and good humor she'd experienced only once or twice. He wasn't mean or cruel, but he was more man than Tony could ever be. And he was sending her away.

"I'll be down in my office," he said quietly. "Come down in about five minutes."

"Sure." She failed miserably at jauntiness, so quickly closed the door, leaned her hot forehead against it, and shut her eyes. "Sure."

*This would never do.* If she was going to go, she was going to do it in style, with as much cockiness and impertinence as she could manage. She'd be damned if she'd let Matt or anyone else know how much she wanted to stay, how much it hurt to be let go.

Alix pulled herself up and marched over to the mirror. She glared at herself and stuck out her lip. At the moment, she looked pale and washed out. But not for long.

Reaching for a black kohl pencil she rimmed her violet eyes with angry black lines. She added a little more color to her lips, an extra chain and

hoop to each ear, then discarded her loose red tee for a black ribbed scoop-necked tee that hugged her body like a second skin. Her jeans were already tight enough.

She stared at herself in the mirror, not quite satisfied. If she was unsuitable, she told herself, she was going to be as unsuitable as his worst nightmare. As obnoxious as the worst punker he'd ever met. He'd be able to tell himself how smart he'd been to get rid of her.

But she needed something else.

Her eyes fell on a package of gum on the dresser. That would work, she thought. Quickly she opened a couple of sticks and shoved them into her mouth. Nothing like a gum-cracking, swaggering punk to upset a nice upper-class family man and convince him he was doing the right thing. A smoke would be even better, but she'd given that up years ago.

Finally satisfied, she took a deep breath. She was armed and ready now. She could take anything.

She started down the stairs, then wound her way through the foyer, the living room, and the hallway to Matt's office.

For a moment, she stood in the open doorway of the large, wood-paneled room. The only lighting was a brass lamp on his wide oak desk. Matt wore a pair of glasses she'd never seen before, and was working on what appeared to be some invoices.

Matt looked up and gestured her to an uphol-

stered office chair in front of his desk. Alix ignored him and sauntered into the middle of the room, looked around, then chose a wingback leather chair pushed against one wall several feet from his desk.

She sat down, cracked her gum loudly, then smiled sweetly. He hadn't taken his eyes off her from the moment she'd entered the room. Even from here, she could tell she was making him uncomfortable. *Good.*

Matt put down the papers he held, removed his glasses and cleared his throat. In the dim light he looked strained, uneasy. His eyes found hers, and held for a moment Alix found excruciatingly long.

"Look," he said finally. "I was at the referral agency today. You know, Miss Waldrum's. She's found a new nanny for us, one who can start Monday. So tomorrow will be your last day."

"Sure." Despite Alix's preparation, the words hurt. Purposely, she blew a bubble, large and pink, to hide her distress.

"Clarisse—I mean Miss Waldrum—said you should call her tomorrow. She thinks she's got another placement for you."

Alix shrugged and looked down at her nails. It was harder to pretend she didn't care about being rejected, about not being wanted, than she'd thought.

Her head down, she tried to think of something

brazen and brittle to say, something that would make it clear she was as glad to leave the Erickson home as Matt was to get rid of her. But the seconds stretched into minutes as the words refused to come.

A rustling from the desk made her look up. Matt was twiddling his pen, an expression distinctly like guilt on his face.

“Look,” he started, as soon as he’d caught her eye. He cleared his throat. “Look, it’s not as if I don’t think you’re a good nanny. I’m sure you are. And the kids like you, especially Ariel. It’s just—”

“I know. I’m not suitable,” Alix finished for him, her voice cracking despite her efforts to control it. She stood up and managed to shrug carelessly. “You’re entitled to your opinion.”

She stared at him boldly, pleased when he flushed.

His mouth tightened for a moment. He sighed. “Alix,” he said gently, “sit down. Please.”

Gentleness was the last thing Alix wanted now, from anyone. But she sat down anyway, loudly cracking her gum.

Matt grimaced, then looked at her, a silent appeal in his eyes. She steeled herself against it.

“You have to understand,” he started off slowly, “it doesn’t have that much to do with you personally. It’s just that I can’t take any chances. Not with the kids. They’ve been hurt enough.”

“I would never hurt your kids!”

Her vehement response startled Alix almost as much as it seemed to startle Matt. She was appalled he would think that she, who had been hurt so much when she was young, would ever hurt any child.

Matt blinked and took a deep breath. "I'm not saying you would," he continued earnestly. "Not intentionally. Certainly the other nannies didn't do it on purpose. They were just thoughtless. And young."

