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By Barbara Dunlop




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By the time Kalissa learns the truth, Riley's passion is the real deal. But can he convince her she isn't a mere pawn in his seduction scheme?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Barbara Dunlop has written more than forty novels for Harlequin Books, including the acclaimed COLORADO CATTLE BARONS series for Harlequin Desire. Her sexy, light-hearted stories regularly hit bestsellers lists. Barbara is a three time finalist for the Romance Writers of America's RITA award.

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Kalissa Smith stripped off a pair of dirt-streaked garden gloves and paced backward from the Newbergs' house, smiling with both pride and satisfaction. It had taken a full month, but the new lawn gleamed emerald under the August sun. Beyond its scalloped edges, fresh, black dirt was mounded in flower beds positioned against the brick walls of the two-story colonial. Evergreens and dwarf maples were clustered in one corner of the spacious yard, providing shade and privacy.

"The ornamental peppers definitely work," said Megan, crossing from their company pickup truck in the driveway.

"It's a bit of a twist," said Kalissa.

Megan drew a deep breath. "I think they'll be happy with the twist."

"They'd better be happy."

The Newbergs were not the easiest clients in the world, but at least the job was finally complete.

"Did we make any money on this one?" Megan asked.

"I sure hope we did. We were underwater on the turf, but we saved on labor."

"Only because we did most of it ourselves."

"Good thing we charge ourselves such reasonable prices."

Megan smiled at the joke. "It does look fantastic."

Kalissa couldn't help flexing her sore shoulders. Her calves were tight and her abs ached from so many days of physical work. On the bright side, she had absolutely no need to visit a gym, and she was developing a very nice tan.

"I'm going to take some pictures for the web site," she said.

Mosaic Landscaping had been in business for just under a year, starting when Kalissa and Megan had both earned college diplomas in landscape design.

"There were three more inquires on our voice mail this afternoon," said Megan.

"Can we at least grab dinner before we start a new project?" Megan chuckled. "On top of everything else, you want *food*?"

"Call me high-maintenance."

"I could go for a burger."

"Benny's, here we come."

Benny's Burgers was a funky little restaurant tucked in an alleyway near their landscape shop on the west side of Chicago. They'd rented the aging storefront and warehouse space because of its generous size and reasonable rent. Esthetics had little to do with the decision—though they had painted and brightened the upstairs apartment, moving two single beds and some used furniture into the space.

Kalissa retrieved the camera from the front of their serviceable, blue pickup truck, making her way around the yard to take shots from various angles.

At the same time, Megan gathered up the last of the hand tools, stowing them in the pickup box. Then she perched herself on the tailgate, scrolling through pages on her tablet.

"Any new inquiries from the web site?" Kalissa called as she lined up for a picture of the flagstone walkway edged with pink and white peonies. The front porch and double doors filled in the background, and the sun was hitting the flowers at just the right angle.

"There are still a lot of people looking for maintenance."

Megan and Kalissa had talked about adding a yard maintenance service to their business. It wasn't where they wanted to focus, but if they could hire a decent crew, they might be able to make a little extra money. Their business was gradually increasing its customer base, but the margins were thin.

Kalissa clicked the final shots.

"What do you think about doing that?" she asked as she made her way back to the truck.

"Is there something you've neglected to tell me?" Megan was staring at the tablet screen.

Kalissa stopped in front of her. "About what?"

Megan turned the tablet so it was facing Kalissa.

Kalissa reached out to steady it.

She squinted against the bright sunshine, and a photo of a bride and groom came into focus. The man was handsome in his tux, and the woman's dress was gorgeous, highlighted by a huge, multi-colored bouquet of roses, tulips and lavender.

"See it?" asked Megan.

"The Ferdinand Pichard roses?" They were stunning. Kalissa had never seen them in such a deep magenta.

"The *bride*"

"What about the—" Then Kalissa saw it. She snapped her hand back in astonishment.

"It's you."

"It's not me." Kalissa peered at the woman's startlingly familiar face. It obviously couldn't be her. "Photo-shopped?" she asked.

"That's what I thought," said Megan. "But there are a bunch more." She moved so they could both see the screen while she scrolled through other pictures.

"What on earth?" Kalissa took control of the tablet. "Is this a joke?" She looked at Megan. "Did you do this?"

Megan stood up for a better view. "I only found it two minutes ago."

Kalissa stopped on a picture of the bride and groom cutting the wedding cake.

"Nice," said Megan. "Seven tiers."

"I obviously have money in this alternate life." Kalissa took in each of the bride's poses and expressions. "Too bad I can't float us a loan."

She struggled to figure out where her head shots could have originated, guessing this was some kind of on-line game.

"My birthday's coming up," she ventured, trying to imagine who, other than Megan, would spend this much time on a joke gift.

"Nice groom," said Megan.

Kalissa took another look at the man. "He is pretty hot."

