

Friendly Wedding

Nora R. Hobbs



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The Request

“Val?” His questioning soft voice floated to her as she cupped the red tulip between her fingers and admired it.

“Yes.” She turned the decorative ceramic planter around so the flower could catch the sun coming through the wide window on the fifth floor of the high-rise building. She rose up to look through the window and could see her reflection in it. She was a slim, neat woman with light chocolate-colored hair, usually worn up, because it made her look professional. She had nice features, full lips and smooth cheeks that hid the bone structure. Her hazel eyes were much too big for the rest of her face, she thought. She never needed mascara to emphasize them. Her lashes were naturally long, anyway, and she had thick eyebrows that she took pains to keep groomed.

“How long have you been my personal assistant?”

She could feel his eyes on her, but she was comfortable with it. Over the years, she had grown accustomed to it, for he was always watching her.

“Three years,” she answered, going to the next plant sitting on the windowsill. She poured a small amount of water from the little pitcher with a long spout onto the soil and watched it disappear.

“Do you like your job?”

She turned to look at the man sitting behind the large mahogany desk. He was in his mid-forties with dark hair, slightly lighter at the temples. He had well-groomed eyebrows, a slightly large nose and interesting lips. He was looking at her with serious hazel eyes. “Yes, I do, Doug,” she smiled at him. They had been on a first name basis for the past two years.

She had a good salary in the top of her field, a comfortable life and a little stash for hard times. Doug was an easy-going man and though sometimes he looked at her sensually, he never said or did anything to embarrass her. He was not hard to please, if you knew his likes and dislikes, which she learned early. She knew how he liked his coffee and that he wanted each day’s work on his desk the next morning and sometimes, that required a little over time, but she was willing to do it, because her bonus check every three months made up for it.

“How old are you?” He leaned back in his oversized chair.

She laughed lightly, “Doug, you don’t ever ask a woman her age. She wouldn’t tell you the truth, anyway.”

“Tell me the truth.”

“Is it important?”

“Yes,” he nodded and looked serious.

“I just turned thirty.” Val didn’t see any reason for the question, but she was not ashamed of her age. She felt that thirty was the age when youthful foolishness gave way to maturity.

“Why hasn’t some lucky young man married you? You are lovely, bright and dependable.”

“Maybe because I’m not looking and no one measures up to my expectations.”

“What are your expectations?”

“Long term commitment ...to me, for one, and someone that can carry his end of the relationship like a man ...and keep reminding me that I’m a woman by the things he does.”

“Hmm,” he drew his fingers down his chiseled cheeks thoughtfully. “I know you’re not married, but do you have a significant other?”

“That is a little personal, isn’t it?”

“It could be, if I didn’t have a reason for asking.”

His lips turned up in a slight smile. His face held soft friendly features and he had a way of setting people at ease around him. That was probably why he was a success in his business. He had business interests in many places, some in strange and foreboding places, as well as mainstream overseas investments. He’d said once, “Anywhere there is honest money to be made, I’m there.” Pretty much that summed up his business. He had invested heavily in space travel and thought it would become important in the future. He had investments in a rubber plantation in the Congo, and a pineapple plantation in Hawaii.

“I have a boyfriend, yes,” she returned with a tilt to her head.

“Are you living with him?”

“Doug, that is none of your business. Why are you asking me these questions?” He had never talked like this before to her. She was a little surprised.

He leaned forward and picked up a pen from his desk and rolled it between his fingers. “I’m sorry, Val, just forget it.”

She studied him and he had two deep creases between his eyes. He had something on his mind and that something included her. “I’m seeing a fellow, but it is not serious. He is more like a friend.” She offered, turning back to the flowers. “I’m not living with anyone and have no intention of doing so.” That, she added, because she

didn't know where this was going and she didn't want to leave herself open.

"Good," he brightened. "Then there is no reason for you to refuse my request."

"What request is that?" She finished watering the flowers and turned with the pitcher poised in her hand.

