



A Single Kiss (Sweetest Kisses)

By Grace Burrowes

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A Publishers Weekly Top Ten Romance for Fall 2014

New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Grace Burrowes brings her gorgeous writing and incredible storytelling abilities to a brand new series of contemporary romance.

A single kiss can change everything...

In the first novel of the Sweetest Kisses series, Hannah Stark has set her sights on corporate law to assure her a career of paperwork, predictability, and conservative suits. Contracts, finance, and the art of the deal sing to her, while the mess and misery of the courtroom do not. But her daughter needs to eat, so when Hannah is offered a temporary position in a small town firm's domestic relations department, she reluctantly accepts.

Trent Knightley is mightily drawn to his newest associate, though Hannah is as protective of her privacy as she is competent. When their friendship and attraction heat up, Hannah's secrets put her heart and Trent's hopes in double jeopardy.

Sweetest Kisses series:

- A Kiss for Luck (Novella)
- A Single Kiss (Book 1)
- The First Kiss (Book 2)
- Kiss Me Hello (Book 3)

"Burrowes' powerful and complex characters will enthrall you." -*RT Book Reviews*

"Burrowes continues to captivate and enchant!" -*Fresh Fiction*



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Editorial Review

Review

"The beautifully depicted characters are so engaging... There are stories that just enfold you with a sense of romance and awe...this is one such tale. I look forward to reading more." - *Night Owl Reviews, 5 stars, Top Pick!*

"A guarded heroine with a haunted past, a single dad savvy enough to win her trust, and a supporting cast you'll want to meet again come together in an insightful, delightful romance..." - *Library Journal*

"The first book in Burrowes' Sweet Kisses series is a touching stand-alone that includes unicorns, lawyers and, of course, kisses... an enjoyable read." - *RT Book Reviews*

About the Author

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Grace Burrowes' bestsellers include *The Heir*, *The Soldier*, *Lady Maggie's Secret Scandal*, *Lady Sophie's Christmas Wish* and *Lady Eve's Indiscretion*. Her Regency romances and Scotland-set Victorian romances have received extensive praise, including starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*. *The Heir* was a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of 2010, *The Soldier* was a PW Best Spring Romance of 2011, *Lady Sophie's Christmas Wish* and *Once Upon a Tartan* have both won RT Reviewers' Choice Awards, *Lady Louisa's Christmas Knight* was a *Library Journal* Best Book of 2012, *The Bridegroom Wore Plaid* was a PW Best Book of 2012. Two of her MacGregor heroes have won KISS awards. Grace is a practicing family law attorney and lives in rural Maryland.

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Chapter 1

"She had that twitchy, nothing-gets-by-her quality." MacKenzie Knightley flipped a fountain pen through his fingers in a slow, thoughtful rhythm. "I liked her."

Trenton Knightley left off doodling Celtic knots on his legal pad to peer at his older brother. "You liked her? You liked this woman? You don't like anybody, particularly females."

"I respected her," Mac said, "which, because you were once upon a time a husband, you ought to know is more important to the ladies than whether I like them."

"Has judge written all over him," James, their younger brother, muttered. "The criminals in this town would howl to lose their best defense counsel, though. I liked the lady's résumé, and I respected it too."

Gail Russo, the law firm's head of human resources, thwacked a file onto the conference table.

"Don't start, gentlemen. Mac has a great idea. Hannah Stark interviewed very well, better than any other candidate we've considered in the past six months. She's temped with all the big boys in Baltimore, has sterling academic credentials, and-are you listening?-is available."

"The best kind," James murmured.

Trent used Gail's folder to smack James on the shoulder, though James talked a better game of tomcat than

he strutted.

"You weren't even here to interview her, James, and she's under consideration for your department."

"The press of business..." James waved a languid hand. "My time isn't always my own."

"You were pressing business all afternoon?" Mac asked from beyond retaliatory smacking range.

"The client needed attention," James replied. "Alas for poor, hardworking me, she likes a hands-on approach. Was this Hannah Stark young, pretty, and single, and can she bill sixty hours a week?"

"We have a decision to make," Gail said. "Do we dragoon Hannah Stark into six months in domestic relations then let her have the corporate law slot, or do we hire her for corporate when the need is greater in family law? Or do we start all over and this time advertise for a domestic relations associate?"