"Look," he repeated. "I don't think I need to tell you how much the kids were devastated by their mother's death. Especially Jessica. She misses her so much. When the first nanny came along, she was fun, she was personable, and she even looked a bit like Ginny. The kids were crazy over her, clinging to her much more than they should have."

Matt leaned forward in his chair, his arms resting on the desk. Alix could see how hard he was trying to make her understand, even as his voice turned bitter.

"She broke her contract after five months," he said flatly. "She wanted to travel in Europe with her boyfriend. Jessica was eleven then. She went into her room and wouldn't come out for days. Josh had nightmares for months after, and Ariel kept asking for her and crying when she wasn't there. It was terrible."

Alix couldn't help reacting to what Matt was

telling her. Indignation over the former nanny's behavior welled up in her, along with sympathy for Matt and the children. She forgot to feign indifference. "How could anyone be so callous," she murmured.

Matt sighed. "For a while, I just used a combination of babysitters and a daycare center. But it was really awkward, especially with the hours I work. I decided to get another nanny. This time I must have interviewed a dozen, all of them with good references. We finally settled on Andrea. She was twenty-one, and signed a three-year contract that even included options for raises and for her to live out if she wanted."

His expression hardened. "She quit after seven months. Someone a couple of blocks over agreed to pay her more money, and pouf, that was it. This time the kids were mostly quiet. Jessica said she didn't care. That's the way people were. For some reason, Josh got it into his head it was his fault she left and I had trouble with him for months."

"But you said they had contracts!" Alix exclaimed, her reaction every bit as horrified as if Jessica, Josh and Ariel were her own. She knew too well how it felt to be deserted, to live in constant chaos and instability. Ever since her father died when she was three and her sister four, they'd bounced from city to city, and from man to man. "Couldn't you have—"

"Sure," Matt interrupted impatiently. "I could

have sued either of them for breach of contract. But what good would that have done? It wouldn't have brought them back."

Matt sat back in his chair and ran one hand through his hair. When he looked at Alix again, his gaze was beseeching. It affected her as much as anything he'd said.

"Don't you see, that's why I can't take any more chances," he continued. "Look what it's done to my kids, what it's still doing to them. They're getting so they don't trust anyone anymore. I can't have it happen again."

Alix couldn't take her eyes off Matt. His anguish touched her, squeezing her heart and reminding her of every hurt she'd ever felt. It wormed its way inside until it rubbed up against the beginning of an idea, one Alix couldn't have begun to articulate at first. Slowly, it began to take root and sprout, each branch, each leaf making it clearer and stronger than before until it flowered into a conviction so compelling she couldn't understand how she hadn't seen it before.

"No. No, you can't have it happen again," she said slowly.

She raised her head, her eyes clear. She knew now she wanted this job more than anything. She was the perfect person to take care of these kids. Somehow she had to make Matt understand this was the best solution for everyone.

Quietly, she removed the gum from her mouth

and dropped it in the wastebasket, ashamed she'd been so childish. It would serve her right if he didn't want any part of her now.

She got up, went to the chair in front of his desk and sat down. She leaned forward and put her hands on the desk.

“Mr. Erickson—Matt—please let me keep this job. I'll stay as long as you and the kids want. I wouldn't ever leave like that, or break a contract in the middle. I would never hurt your kids that way.”

The about-face startled Matt, derailing his line of thought. Especially coming on the heels of her “I-don't-care-about-anything” attitude, an attitude he had found worse than all the tears, all the objections he might have imagined.

Because no matter how hard he had tried to focus on Alix's punk hairstyle and chains, her gum-chewing insolence, her youth, what he saw was a young woman trying desperately to pretend she didn't care. A woman who'd made him laugh freely for the first time in months, who'd made him feel young again. The first one to recognize he was trying to be a good father and to offer practical help without any judgment.

He stared hard at Alix's anxious face, at the earnestness so at odds with her clothing and makeup, and tried to come to grips with the contradictions and what he had to do. Finally, he sighed and shook his head. He had to be hard. He had to

take the safe route. If only for his kids.

“Sure. That’s easy for you to say now,” he responded wearily. “But who knows what will happen in the next year? A better job offer? A boyfriend who wants you to change jobs? If it’s not one thing, it’s likely to be something else.” He shook his head again. “No.”

“But I’m not like that. I wouldn’t do that. I *care* about your kids....”

“How can you care?” Matt broke in disbelievingly. “You barely know them.”