"I have to go to Africa and look at a diamond mine I want to invest in. I would like you to go with me." His chair squeaked softly as he leaned back again and studied her reaction. Val was somewhat taken aback by his statement and puzzled as to why he wanted her along. He had taken a lot of business trips and never asked her to go. "If I can clinch this deal, I will make it worth your while." He sweetened the pot. That was the businessman talking.

"Why do you need me?" She drew near his desk and looked down at him.

"Because I need someone I can trust and someone that will be my eyes and ears. These people down there are not exactly honest business people and the man in charge of the operation doesn't hold the purse strings of the business. His wife does and that is where you come in. I need you to feel her out and let me know what is going on outside of the meeting with Mr. Kenellog. This is a chance to get my foot into the diamond market and that's a lucrative business. What do you say?"

"I'll have to think on it. I do have a family, you know."

"I understand," he smiled. "I need your answer within the next couple of days. I have to be down there next month and we need to get your passport and everything."

Traipsing through the jungles of Africa was not one of the things she considered part of her life's plan, nor did she find it a pleasing thought. However, Doug had asked her to go and it seemed very important to him. He didn't say how long they would be gone and her mother had a bad heart. Then there was James... he would not be

enthusiastic about her going, she was sure. All these thoughts tumbled through her mind as she drove out of Pleasantville and headed over the bridge to Ventor City.

It didn't take long before she was pulling up in the drive to the retirement house her mother and father had saved all their lives to build. From their patio, the white waves of the ocean could be seen and on this summer day, they were sitting at a patio table, sipping iced tea and watching the sailboats make their way up the coast.

Val stopped in their neat kitchen and made a glass of tea for herself before going out to greet her parents. She usually came by at least three times a week. She guessed they were a little surprised to see her today, because she had been here yesterday. They smiled and seemed glad to see her, though. She hugged her dad around the neck from behind and kissed her mother on the cheek before settling down in one of the patio chairs.

She didn't know quite how to bring up the subject on her mind, so she sipped her tea and looked out over the ocean.

"Is everything okay," her father asked. She nodded without looking at him. He was a retired banker and a whiz with finances. He had a dry personality and was sometimes hard to live with. She admired her mother for putting up with him for fifty-six years. His silver hair showed only a few strands of the dark color it used to be. Most of that gray came on when they lost William to the Vietnam War. It was shortly after that when her mother had a mild heart attack. Losing their son about killed the both of them. Then Barret joined the Air National Guard, and now he was in Iraq. That left her to look in on them and that was why she was here. She hated to go away now, too, and leave them all alone. Well, there was no other way, except to just come out with it.

"My boss wants me to go on a business trip with him," she said dryly.

"I thought you and James were close," her father

returned.

“It’s not like that, Dad,” she laughed. “You watch too much TV. It is purely a business trip.”

“James is a nice man,” her mother entered. She was a small lady with curls all over her head. Her face has held its features well and time had not taken the sparkle out of her eyes. She still wrinkles her nose when she doesn’t like something and her eyes are hidden behind silver rimmed glasses, which did not hide the beauty she still maintained.

“Yes, he is, but we are only friends and you know that.”

“You need a husband,” her father said and took a sip of tea.

“He wants me to go to Africa with him,” she ignored her father’s words.

“James does?” her mother blinked at her.

“No, Mother, Doug does,” she sighed.

“Doug is it, now?” her father questioned.

“It’s been Doug for years, Dad,” she opened her hand to him. “It doesn’t mean a thing.”

“Valerie Mary Hension,” her mother looked wide eyed at her. “Africa? Child, that’s half way around the world.”

“I know,” she said softly.

“What about James?” her father questioned.

“He’s a big boy. I think he can live on without me.”

“He has a child, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, she’s three,” she replied.

“I would like a grandchild, before I die,” he leaned forward.

“You already have two from Barret.”

“We never get to see them,” her mother complained.

“That’s not my fault,” she stood up. “I’m not going to be in a hurry to have children.”