Domestic law was Trent's bailiwick, but because certain Child In Need of Assistance attorneys could not keep their closing arguments to less than twenty minutes per case, Trent hadn't interviewed the Stark woman either.

"Mac, you really liked her?" Trent asked.

"She won't tolerate loose ends," Mac said. "She'll work her ass off before she goes to court. The judges and opposing counsel will respect that, and anybody who can't get along with you for their boss for six months doesn't deserve to be in the profession."

"I agree with Mac." James dropped his chair forward, so the front legs hit the carpet. "I'm shorthanded, true, but not that shorthanded. Let's ask her to pitch in for six months in domestic, then let her have the first shot at corporate if we're still swamped in the spring."

"Do it, Trent," Mac said, rising. "Nobody had a bad thing to say about her, and you'll be a better mentor for her first six months in practice than Lance Romance would be. And speaking of domestic relations, shouldn't you be getting home?"

* * *

Grace Stark bounded into the house ahead of her mother, while Hannah brought up the rear with two grocery bags and a shoulder-bag-cum-purse. Whenever possible, for the sake of the domestic tranquility and the budget, Hannah did her shopping without her daughter's company.

Hannah's little log house sat on the shoulder of a rolling western Maryland valley, snug between the cultivated fields and the wooded mountains. She took a minute to stand beside the car and appreciate the sight of her own house-hers and the bank's-and to draw in a fortifying breath of chipper air scented with wood smoke.

The Appalachians rose up around the house like benevolent geological dowagers, surrounding Hannah's home with maternal protectiveness. Farther out across the valley, subdivisions encroached on the family farms, but up here much of the land wouldn't perc, and the roads were little more than widened logging trails.

The property was quiet, unless the farm dogs across the lane took exception to the roosters, and the roosters on the next farm over took exception to the barking dogs, and so on.

Still, it was a good spot to raise a daughter who enjoyed a busy imagination and an appreciation for nature.

Damson Valley had a reputation as a peaceful, friendly community, a good place to set down roots. Hannah's little house wasn't that far from the Y, the park, and the craft shops that called to her restricted budget like so many sirens.

The shoulder bag dropped down to Hannah's elbow as she wrestled the door open while juggling grocery bags.

"Hey, Mom. Would you make cheese shells again? I promise I'll eat most of mine."

"Most?" Hannah asked as she put the milk in the fridge. The amount she'd spent was appalling, considering how tight money was. Thank heavens Grace thought pasta and cheese sauce was a delicacy.

"A few might fall on the floor," Grace said, petting a sleek tuxedo cat taking its bath in the old-fashioned dry sink.

"How would they get on the floor?"

"They might fall off my plate." Grace cuddled the cat, who bore up begrudgingly for about three seconds, then vaulted to the floor. Grace took a piece of purple yarn from a drawer, trailing an end around the cat's ears.

"Cats have to eat too, you know," Grace said. "They love cheese. It says so on TV, and Henry says his mom lets him feed cheese to Ginger."

"Ginger is a dog. She'd eat kittens if she got hungry enough." The groceries put away, Hannah set out place mats and cutlery for two on the kitchen table. "You wouldn't eat kittens just because Henry let Ginger eat kittens, would you?"

Did all parents make that same dumb argument?

And did all parents put just a few cheesy pieces of pasta in the cat dish? Did all parents try to assuage guilt by buying fancy 100 percent beef wieners instead of hot dogs?

"Time to wash your hands, Grace," Hannah said twenty minutes later. "Hot dogs are ready, so is your cat food."

"But, Mom," Grace said, looping the string around the drawer pull on the dry sink, "all I did was pet Geeves, and she's just taken a whole bath. Why do I always have to wash my hands?"

"Because Geeves used the same tongue to wash her butt as she did to wash her paws, and because I'm telling you to."

Grace tried to frown mightily at her mother but burst out giggling. "You said butt, and you're supposed to ask."

"Butt, butt, butt," Hannah chorused. "Grace, would you please wash your hands before Geeves and I gobble up all your cheesy shells?"

They sat down to their mac and cheese, hot dogs, and salad, a time Hannah treasured-she treasured any time with her daughter-and dreaded. Grace could be stubborn when tired or when her day had gone badly.

