
An Imperfect Love

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CHAPTER ONE

TRAFFIC had been especially heavy on Camelback Road that morning, and it was a little later than usual when Alisa parked her small car behind the sprawling masonry building that housed the firm of Harrison, Weber and Abernathy, Attorneys-at-Law. It was still early enough in the morning, however, for the sweater she had flung around her shoulders to be welcome. Phoenix might be more hospitable in early March than most other cities in the nation, but mornings and evenings could be crisp.

“Crisp,” she muttered to herself. “You’ve lived in this climate for less than a year and you’re already thoroughly spoiled. In Green Bay they’re wading through snowdrifts three feet deep, and battling icy streets and cars that won’t start in sub-zero weather. Meanwhile, you’re complaining because you need a sweater in the morning!”

And sometimes, she thought, I’d gladly put up with the snow and the ice and the cold, if I could only go home.

She squared her shoulders. *This is home now, she told herself. Home isn’t a city or a neighborhood or a house—it’s a place where you are free to be yourself, without excuses, without play-acting, without having to hide behind a false smile. Home is where you can cry, if you need to, without having to explain.*

And Green Bay could never be home to her again. Not as long as Shelley was there. Shelley, and Clay.

The receptionist looked up from the pile of mail she was sorting into neat little heaps and grinned. “It isn’t often that I’m here before you, Miss McClenaghan. Are you taking it easy this week, with Mr. Abernathy out of town?”

Alisa smiled. “Not exactly. Is that all of his mail?”

The receptionist sneezed and shook her head. “I don’t think so. I seem to detect another scented one lurking at the bottom of the pile.” She tossed a pale blue envelope on top of the stack. “I know I shouldn’t complain, because you usually sort out his mail. But how do you stand the conflicting perfumes? I think the job

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deserves combat pay, myself.” She sneezed again. “I moved to Arizona to get away from the pollen, and now I find that perfume makes me weepy-eyed.”

“Not all Mr. Abernathy’s mail reeks of *Joy*.”

“No,” the receptionist agreed dryly. “Some of the ladies prefer *Sensually Meghan*. At five hundred dollars an ounce, I wouldn’t think they’d waste it on notes to their divorce lawyer.”

Alisa laughed, in spite of herself. “Be glad they’re only writing him notes about their property settlements, instead of sitting around the reception room all the time waiting to see him.”

The receptionist wrinkled her nose thoughtfully, and sniffed. “I’ll remember that. Still, after having been burned on matrimony once, you wouldn’t think they’d be eager to start flirting again.”

“Why not? For some of these women it’s a way of life. Besides, you have to admit that he can certainly play the game.”

The receptionist looked scandalized. “You don’t mean that he would actually—?”

“I didn’t say that,” Alisa reminded. *But*, she told herself, *I’ve already said plenty that I shouldn’t have said*. She scooped up the stack of mail and carried it across the thick-carpeted waiting room to her own office, and shut the door firmly behind her.

A little of that kind of talk being overheard by the wrong person and you’ll be out of a job, Alisa my girl, she told herself.

No one, to her knowledge, had ever accused Justin Abernathy of misconduct with a client, and probably no one ever would. Using his phenomenally effective charm to cajole the ladies into cooperation was one thing, but he knew precisely where the line was drawn, and he would never step over it—at least, not as long as there was a divorce action pending. After the shouting was all over and the final papers were signed—

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Well, that might be something else, she reflected. A number of his former clients seemed to hope that was the case, at any rate. And he had been seeing a lot of one of them, lately. But then Debbie Baxter knew how to play the game, too.

Alisa sighed and reached for the razor-sharp letter opener. Quickly, systematically, she slit the envelopes, and then unfolded each letter one by one, listed the contents in the mail log she kept faithfully up to date, and attached a note where necessary summarizing the message the letter contained.

Eight months ago, when she had first come to work for Justin Abernathy, she had carefully sorted his mail and placed a stack of unopened envelopes on his desk blotter each morning. All of them were marked *Personal* or *Private* or *Confidential*. Most of them were addressed in a feminine hand. She had felt a little strange about even handling them, as if she was violating his privacy.

On the fourth morning of her employment he had summoned her into his office and pointed at the pile she had put on his desk just minutes before. “What are those doing here?” he had asked.

“I assumed, since they’re marked *Personal*, Mr. Abernathy, that you wanted—”

“Mail which comes to my office is, by definition, not personal,” he had said.