“But I do care!” Alix leapt up, almost knocking the chair over. “Please believe me.”

Matt shoved his chair back and stood up, frustration gnawing at his conviction. It didn’t help that he wanted to believe her. But he couldn’t. He just couldn’t. And with her emotional pleas for her job and her concern for his kids, she wasn’t making it any easier.

“Words, it’s all words,” he said, gesturing with both hands. “Words don’t mean anything. Even contracts, written words. None of it means anything!”

“But my words do. My contracts do.”

The pain and the pleading in her eyes exacerbated his already strong sense of guilt, making him more defensive than ever. His frustration at her continuing refusal to understand slowly started to turn to anger.

“That’s enough,” he retorted sharply. He tried

to find a neutral place on the far wall to focus, anywhere but her anguished face. “It just won’t work and there’s nothing further to discuss.”

He glanced back at Alix, hoping she’d accede the point and leave. But she stood there, her violet eyes large and beseeching, her soft lips turned down unhappily.

“But it can work,” she pleaded. “I’ve done a good job before. I’m really reliable. And I like your kids. I wouldn’t hurt them. I—”

“No!” he snapped, his anger flaring at her stubborn refusal to understand. His voice rose as his emotions took over. “It doesn’t matter what you say, what you do, I’d need proof you’d stay. And that’s something you can’t possibly give me.”

“You’re right!” Alix shouted back, her fists clenched and a glimmer of tears in her eyes. “I can’t give you any proof because you won’t let me!”

“I can’t *afford* to let you,” Matt shouted. He couldn’t let himself be swayed by tears or promises, no matter how much she might mean them at the moment. “Can’t you see that? I won’t let my kids be hurt again.”

“But I wouldn’t hurt them,” she repeated earnestly. “I’ve never meant anything as much as I mean this. Just give me a chance and I’ll prove it.”

Matt grimaced, torn by guilt, frustration and

anger. What could he say to make her understand, to end this pointless confrontation?

Suddenly, incongruously, Clarisse's comment about a client marrying his kids' nanny zipped into his head. He started to dismiss it when another thought, so crazy it had a certain logic to it, followed on its heels.

He took a deep breath as the wheels spun crazily inside his head. Perhaps this was what it would take to make her accept defeat. He took another breath, stepped closer with arms stretched taut, and braced himself against the desk. He pinned Alix with a challenging glare.

"Okay," he said, his voice deceptively quiet. "You want to prove you care? Okay, I'll let you prove it."

He hesitated only slightly.

"You can prove it by marrying me. Marrying me next week."

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# Norah-Jean Perkin

As a child, Norah-Jean always hated to finish reading the last page of a good book. Nothing was worse than saying goodbye to the characters with whom she had lived through suspense, adventure, sorrow, happiness and love.

So she didn't. When she got into bed every night, she created new stories for her favorite characters, often keeping herself awake half the night. Today she loves developing characters, loves and adventures that will capture her readers' imaginations and perhaps even keep them up reading when they should be sleeping.

*Outrageous* is close to her heart because the heroine believes that love can't happen to her. Helping her find her heart's desire, and a place where she truly belongs, was satisfying and emotional work. She loves concocting romances and adventures that reflect her belief in the power and magic of love.

A former newspaper reporter, magazine editor and freelance writer, Norah-Jean lives with her husband and three children in southwestern Ontario, Canada. A member of Romance Writers of America, she is a three time Golden Heart Finalist.

Norah-Jean hopes you enjoy reading *Outrageous* as much as she enjoyed creating it. And if the characters and story inspire you to invent your own romantic fantasies, all the better.

You can email her at [paa@cyg.net](mailto:paa@cyg.net).



# Norah- Jean Perkin

*Outrageous* is a heart-warming tale of a lonely outsider who finds love and acceptance where she least expects it. *Chris Carlisle*

The new nanny is everything Matt Erickson doesn't want for his three children. Interested only in child care, he feels the woman is too young, too eccentric, much too attractive—and worst of all, likely to take off and leave his children hurt and confused once more. Wanting stability for his kids, Matt challenges her by making a overly generous offer for a long term commitment.

Like armor, Alix St. Germain's outrageous clothing and attitude have seen her through the tough times. She has been an outsider most of her life and hides from her past behind a cocky facade. Affronted that the widowed father thinks her too irresponsible to care for his family, she calls his bluff, and accepts his offer.

Just as she finally begins to believe that love might actually exist, her past walks in the door.