"Grace, please don't wipe your hands on your shirt. Ketchup stains, and you like that shirt."

"When you were a kid, did you wipe your hands on your shirt?" Grace asked while chewing a bite of hot dog.

"Of course, and I got reminded not to, unless I was wearing a ketchup-colored shirt, in which case I could sneak a small smear."

Grace started to laugh with her mouth full, and Hannah was trying to concoct a request that would encourage the child to desist, when her cell phone rang. This far into the country, the expense of a landline was necessary because cell reception was spotty, though tonight the signal was apparently strong enough.

"Hello, Stark's."

"Hi, this is Gail Russo from Hartman and Whitney. Is this Hannah?"

The three bites of cheesy shells Hannah had snatched while preparing dinner went on a tumbling run in her tummy. "This is Hannah."

"I hope I'm not interrupting your dinner, Hannah, but most people like to hear something as soon as possible after an interview. I have good news, I think."

"I'm listening."

Grace used her fork to draw a cat in her ketchup.

"You interviewed with two department heads and a partner," Gail said, "which is our in-house rule before a new hire, and they all liked you."

Hannah had liked the two department heads. The partner, Mr. MacKenzie Knightley, had been charm-free, to put it charitably. Still, he'd been civil, and when he'd asked if she had any questions, Hannah had the sense he'd answer with absolute honesty.

The guy had been good-looking, in a six-foot-four, dark-haired, blue-eyed way that did not matter in the least.

"I'm glad they were favorably impressed," Hannah said as Grace finished her mac and cheese.

"Unfortunately for you, we also had a little excitement in the office today. The chief associate in our domestic relations department came down with persistent light-headedness. She went to her obstetrician just to make sure all was well with her pregnancy and was summarily sent home and put on complete bed rest."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Not domestic relations. If there were a merciful God, Hannah would never again set foot in the same courtroom with a family law case. Never.

"She's seven months along, so we're looking at another two months without her, then she'll be out on maternity leave. It changed the complexion of the offer we'd like to make you."

"An offer is good." An offer would become an absolute necessity in about one-and-a-half house payments.

Grace was disappearing her hot dog with as much dispatch as she'd scarfed up her mac and cheese.

"We'd like you to start as soon as possible, but put you in the domestic relations department until Janelle can come back in the spring. We'll hire somebody for domestic in addition to her, but you're qualified, and the

need, as they say, is now."

"Domestic relations?" Prisoners sentenced to life-plus-thirty probably used that same tone of voice.

"Family law. Our domestic partner is another Knightley brother, but he's willing to take any help he can get. He was in court today when Janelle packed up and went home, otherwise you might have interviewed with him."

"I see."

What Hannah saw was Grace, helping herself to her mother's unfinished pasta.

"You'd be in domestic for only a few months, Hannah, and Trent Knightley is the nicest guy you'd ever want to work for. He takes care of his people, and you might find you don't want to leave domestic in the spring, though James Knightley is also a great boss."

Gail went on to list benefits that included a signing bonus. Not a big one, but by Hannah's standards, it would clear off all the bills, allow for a few extravagances, and maybe even the start of a savings account.

God in heaven, a savings account.

"Mom, can I have another hot dog?" Grace stage-whispered her request, clearly trying to be good.

Except there wasn't another hot dog. Hannah had toted up her grocery bill as she'd filled her cart, and there wasn't another damned hot dog.

Thank God my child is safe for another day... But how safe was Grace in a household where even hot dogs were carefully rationed?

Hannah covered the phone. "You may have mine, Grace."

"Thanks!"

"Hannah? Are you there?"

A beat of silence, while Hannah weighed her daughter's need for a second hot dog against six months of practicing law in a specialty Hannah loathed, dreaded, and despised.

"I accept the job, Gail, though be warned I will transfer to corporate law as soon as I can."

"You haven't met Trent. You're going to love him."

No, Hannah would not.

Gail went on to explain details-starting day, parking sticker, county bar identification badge-and all the while, Hannah watched her hot dog disappear and knew she was making a terrible mistake.