Alisa had blinked at him in astonishment. “You can’t mean that you want me to deal with those?”

He had leaned back in his big leather chair and clasped his hands at the base of his neck and said, sounding honestly curious, “Why not? You’re a confidential secretary, aren’t you?”

She hadn’t been able to argue with that. So she had taken the stack of envelopes back to her desk and, with trepidation, opened them. It had become easier over the months, and now she didn’t even look to see what warnings were written on the envelopes. He’d been right—the vast majority were business, after all. The occasional exception had ceased to embarrass her; it certainly never seemed to bother Justin Abernathy.

She glanced at the legal pad on the corner of her desk, waiting patiently for her to finish with the mail. The list of things to do filled an entire page in neat shorthand.

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The fact that Justin Abernathy had been in Flagstaff for most of the week taking depositions for a big divorce case didn't mean that his secretary was having an easy time of it in Phoenix; as usual, things had become even more frantic the instant he'd stepped out of the office. And it didn't matter where he went, either. As long as Justin Abernathy was within reach of a telephone, Alisa wouldn't lack for things to keep her busy. She was half amused at the receptionist's idea that she was having a vacation with him gone all week. What did the girl think Alisa did behind her closed office door all day anyway? File her nails? Play solitaire? Tap-dance on the polished mahogany top of her desk?

At any rate, that sort of thing might be the receptionist's idea of a pleasant day at the office, but it wasn't Alisa's. As a good secretary, she prided herself on her efficient use of time.

"Oh, stop patting yourself on the back for being virtuous," she told herself crossly. "You're just edgy because it's Friday and you haven't any idea what you're going to do with the whole weekend. Well, tonight you'll just have to get busy and plan something— anything— to fill up all those hours. Then you'll feel better."

She picked up the last envelope. It was addressed in a spidery, cramped hand that she recognized instantly, for Justin Abernathy had received a letter from his great-aunt Louise every Friday morning in the entire eight months Alisa had worked for him. She had wondered at first how Louise Abernathy managed such consistency, considering the vagaries of the postal service. But then, as the letters continued and she got to know Louise a little better, it became obvious. No one would dare to contradict Louise's wishes, not even the federal government. The only exception was apparently Justin Abernathy, and even he had learned not to push certain subjects with her.

For example, the telephone system. Louise believed the telephone was an invention of the devil, and she was certain that anyone who used it for anything short of dire emergency was inevitably going to be struck down by lightning. Not even Justin could change her mind on that and so every Monday Alisa mailed a letter from Justin to Louise. He never wrote the letters, of course; Alisa did. Sometimes she wondered if he even bothered to read them any more before he signed his name.

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This week Louise's letter was enclosed in a birthday card, along with a generous-sized check. Alisa looked at the card with surprise, and then laughed at herself. "Did you think the man didn't have birthdays?" she asked herself lightly. Well, his secret was out now; Justin Abernathy would be thirty-five tomorrow, and his great-aunt Louise wasn't about to let him forget it.

Alisa chewed thoughtfully on her pen as she deciphered Louise's handwriting. It was going to take a bit of tact to answer this one properly, she reflected. Oh, well—it would give her something to think about all weekend. She put the letter on the corner of her desk so she wouldn't forget to take it home with her.

She skipped lunch and used the time instead to drop off some papers at the courthouse. It wasn't that she didn't trust the messenger service, but sometimes she preferred the secure feeling of putting important documents into the right hands herself. Besides, she told herself, it made a good excuse to get out of the office, and, though driving in Phoenix traffic at high noon was hardly a heavenly experience, the view of the mountains that surrounded the Valley of the Sun certainly made up for it. The palm-lined streets, with gigantic saguaro and barrel cacti standing proudly at unexpected intervals, were part of a landscape that still looked surreal to a girl who had grown up in the woods of northern Wisconsin. She had to remind herself at least once a day that Phoenix was not just an enormous film set.

The receptionist greeted her on her return with a stack of yellow message slips. "Mr. Coltrain is here, too," she said, as Alisa shuffled expertly through the memos. "I told him you'd be back any minute, so he said he'd wait."

Alisa's fingers clenched on a yellow square. For an instant, she stared down at it, and then put it at the bottom of the pile. Her fingers were trembling a little. "I hope you didn't let him into my office."

"No, he's in the conference room drinking coffee. Are you all right, Miss McClenaghan?"