"It says here he's Shane Colborn."

"Why do I know that name?"

"Colborn Aerospace," said Megan, identifying a prominent Chicago company.

"So, it was obviously somebody from Chicago who did this."

"I mean, this is the real guy. He *owns* Colborn Aerospace."

"Uh, oh." Now Kalissa was worried. "He's not going to think this is funny. Can anybody see this page?"

"I got it from a Nighttime News link." Kalissa's confusion grew. "The national site?" Megan nodded.

"Why? How? We have to get them to take it down."

"I think it's legit."

"That's ridiculous."

"I think you have a doppelganger."

"That's not a real thing." Kalissa studied the bride's face. "And there's no way someone could possibly look this similar."

It was a joke. These had to be pictures of her that somebody had taken without her knowledge.

"Maybe you were part of a cloning experiment?"

"I doubt they had human cloning when I was born."

"I hope they still don't have it now," said Megan. "You know, there is one other possibility,"

Kalissa waited a moment. But when Megan didn't finish, she glanced up. "What?"

"You have an identical twin," said Megan.

Kalissa shook her head.

"You *were* adopted."

"I was nearly a year old when I was adopted. My mother would have known if I had a twin sister. She would have said something."

Gilda Smith hadn't been the most organized person in the world. She was fond of sherry, and her memory was never the greatest. But you didn't forget that your adopted daughter had a twin sister.

Megan looked pointedly down at the screen. "Maybe they split you up."

"Who would do that? And why keep it a secret?"

"It says she's Darci Rivers. Well, Darci Colborn now."

"My birth name was Thorp."

"And your legal name is Smith. Whoever adopted this Darci would have changed hers too."

"It can't be," said Kalissa, fighting the logic of Megan's assumption. "It just can't."

Megan shrugged her shoulders, clearly resting her case.

As Kalissa took in every inch of the woman's face, her chest tightened, and a strange buzzing sensation made its way along her limbs. She struggled to wrap her head around the information.

The resemblance was far too close to be a coincidence. Unless this was some elaborate photo-cropping joke,

there was a real possibility she had a secret twin sister.

"You should call her," said Megan. "Maybe *she* can float us a loan."

Kalissa was appalled. "You didn't actually say that."

"The woman just married a billionaire."

"So what?" The Colborn money had absolutely nothing to do with Kalissa.

"The minute she gets a look at you—"

"I'm not about to let her get a look at me."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not going to be that person."

"Really? What person is it you're not going to be?"

"The long-lost relative who pops up the minute there's money in play."

"You don't have to ask her for money."

Kalissa wasn't fooling around here. "It doesn't matter if I ask or not. They'll think I've been waiting in the wings all these years, and now I've decided to pounce."

"She'll probably just offer it up."

"*Stop* it."

"We'd pay her back."

"See?" said Kalissa. "See? Even you think I'm after her money. And you know me better than anyone."

"It's not like she'd miss a few thousand. *Temporarily*!"

Kalissa closed the window and handed back the tablet. "No. No. And no."

"You can't just ignore this."

"Watch me."

Riley Ellis was both thrilled and terrified. He had a newly expanded aircraft factory, a significant new sales contract, a massive mortgage on the commercial building and a maxed out line of credit. Ellis Aviation was entering a whole new phase of existence.

"Flipping the switch now," he said to Wade Cormack on the other end of the cell phone in Seattle.

"Congratulations," said Wade. He was the owner of Zoom Tac, the company supplying most of the parts for the new E-22 short haul jet.

Riley twisted the switch, and the main overhead lights came on in sequence. Computers came to life, and robotic machines started their power-up sequence along the assembly line. The hundred staff members on the floor sent up a cheer.

He hadn't really turned everything on with a single switch. The supervisors and foremen at each station had simply taken the overhead lights as a signal to go live. It was eight a.m., August 16th, day one of the expanded operation.

From the interior walkway on the third level, Riley gave everyone a wave and a salute. "The clock is officially ticking," he said to Wade.

The cheering gradually died down, and everyone's attention turned to their tasks.

"Now you just need to get the glitches worked out of the supply chain," said Wade.

"The custom rivets finally arrived. Colorado's good on the sheet metal. How are your new parts certifications coming?" Riley moved along the walkway to his office, the spring-loaded door shutting out the noise behind him.

"My guys say they're on track."

"That's great." Riley plopped down on his desk chair.

The new office was compact and utilitarian, with big windows overlooking the factory floor. His production and sales managers had offices on either side of him, with the various unit supervisors near their staff's stations throughout the facility.

Out of habit from all the recent construction, he'd worn cargo pants and a t-shirt, his feet clad in steel toed boots. Part of him was itching to get down there on the floor and plunge in. But he realized he had to stay at the helm.

He had over a hundred and fifty workers now, operating on three shifts. They needed a leader, not a colleague. And he had to keep focused on the company's strategic direction.