* * *

"Trent Knightley is a fine man, and his people love him," Gail said, passing Hannah's signing bonus check across the desk. "The only folks who don't like to see him coming are opposing counsel, and even they respect him."

"He sounds like an ideal first boss."

What kind of fine man wanted to spend his days breaking up families and needed the head of HR singing his praises at every turn?

The entire first morning was spent with Gail, filling out forms-and leaving some spaces on those forms blank. Gail took Hannah to lunch, calling it *de rigueur* for a new hire.

"In fact," Gail said between bites of a chicken Caesar, "you will likely be taken out to lunch by each of the three partners, though Mac tends to be less social than his brothers. You ordering dessert?"

People who could afford gym memberships ordered dessert.

"I'd like to get back to work if you don't mind, Gail. I have yet to meet the elusive Trent Knightley, and if he should appear in the office this afternoon, I don't want to be accused of stretching lunch on my first day."

Not on any day. If Hannah had learned anything temping for the Baltimore firms, it was that law firms were OCD about time sheets and billable hours.

"Hannah, you are not bagging groceries. No one, and I mean no one, will watch your time as long as your work is getting done, your time sheet is accurate, and most of your clients aren't complaining. Get over the convenience-store galley slave mentality."

Gail paid the bill with a corporate card, and no doubt the cost of lunch would have bought many packages of fancy 100 percent beef wieners.

"Don't sweat the occasional long lunch," Gail said as they drove back to the office. "Trent takes as many as anyone else, and the way he eats, he'd better."

Gail's comment had Hannah picturing Mr. Wonderful Boss, Esq., as a pudgy middle-aged fellow who put nervous clients at ease and probably used a cart and a caddy when he played golf with the judges.

* * *

Hannah finished arranging the fresh flowers that had just been delivered to her office, her sole extravagance as the proud recipient of a signing bonus. The florist had recommended the purple glads, and for good reason, for they were splendid specimens. Hannah pulled out one long, magenta-lavender blossom to share with Grace.

Gino, the beefy Italian facility manager, had delivered a banker's box piled high with every imaginable office supply and promised Hannah he'd have her computer installed by tomorrow morning. Her office was a tidy, impersonal space but for the flower arrangement, and she liked it that way-even when temping, a lawyer learned that clients got nosy. She wrapped the gladiolus in a wet paper towel, then spotted a volume of Maryland Family Law on her credenza.

A poo-poo brown book for a poo-poo brown subject, Grace would say.

Still, it was a reference book that belonged in the boss's shelves. Hannah had taken a moment to assess Trenton Knightley's private office, and found it cozy, like a den or study, more baronial than palatial. The Oriental rug and upholstered furniture went with her well-fed, middle-aged, avuncular image of him. Then too, if he kept the firm's family law library in printed book form, maybe he was a bit of a cyberphobe.

Some of the older attorneys were.

Hannah approached the door to the boss's office, book in one hand, flower in the other. A man's voice coming from within stopped her before she would have barged through the slightly open door.

"So what are you doing tonight?" the guy asked, voice pitched intimately, the inflection lazy and personal. A beautiful, sexy voice completely inappropriate for a law office during business hours.

"Do you think he could stand to part with you for an hour?" the man asked.

Hannah told herself to put the damned book back another time, but curiosity held her in place.

"I'm in the mood for a ride." A ride? How crude was that? "I was stuck all day on a nasty case, and I need to change gears. The best way I know to do that is spend some time with my favorite girl."

Oh, for cryin' in a bucket. Hannah turned to go, but some flicker of light or shadow must have given her away. The door swung open.

"I'll be there in less than an hour," he said into a cell phone. "Go ahead and eat something-you'll need your energy." He slipped the phone into his pocket and smiled at Hannah. His jacket was off, his shirt sleeves cuffed back, and his tie-a stylized image of a white horse galloping out of a crashing blue surf-was loosened.

The informality of the guy's attire only emphasized that fact that he was drop-dead-of-an-estrogen-coronary gorgeous. Tall, dark, and handsome, three for three. His sable hair was a tad long, his facial architecture a touch dramatic. Even white teeth arranged in a shark-smile, and blue, blue eyes finished off a walking assault to a woman's composure.

Hannah stood in the doorway, Family Law in one hand, a perfectly phallic flower in the other.