Alisa smiled absently. "Of course. I was just thinking about the files I'd left on my desk. We wouldn't want to let anybody from a rival firm get a look at those, would we?"

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The receptionist looked puzzled, but before she could answer Alisa had crossed the carpeted waiting room.

Dumb, she told herself. *Very, very dumb.*

Everyone in the firm knew what a stickler she was about locking everything up before she left her office, even if it was only to go and have a cup of coffee in the employees' lounge. There was nothing on your desk at all—certainly nothing of a sensitive nature. Ridge Coltrain could spend weeks in there and not come up with anything that would help him next time he went up against Justin Abernathy in court.

But letting the receptionist think she was upset about Ridge Coltrain was better than the alternative. She closed her eyes for an instant, and the image of the yellow message slip seemed to be burned on to the back of her eyelids. “Shelley called,” it said. “Said it is urgent; please call her back as soon as possible.”

That was all. There was no reason why anyone should suspect that simple message of making Alisa's heart race and her insides feel strangely empty.

It's Clay, she thought. *Something must have happened to Clay.*

And until she had dealt with business there was absolutely nothing she could do about Shelley's call, so she squared her shoulders and went down the hall to the conference room.

Ridge Coltrain was leaning back in the leather chair at the head of the long table, a coffee mug dangling from his hand, dreamily studying the modern-art print that nearly filled the opposite wall.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ridge,” Alisa said crisply. “You're here for the papers on the Goulds' property settlement, right?”

He uncoiled himself from the chair, stretching lazily to his full height, which was considerable. “I'm in no hurry,” he murmured. “I love to sit and absorb the atmosphere of this place. If it's true that you can tell a successful lawyer by the expensive furniture in his office, then Justin obviously has no worries.”

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Alisa bit back a smile. Ridge Coltrain's law practice was a new one, and not the most secure as yet, but there was no envy in his voice, only idle good humor. That self-control, she had heard Justin Abernathy say, was precisely why the young man was going to be dangerous in a courtroom when he got a little more experience under his belt.

If Ridge Coltrain ever heard that, she thought, he would probably take it as a compliment— and understandably so. But he would never hear it from her.

She led the way into the office and unlocked the bottom drawer of her desk. "I expected that you'd send your secretary over."

"My secretary can't be trusted to get herself to work on time, much less clear across Phoenix with a set of important papers. Are you sure you don't want a job, Alisa? I can't pay you what Justin does, that's sure, but think of the challenge." He waved his mug in the air. "And you wouldn't have to wash fancy china cups, either—we use the plastic foam kind."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Ridge, but the cleaning service does the mugs." *Please, she thought, just take the papers and go, Ridge. I don't want to chat today.*

He shook his head sadly. "You have no sense of adventure, Alisa." He flipped the folder open and ran a finger down a page. "I'll look at this over the weekend and get back to Justin next week. And if you change your mind about wanting a job..."

She smiled and said everything that was pleasant, and hurried him out of the door as quickly as she could without being rudely obvious. The instant the door closed behind him she grabbed for the telephone.

There was no answer at Shelley's apartment.

Alisa reached for the message slip again; there was no telephone number on it. How like Shelley, she thought, to say it was urgent but not leave a number where she could be reached. Should she try the hospitals? Or the police, perhaps?

Don't be a fool, she told herself sternly. She didn't know that anything is truly wrong; everything Shelley had ever wanted was urgent – according to Shelley, at least. And she had a job to do. She couldn't spend the afternoon on the telephone

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trying to run down every emergency facility in Green Bay to ask if something might have happened.

But she kept trying every half-hour, and listening to the dull buzz of an unanswered telephone in an empty apartment. And every time her own phone rang, her pulse leaped until she found that it was not Shelley.

By mid-afternoon, with the continual interruptions of the telephone— every one of Justin Abernathy’s clients seemed to be having a crisis this week— she had worked her way only halfway down her list of things to do.

Perhaps, she thought, Louise Abernathy had a point after all. The world *would* be a much more civilized place without the continual demanding chime of a telephone.

That was when Debbie Baxter strolled into the office, swinging a pair of sunglasses between her thumb and forefinger. She was wearing faultless white tennis shorts that showed off her perfectly tanned legs to an almost indecent height. Her tightly fitted top also displayed a great deal of Debbie in a slightly different way, and her long red hair tumbled wildly around her shoulders. Alisa concluded that it had been artfully arranged, though to the average man, it would probably look as if Debbie had just come off the court. She looked a good ten years younger than her real age, which Alisa happened to know because Debbie’s divorce had still been pending when Alisa had first come to work for Justin Abernathy.