"Good luck," said Wade.

"Talk to you in a few days." Riley ended the call.

As he settled back in his chair, his thoughts went fleetingly to his father, Dalton Colborn. The man had never once acknowledged Riley as his illegitimate son, and he'd certainly never given him any support or encouragement. Still, their lives had ended up following a similar path.

At the moment, Riley couldn't help but wonder if this was how Dalton had felt in the early days when his fledgling company had first started to grow. Had he experienced this same combination of exhilaration and flat-out fear? Dalton had gone from nothing to a billion dollar aerospace company before he'd died, so he must have taken chances along the way.

Shane Colborn had inherited that dynasty. Shane was the legitimate son, the golden child.

"Well, Shane," Riley said out loud to the empty office, wishing he had a shot of tequila or even a beer to use for a toast. "Let's find out if your illegitimate half-brother can give you a run for your money."

His phone pinged with a text message.

He set aside his thoughts and checked it. The text was from Ashton Watson, his high school friend. It was a photo tagged: Blew my mind.

Another text came immediately from Ashton. I've met the bride.

Curious, Riley tapped the photo. It expanded to show a picture of Shane dressed in a tuxedo standing next to a gorgeous, auburn haired woman in white lace. She had a trim body, bright green eyes and flawless skin, a true ten on the hotness scale. Then again, a ten was exactly what Riley would have expected for Shane.

His office door opened, and Ashton strode right in. "She's a piece of work, that one. Nasty as they come."

"She doesn't look nasty," Riley couldn't help but observe. She looked classy and beautiful, and also very happy. Then again, she'd just married a billionaire in a lavish wedding that was reported to have cost several hundred thousand dollars. That would probably make the nastiest of women happy.

"Just don't tick her off," said Ashton.

"How do you know her?"

"She was Jennifer's roommate."

"Jennifer?"

Ashton gave an exasperated sigh, lowering himself into the single guest chair. "I dated her for four months."

"Did I meet her?"

"Yeah. At least once. I'm sure you met her. Blond hair, blue eyes, great legs."

"You just described every date you've had since freshman year."

"She was different. Anyway, it doesn't matter. It's going to go bad for Shane. I'd put money on it."

"Couldn't happen to a nicer guy," Riley drawled.

Ashton grinned and cocked his head toward the interior windows. "Looks really good out there."

"I can't believe we're finally up and running."

"I knew you'd do it."

"I haven't done it yet." Riley rose to gaze out at the factory himself. Machines were running. People were

working. But it was a long, long road to any kind of profitability. He sure hoped he could make it.

Ashton stood beside him. "Yeah, you have. Before long, you'll have more contracts than you'll know what to do with."

"Believe it or not, I've been thinking about Dalton."

"Seriously?"

"I was thinking, he had to have started out like this, same risks, same fears, same hopes."

It took Ashton a second to respond. When he did, his tone was thoughtful. "You're more like him than Shane is, you know."

"That's not my ambition. Riley had no admiration or respect for his biological father. He hated the man."

"Shane had it handed to him on a silver platter. You had to fight for every inch to get where you are."

"Where I am is deep in debt and tip-toeing along a cliff of complete disaster."

"That's what makes it exciting," said Ashton. "No risk, no reward."

"Is that why you fly the way you do? The adrenaline rush?"

Ashton was a helicopter pilot, and he volunteered for search and rescue on his days off. He had a reputation for saying yes to the riskiest of flights.

"Sure," Ashton said with a shrug. "That and it impresses the girls."

"Like you've ever had trouble getting girls." For some reason, Riley took another look at the picture of Shane and his bride.

"Her name is Darci Rivers," said Ashton.

There was something compelling in the woman's emerald eyes, a secret in her lush smile. Riley suddenly pictured her shiny hair splayed across a white pillowcase.

He shifted and quickly banished the image.

"You think he made a mistake?" he asked Ashton.

"Oh, he made a mistake all right. That creature's got claws."

"Well, I hope she distracts him," said Riley.

He and Shane would be going after the same airline contracts from here on in. If Shane was newly married to a handful of a wife, it might give Riley an advantage.

Through the glass of the restaurant window, a good looking, neatly dressed man caught Kalissa's eye for a

second time.

He was staring openly now as she wheeled a trio of azalea plants across the lighted patio garden.

It would be nice to think he was interested in her. He was extremely attractive, with dark eyes, a straight nose, and the kind of square chin that made a man seem powerful. But she was dressed in dirt streaked blue jeans, a faded green T-shirt and a pair of scuffed, serviceable work boots.

Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. At least it had started the day that way. By now, it likely resembled a rat's nest. And the morning's fifteen second application of mascara would have long since rubbed off.

No. The thoughts running through his head were not about getting her phone number. Judging by his growing frown, he was probably offended by her dirty, disheveled state as he tried to enjoy a refined meal.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Alfred Cox:

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