Her mouth snapped shut.

"Hello," he said, still exuding the air of happy anticipation he'd had on the phone. "Is that flower for me?"

"You got some nerve, buddy." Hannah plowed past him. "If you must arrange your assignations on company time, then at least do it someplace other than the boss's office, and no, this flower is not for you."

Those bachelor-button blue eyes began to dance. "Perhaps we'd best introduce ourselves before we're handing out citations for unprofessional conduct. Trent Knightley, director, Domestic Relations. And you would be?"

Unemployed. Again.

"Toast," Hannah muttered, setting the book on the pale oak coffee table and seeing her new, improved grocery budget evaporate before her eyes. "I would be utter toast."

"You're my new hire," he said, the smile dipping into a frown. "Heather? Helen? No..."

Was it a good thing that he couldn't recall the name of the associate he probably intended to work to death?

She dutifully extended a hand. "Hannah Stark."

"Hannah," he said, taking her hand in his and not shaking it, but holding it as he studied her. "Have a seat. I

am remiss for not greeting you in person, but depositions wait for no man or lady. How was your first day?"

Lawyers could be remiss; other people dropped the ball or screwed up.

The mischief in his gaze was gone, which was a relief. Everybody had said he was nice; nobody had said he was a gorgeous, womanizing, flirting-

She took a seat while he folded his length into a wing chair, stretched out long legs, and crossed them at the ankle.

"My assignation isn't for an hour," he reminded her. "Spare me five minutes and tell me about your day."

Cross-examination, of course.

"Busy," Hannah said, "but unremarkable. My forms are executed for HR, my office is outfitted, I did lunch with Gail. I spent some time this afternoon trying to track down a case for another associate-I forget the gentleman's name."

"Viking blond? Toothpaste-commercial smile?"

"He has the child support docket." Hannah had seen no toothpaste-commercial smiles outside present company. "Matthew?"

"Gerald Matthews."

"Right. Gerald. His client can prove he had a vasectomy prior to the child's birth-the client, not Gerald-and the procedure hasn't reversed itself since. Gerald thinks there's some relevant case law."

"If the case is coming up Friday and Gerald hasn't started his research, then perhaps you'd like to handle it?"

A silence spread, with Hannah eyeing her flower, while her boss eyed her. This was the price of fancy 100 percent beef wieners. She didn't want to touch the child support docket, neither did she want to admit her reluctance to Mr. Divorces-Are-Us.

"How about not quite yet?" Hannah hedged.

"Fair enough. Why the flower, Hannah Stark?"

Damned lawyer. He'd dropped back into that sexy, conspiring, you-can-trust-me tone he'd used on the phone.

"They're pretty."

"You sent them to yourself?"

She fingered the last blossom, feeling foolish and angry, because a good lawyer could do this. Lead the witness down one path of inquiry, then ambush them from an entirely different direction.

"I like flowers."

She liked signing bonuses, too, and making her mortgage payments on time.

"How about you plan to observe Gerald on happy pappy day?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"We hear all child support matters on Friday in Damson County. It's payday for a lot of people, so it maximizes the chance of some money coming in against arrearages. A Friday docket also gives the folks who are locked up for nonsupport the weekend to come up with the money so they don't miss as much work getting processed out."

The science of lives coming unraveled was part of the reason Hannah loathed family law. "You want me to handle child support cases?"

"Gerald has the docket well in hand, but, yes, I'll want you trained for it, because we should all be able to back each other up. You and I did not get a chance to interview each other, Hannah. My philosophy with the people working for me is to give them what they need to do a good job, then leave them alone to do it. With you, I'll have to be more hands on."

Not a hint of an innuendo of a possibility of flirtation underlay the words hands on.

"Because?"

"Because you have no courtroom experience, and family law is litigation intensive."

She'd been in courtrooms since she'd turned three years old. "You and the other three associates can't do the courtroom cases?"

He rose and took the flower from her, poured a glass of water from a pitcher on the windowsill, and balanced the gladiolus in its makeshift vase. The long stem leaned precariously against a thriving rhododendron, but was at least spared death-by-wilting before Hannah even got it home.

"Most new associates are chomping at the bit to get on their white chargers and be God's gift to the courtroom," he said. "I gather you're not."