I must have another chat with the receptionist, Alisa told herself. People weren’t supposed to just wander into her office like this. But then, Debbie Baxter didn’t consider herself to be any ordinary person. It would take more than a receptionist to stop her.

Debbie’s eyes went eagerly to Justin’s office, and her face fell when she saw the open door and the darkened room beyond.

“He’s still in Flagstaff,” Alisa said, without waiting to be asked.

Debbie curled up in the chair beside Alisa’s desk, as lithe and supple as a jungle cat. *Or a python*, Alisa thought.

“He isn’t going to be up there all weekend, is he?”

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“He hasn’t told me, but I doubt it.” Alisa didn’t take her eyes off the legal pad where she was summarizing the questions of the last client who had called.

“He’d better not. We have a date for tomorrow.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t miss it.”

Debbie looked at her for a long moment, as if suspecting irony, and then confided, “Well, it’s a bit difficult, you see. It’s just sort of a casual date. I mean, I let him think it was nothing important because I didn’t want him to be suspicious, but I’m really having a surprise party for him, for his birthday.”

Alisa’s eyebrows went up. *Obviously I was wrong*, she thought. His birthday was apparently no big secret, after all.

“He hasn’t a clue, and I can hardly call him up in Flagstaff and make a big production out of asking when he’s coming home.”

“I wouldn’t recommend that, no.”

Debbie looked expectantly across the desk, and said finally, “You could find out for me.”

Alisa sighed. Refusing would obviously do her no good; telling Debbie no and making it stick took about the same effort as wearing down a rock with a trickle of water. “If he calls the office, I will remind him to check his calendar for the weekend.”

Debbie thought that over. “I suppose I’ll have to be content with that.”

“I’m afraid it’s the best I can do.”

“I know,” Debbie said sympathetically. “He’d get suspicious if his secretary suddenly wanted to know all about his weekend plans. I mean, it’s obviously none of your concern what he does with his free time.” She frowned, and then added suddenly, “But if you do this favor for me, the next time I get a chance I’ll introduce you to my ex-husband. You’d make a great couple.”

Alisa bit her lip and said, choking only slightly, “Thank you. But...”

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“Bob always seemed to like the dowdy, efficient secretarial type. That’s mainly why we got divorced.” She glanced towards the door; then a glow spread over her face and she sat up eagerly. “Justin! I thought you were never going to get home!”

From the corner of her eye, Alisa could see wariness spring to life in the dark brown eyes of the man in the doorway.

That was a bad tactical mistake, Debbie, she thought. The last thing you want is for him to recognize that he’s being pursued.

Debbie seemed to realize it too. She glanced at the delicate watch strapped to her wrist and said, “Goodness, it’s late. I must be going, Justin, dear. I only stopped in to tell your secretary that I think she should meet Bob. Don’t you agree? They’re exactly the same type.” She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. “Oh, we are still playing tennis tomorrow, aren’t we? Silly me—I’d almost forgotten.”

Alisa gave her points for the fast recovery. Perhaps the woman wasn’t as dizzy as she sounded after all.

Justin Abernathy was frowning. “Debbie, I’m really swamped with work.”

She straightened his tie and pouted prettily. “Justin, dear, you mustn’t work all the time, you know—it makes you a very dull boy. And we can’t disappoint the Buchanans. They’re counting on us, and they’ll only be here for another week.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Debbie smiled triumphantly and blew Alisa an elaborate kiss from the doorway. “Do remember what I said about Bob, darling. I’ll be delighted to introduce you. It’s so sensible to be friends with one’s ex, you know, and I’d love to see him get the... um... happiness he deserves.”

Alisa couldn’t decide whether to laugh or cry. She settled for closing her eyes for a long instant, and by the time she opened them Justin Abernathy had crossed the room and turned on the lights in his office. “If you’re not too busy dreaming about Bob Baxter, Mac,” he said from the doorway, as he pulled his tie loose, “I’d like to get some work done.” He didn’t wait for an answer.

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Alisa smothered a sigh and gathered up the mail, the stack of messages and her notebook. She had been “Miss McClenaghan” for the first two days she had worked for him; then, in a busy moment, he had called for “Mac” and she had made the mistake of answering. It wasn’t that she minded, exactly. Most of the time she thoroughly enjoyed working for him, and even the nickname didn’t bother her. It was only at times like this, when the pace got busy and tense and he lost his sense of humor, that being called “Mac” really annoyed her.