“You’re thirty aren’t you? Doesn’t seem to me like you have been,” her father injected.

“I don’t know how long I will be gone,” she sighed.

“When are you going?” her mother asked.

“Next month,” she supplied. “We’ll talk about it some more later. I have to go. James is coming for dinner.”

“Poor James,” her father muttered.

Val turned for the door and tossed ‘bye’ over her shoulder as she left.

She did not understand why it bothered her parents so much that she had not married and had kids. It was her life, after all. Being married and having kids was not a priority with her. She liked working, instead of picking up toys and feeding babies. However, when Tena brought her new baby to the office, she couldn’t wait to get her hand on it. It’s just all the other responsibility that comes with it. She decided she was a very strange person.

Dinner was ready when the phone rang, “Hello?” she said into the receiver.

“Hi, honey, uh ...I’m sorry. I can’t make it to dinner tonight.” His words held regret. “I have to take a client out for a business dinner. You want to come along?”

“No.” She looked around at the table set for two with a candelabrum in the middle. “That’s okay,” she sighed.

“I’m sorry, but I will stop by later tonight.”

“All right, I really need to talk to you.”

“Okay, babe. I’ll see you later.”

She hung up and muttered, “If something else doesn’t come up.”

The thing about James was that he lived in a world where plans, dates or appointments meant nothing and he changed them with a flip of his hand, without any thought about how it affected others. This was the one drawback in their relationship. She sighed, went over to the table, took the second setting off the table, and removed the centerpiece. No romantic dinner tonight. Romance was always sacrificed for business. Then she filled her plate from the stove, sat down and ate dinner.

She was watching the late news when the doorbell rang to her apartment. She went to the door and opened it.

James was leaning against the doorpost with a shy grin. He was tall with brown, sculptured hair that came almost to his collar. He had deep brown eyes and a broad smile. His features were sharp and chiseled, with a square chin and sensual lips. He was very handsome. It was that, she determined, that attracted her to him.

“Hi,” he leaned near and kissed her softly.

“Come in,” she returned. Then she went over, picked up the remote and turned the TV off. He followed her and slid his arms around her from behind and nibbled on her ear. She reacted to the chill it gave her and then she removed his hands and sat down on the sofa.

“James, my boss wants me to go on a business trip with him,” she told as he sat down beside her.

“Is that right?” he replied, leaning very near her. She knew if she turned her head to look at him he would kiss her and she was not in the mood to be romantic. His phone call had killed the romance for her.

“It’s next month and I have a lot to do to get ready,” she stared at the blank TV screen.

“This is the first time he has taken you with him, isn’t it?” he said near her ear and then kissed her neck.

“Yes,” she returned, moving her head away from him slightly. “We are going to Africa, and I have no idea how long I will be gone.”

“Africa?” he said in a distracted voice and she could feel him moving toward her, so she stood up quickly and looked down at him.

“I have to get a passport, shots and make appointments. I’ll need some new clothes and ...and everything.”

“Well, do you have to do that tonight?” He stood up and was very close to her.

“No, but I’m tired.” She looked at the disappointment in his eyes. Then she said something that surprised her. “You’ll have to go someplace else for sex tonight.” She never talked like that and she wondered why

she said it.

He blinked at her in astonishment, “What a thing to say,” he finally found his tongue, “Do you think that is the only reason I’m here?”

“I don’t know, James. I just...” she shrugged, “I just need some space.”

She could feel his eyes on her, studying her. “You have a thing going with your boss, don’t you?”

“Please, go now. I need to get some rest. I have a lot to do tomorrow.”

She didn’t know why she let him believe there was something between her and Doug. It was cruel, but then again, she never gave him any reason to think that. It was a witness to the frailty and lack of trust in the relationship.

“All right,” he said with hurt in his voice. “We could have had a nice life together.”

Then he turned and went out, closing the door between them. She did have some feelings for James, most of the time. Maybe she was still miffed about dinner. She stood there looking at the door and felt nothing, no regret, no relief, and no sense of loss... nothing.