The problem was not litigation-Hannah was as willing to go to court as the next attorney-the problem was family law.

"I will be honest," Hannah said, because honesty was expedient in this case, and because he'd looked after Grace's flower. "I want to pull my share of the load until I can safely slide over to corporate services. In a divorcing family, the children can't be in two different households at the same time. It's a zero-sum game that isn't a game at all."

"Gail warned me you were reluctant. Not too reluctant, I trust?"

"No, sir," Hannah said, getting to her feet.

"No, Trent."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Hannah, before you let my little brother work your fanny off this spring, you and I will be eating cold pepperoni with black olives out of the same pizza box. We'll get into yelling matches about litigation strategy. We'll drive to and from the courthouse together at least once a week. I might pick up your dry cleaning. You might share your worst professional fears with me or pass off to me the client who couldn't keep his hands to himself. Call. Me. Trent."

What to say? Yes, sir? "Yes, Trent, but I draw the line at anchovies and pineapple."

"Sit down for one more minute, and let me explain something to you." He did not make it a question. Grace would have told him so.

Hannah dropped into her seat, though the clock on the wall said if she didn't want to be late to pick up Grace-with all the misery that would cause-then she couldn't afford any protracted lectures.

"Mac handles criminal law, but he's never committed a crime. James does corporate and property, though he's never owned a business except for this one, and he owns exactly one piece of ground. I, however, practice family law and was raised in a family. So were you-good, bad, indifferent, or wonderful, every family law attorney has family, and baggage as a result."

After nearly two decades with the most overworked therapists the taxpayer could inflict on foster children, Hannah still had to get the baggage lecture from her new boss.

"What's your point?"

"You'll get your buttons pushed in this business, Hannah Stark, by the cases, the clients, opposing counsel, the judges. We aren't like the social workers and counselors who have a built-in chain of command to support them when they're losing their emotional balance, but we do have common sense. When you're in over your head, you come to me, and we'll address it. When I have a tough case, we staff it and get the benefit of everybody's wisdom. The point is you will not be in the deep end alone with the sharks. I'll be there with you, if I'm doing my job."

Family law was the deep end, and she was already in it and late to pick up her kid.

"This is what Gail meant when she said you were good to work for, isn't it?"

"She said that?"

"Said everybody loves to work for you."

"Probably because I'm off at court so much." He smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. This curving of his lips was more charming than his "Hi, I'm your new boss" version. "I'll tell Gerald to expect you to shadow him this week, but for tomorrow, why not watch my deposition?"

"May I take the case file home with me tonight?" And leave in the next six minutes?

"You may not," he said, his smile broadening. "You're already doing research for Gerald he ought to do himself. If he's swamped, he also has a paralegal to help him, or he could have come to me. Pace yourself for the long haul, Hannah. Enough cases go home with you whether you want them to or not. Now get your things, and I'll walk you to your car. I'm scheduled to freeze my backside off trail riding under the full moon tonight."

That kind of ride? Well, then, maybe it was OK to like the guy, even if he was down-to-earth, good-looking, and willing to brave the full moon on a weeknight.

"No need to walk me to my car, thank you," Hannah said, getting to her feet. Her answer might have been different if he'd made it a question.

"Suit yourself," he said, rising as well. "Deposition starts at nine. We'll leave here around eight thirty, and,

Hannah?"

"Sir?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Trent?"

"Welcome aboard." He shook her hand again, then let her go.

Because he had to freeze his backside off under the full moon, while Hannah had to pick up her daughter.

* * *

"I cannot for the life of me figure out why you let me have Hannah Stark," Trent said, leaning on the jamb of James's office door.

"You needed somebody." James had his feet up on the corner of his desk, a book on merger law open in his lap. "Mac liked her. Besides, curvaceous, twitchy redheads in sensible shoes aren't my type."

Any female in need of a shoulder to cry on was James's type. "You have plans tonight?"

"I always have plans. Think Hannah will be a keeper?"

Hannah was a mystery. "Mac called it right: she's the sort who will never, ever let her hair down. She won't be caught unprepared, won't color outside the lines, won't pop off at opposing counsel, won't neglect a matter in her care."