He had shed his jacket and tie and was emptying the contents of his calfskin briefcase onto his desk when she came in; he looked up and watched as she came across the room.

She tried not to let the inspection bother her, but Debbie’s words seemed to echo in her mind. “The dowdy, efficient secretarial type,” she had said. Was that what Justin Abernathy was thinking, too?

Alisa’s soft olive-green dress was well-tailored, but its lines were classic rather than high fashion, intended to fade into the background. Her make-up was understated, her thick ash-blonde hair fell in unfashionably straight lines to her shoulders, and the glasses she wore when she was reading weren’t an accessory, but a necessity. Still, it was scarcely fair to call her dowdy.

In any case, she told herself firmly, my salary isn’t large enough for me to be a trend-setter, so he can hardly complain if I don’t look like one.

She squared her shoulders and sat down beside his desk. “Where would you like to begin, Mr. Abernathy?” she asked woodenly.

He looked at her for a long moment. “Forget my temper tantrum, will you, Mac? It’s been a long day.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Not the depositions, I hope?”

“No—that went well. But I dictated notes all the way back from Flagstaff, and it wasn’t until I was within twenty miles of Phoenix that I discovered the damned tape recorder wasn’t working. And I’d just put new batteries in it, too.” He tossed the recorder on to the shelf of a bookcase and smiled suddenly. “Sorry—I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

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She thought she had learned, in eight months, to brace herself against that smile; the impact of it was roughly similar to a tidal wave. But she found herself saying, “Perhaps if you were to try again while it’s still fresh in your mind...”

“Dictate it all to you right now, you mean? That was a four-hour drive.” He finished taking folders out of the briefcase, snapped it shut and set it aside. “No, I’d hate to make you cancel a date tonight, Mac. I’ll just take another recorder home for the weekend.”

She wasn’t going to argue with him, and neither was she eager to admit that there was no date to be cancelled. Besides, she thought, what he had really meant was that he had no intention of canceling *his* date. She glanced at the top message in the stack. “Mr. Johnson went to pick up his kids for visitation last night and there was no one at home...”

It was nearly thirty minutes later when she said, “And Mrs. Morrison wrote to say that she’s thought it over very hard, but, despite what she agreed to do last week, she couldn’t live with herself if she let her husband take the Pekinese.”

Justin Abernathy rubbed his knuckles against his jaw. “Astounding,” he said. “They can agree on the house, the kids, the cars and the bank accounts, but when it comes to a ten-year-old Pekinese dog everything breaks down.”

“Chu Lin will be twelve next month,” Alisa murmured. “It’s here on page five of the letter, right where she sprayed the perfume. *Midnight Passion*, I think.” She caught the gleam in his eyes and said, “Sorry.”

“Visitation rights for a dog.. You know, Mac, when I first started in this business I’d have laughed about the possibility of that sort of thing dragging me into court. I’ll have to call her and see what we can work out. Is that everything?”

Alisa picked up the last envelope, stretched her cramped fingers and said, “All the official stuff. But your Aunt Louise sent you a birthday card.”

He groaned and reached across the desk for it. “Does the woman never forget?”

“Would Emily Post?” Alisa asked crisply.

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He glanced at the check, raised his eyebrows, laid it aside and picked up the letter. “I’ll bet Emily Post wouldn’t say this kind of thing to her favorite great-nephew, just because he’s not married yet.”

“I’m sure Louise thinks it’s her duty.”

“I don’t see why. She never got married.” He turned the letter a little and squinted at the spidery handwriting. “And as for telling me that she’d rather have a visit from my wife next Christmas instead of another knick-knack to dust...”

“That hurt my feelings,” Alisa said. “It was a handmade porcelain bluebird that I sent her, and it cost you the earth.”

“Don’t remind me. I saw the bill.”

“She is your only great-aunt; you can’t be cheap about these things. Still, there are limits, and she seems to have reached yours. Would you like me to draft a reply?”

He lowered the letter and looked at her over the edge of it with considerable interest. “Just what would you tell her? I’ve already suggested that she mind her own business— several times over the last ten years.”

“I wouldn’t do that, exactly. There are more tactful ways.”