James was the family golden boy, long-limbed and broad-shouldered like a swimmer. He had the right smile for a corporate attorney, confident and competent without being calculating, but he was also-according to Merle-better than Trent or Mac at making popcorn and watching princess movies.

"Do I hear a 'but' after praise like that?" James asked.

"But good lawyers get sued all the time because they're short on warm-and-fuzzy charm." Or because they worked themselves to a frazzle and screwed their brains out in the mistaken belief that qualified as fun.

"Your warm and fuzzies are not short," James said. "Which is why you have to turn away business. If you can talk Miss Hannah into it, go ahead and keep her on the domestic law team. I'll just bill more hours."

James never fudged on a time sheet-nobody at Hartman and Whitney did-but he surely didn't get enough sleep either. Trent had decided long ago that being a brother trumped being a law partner, and he suspected James and Mac had come to the same conclusion.

"How will you keep up with your social calendar if you're billing seventy hours a week?"

"Neither the socializing nor the law particularly challenges me anymore. I can do both with my eyes closed."

"I do worry about you," Trent said, not even half in jest. James was reading a fifty-year-old case, for mercy's sake. "I did want to thank you for Hannah. She'll be a workhorse."

"Don't work her so hard she quits and goes to massage school."

Massage school, feng shui, medical coding: the temptations wooing good lawyers from the courtroom were treacherous and myriad.

"You sure you have plans tonight?"

"Shoo." James gave his characteristic hand wave. "Genius thrives in solitude."

"I'm leaving, but I have a question for you as the familial authority on the fairer sex."

James crossed his arms, his expression curious.

"Is it now rude to offer to escort a female employee to her car?"

James glanced out the window, as if Peahen v. Piracy Unlimited-corporate cases had the dumbest captions-was so fascinating, he hadn't realized darkness had fallen.

"Walking a woman to her car is gallant, particularly after dark on her first day. My rule of thumb is to figure how I would want somebody treating Merle when she grows up, and that's how I behave. Mostly."

"Good rule. Don't work too late."

"Said the pot to the kettle."

Trent let James have the last word, though with all the hours James had billed lately, James's legendary velocity with the ladies had to be suffering-or taking a breather. Mac's light was still on too, but Trent left his older brother undisturbed. Thanks to Mac's peculiar insights regarding Hannah, Trent's department had a prayer of making it through until spring.

Though Trent wished somebody-a devoted brother, perhaps?-had warned him his new hire was stunningly pretty. Dark auburn hair swept up on a coiled bun gave her a classic appeal, accentuating a lovely profile, big brown eyes, and a full, mobile mouth.

A kissable mouth, if Trent were honest.

She wasn't attractive, though. Hannah Stark had No Trespassing signs posted at every property line, which was puzzling.

Trent got into his late-model Beemer, tucked a disc of Vera Winston playing Scarlatti into the CD player, and let his day's quotient of tension and drama drift away on strains of baroque beauty. As he reached his own property line, though, a question plagued him:

For whom had Hannah Stark taken home that single, lonely, lovely flower?

* * *

Some nights, good enough had to be good enough, even for the most devoted single mom.

In that spirit, Hannah used eight of her ten spare minutes on the way home to hit the fast-food drive-through and pick up a kiddie meal and a tuna salad. When she got to Eliza's, she took the gladiolus from among the flotsam in the backseat and headed for Eliza's kitchen door.

"Mom! You were almost late, but not quite, Eliza said. That's a pretty flower, is it for me?" Grace slammed

into Hannah, throwing her arms around her mother in a seven-year-old's version of a bear hug.

Thank God my child is safe for another day.

"It is for you. It's called a gladiolus, from the Latin word for sword, like a gladiator might use. This flower wants to bloom in a little girl's bedroom, so she can wake up and see something as wonderful as she is."

Abruptly shy, Grace mashed her nose against her mother's waist. "Thanks, Mom."

"There's a kiddie meal for you in the car, Grace. Please don't open the ketchup." Not quite a request, but a polite command.

"No fair," Eliza's oldest, Henry, moaned from the kitchen sink, where he washed his hands. "We never get kiddie meals."

"You have a dog, Henry," Grace said, shoving her arms into the sleeves of her coat. "Ginger is better than a kiddie meal." She galloped out the door, holding up her flower like an Olympic torch. "C'mon, Bronco!"

"First day go OK?" Eliza asked, passing Henry a tea towel.

Hannah ran a finger down little Adam's cheek. He gurgled happily against his mother's shoulder and beamed a perfect baby smile at Hannah.

"Everyone was very nice, Eliza." Which had been unnerving as hell.

"That's how first days are supposed to go. Get home, have a glass of white wine, and congratulate yourself."

"Except now they'll expect me to be nice right back, and sooner or later, I'll screw that up. I didn't get the gene for corporate pleasantries."

For any pleasantries.

At the sink, Henry ran the taps full out and started the garbage disposal.

"Henry Aaron Moser, you stop that or you'll go without supper," Eliza snapped. Henry shut off the taps and the disposal, grinned an all-boy grin, and scampered out of the kitchen. "I could argue about those genes, Hannah, but I know better than to argue with a lawyer. Do you suppose the car is covered with ketchup yet?"

"Bye, Eliza."

The goddess of commuting families had smiled, though, and Grace was sitting serenely in the passenger's seat, consuming her fries one at a time.

"Mom, do you think I'm little?"

What on earth was this about?

"Compared to what? Compared to me you are little now, but you'll likely be taller than I am before you're all grown up. You will never be as big, say, as Pedro." He'd been a source of fascination ever since he'd moved in across the lane.

"Pedro is a Brahma bull. I know I won't ever be as big as he is, but do you think I'm small?"

"I guess so, for now, for a human."

A pause ensued, lasting two whole fries. "Do you think I'm teensy?"

Hannah looked over at her daughter, searching for a clue, finding none. "I do not think you are teensy. You were not even teensy as a newborn, but you were absolutely adorable."

Also scary as hell.

"I don't want to be teensy."

"Why not?"

Another pause, one fry in duration.

"We learned about the teensy fly in school today. It can kill you, and it's teensy. The flies in our house are really small, don't you think? Are you laughing at me?" A fry poised in the air punctuated the question.

"I am not laughing at you. Your teacher made a silly mistake, that's all." Hannah tried to explain the "mistake" to Grace, of confusing tsetse with teensy, but second-grade spelling made the translation slow. Once Grace got the joke, though, she howled.

"Mrs. Corner forgot tsetse sounds like teensy, like teensy-weensy. Gee, Mom, even I know that."

Grace bounced out of the car in great good spirits, which set the tone for a pleasant evening, so pleasant in fact, the child was in bed twenty minutes early.

The extra few minutes should have been a treat, a chance to have that glass of wine Eliza mentioned fairly frequently.

Except Hannah would never risk it.

What if she had to drive Grace to the emergency room?

What if she had to call 911 when Grace complained of a sudden severe bellyache, and the EMTs arrived to find "the mother had been drinking"?

What if the relaxation alcohol afforded became too seductive?

What if somebody made a referral to Child Protective Services, and the state's eyes and ears popped by unannounced at the end of some difficult week to find the wine bottle was the only thing in the fridge?

"That won't happen," Hannah said, putting the teakettle on. Even Child Protective Services needed a referral before they came knocking on doors in the dead of night-though that was pretty much all they needed before putting a child into foster care.

Hannah brewed up a cup of chamomile tea, dosed it with honey, and put in an old Richard Gere-Julia Roberts movie, a romance. The tale had once been one of her favorites, but in the past year the Pygmalion story line had seemed pathetic.

Sometimes, a lady got too empty to dream. Those times were scary, but Hannah had survived them. She might lack the nice-nice gene, but she had a blazingly good memory, an eye for detail, and an excellent grasp

of the law. That was enough to sustain a dream of a good job in the field of corporate law.

And hopefully, enough to sustain Hannah for a short, uneventful detour through the legal dungeon known as family law.

* * *

Trent lay back on an old quilt under the full moon. A few yards away, horses munched deep fall grass, and one lonely cricket sang a slow aria to the crisp night air. The nip in the air, the pitch and tempo of that cricket's song, confirmed that this would be the last such outing for months.

"Daddy?" came a small voice from the other side of the blanket.

"Sweetie?"

"Is there really such a thing as a teensy fly, and can it really kill you? Do they live around here?"

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