“Such as? You intrigue me, Mac. No one has ever managed anything of the sort with Louise.”

“Oh, I could explain to her how dealing with broken marriages every day has soured you on the idea altogether, and that her nagging will only remind you of all the frustrated ex-wives you have to deal with.”

“So far, so good.”

“And if she keeps it up she’ll make you glad that you can go home alone every night. Well,” Alisa added with a pang of conscience, “perhaps not *alone*, but there’s no need to tell Aunt Louise that, surely?”

He dropped the letter and leaned back in his chair with a burst of laughter. “I think you’re right— we should draw the line at the nagging ex-wives. By the way, is that patriotic fervor I hear in your voice, Mac? You sound a bit disillusioned yourself.”

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Alisa shrugged. “I was just trying to help.” She drew a tiny design on the margin of her notebook and looked up. “Besides, I thought you really felt that way. You certainly say often enough that love is blind.”

He nodded. “And marriage is an institution for the blind. I know. Don’t quote me any more, I can’t handle it.” He glanced at the letter again and put it back in the envelope. “If you can pull this one off, Mac, I’ll give you a raise and promote you to writing the briefs for all my appeals.” He ran a hand over the back of his neck. A stray late-afternoon sunbeam touched his head, turning his rumpled brown hair almost auburn for an instant. “I think that’s all for now.” His voice was abstracted, and he opened a folder and reached for a yellow pad and a pen.

Alisa smiled wryly. She— and Great-Aunt Louise— had been abruptly consigned to oblivion, that was for sure. She gathered up the rest of the mail and slipped quietly out of his office, closing the door softly behind her.

She had lost track of time when it opened again. She looked up from her work in surprise; he halted in the doorway, obviously just as startled to see her, with his briefcase in one hand and his jacket slung over his shoulder. “I thought I told you not to cancel your date, Mac.”

She nervously pushed her glasses up. “It wasn’t important. I didn’t want to let all this wait till Monday.”

He looked at the wire basket on the corner of her desk, full of neatly typed legal documents, and the stack of letters, each clipped to its envelope, waiting for his signature.

“Well, it’s time to go home now.” He snapped the lights off in his office.

She glanced at the clock on the credenza behind her desk. “I didn’t realize it was so late. I still have this letter to finish, so I’ll lock up.”

He set his briefcase on a chair. He looked a little exasperated. “Go home, Mac. Whoever is waiting for you is going to think I’m a slave-driver, and I hate having my reputation maligned for no good reason.”

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His voice was faintly ironic, but that wasn't what brought the stinging tears to her eyes. It was, instead, the memory of last winter, when there had been someone waiting for her at home, a bit jealous of the time that her work absorbed...

Don't be foolish, she told herself. Clay had never exactly hung around the apartment waiting for her; it was more the other way around. And she was only thinking about him so much today because of Shelley's call. Damn the girl, anyway; she still wasn't answering her telephone...

Alisa swallowed hard and said, with a carefully cheerful note, "Really, I'd rather finish the letters."

He leaned across the desk and tugged at a bright-colored scrap of paper that peeked out of her desk drawers. "And I suppose this is what you call dinner," he said, waving the remains of a chocolate bar under her nose. "Milk chocolate and almonds do not make a balanced meal." He broke off a piece and ate it thoughtfully. "Get your coat, Mac. I'm going to take you to Emilio's Bar and Grill and feed you."

"I shouldn't." *I should go home*, she thought. But surely not even Shelley would expect her to sit by the telephone and wait? She'd already tried a dozen times to call her back.

He looked her over thoughtfully. "Why? Is someone waiting for you?"

"Tonight, only the cat." Despite her best efforts, she knew she sounded tired.

"Then don't argue with me. I don't know about the state of your refrigerator, but I can guess." He finished off the chocolate bar and tossed the wrapper at the wastepaper basket. "Half a can of left-over tuna for the cat, right?"

She smiled in spite of herself.

"And the only thing I'm likely to find in mine tonight is the green mold that's been growing all week. You wouldn't condemn me to that, would you? Besides, I hate going to restaurants alone."

She bit her tongue to keep from answering that one. "Doesn't your housekeeper stock the kitchen?"

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“I don’t have one any more.”

“But I hired—”

“Three, wasn’t it? They don’t seem to last,” he said blithely. “They all say the house is too big and I’m too impossible, and I thought if I asked you to try again, you might resign. I can do without a housekeeper, but...”

Alisa shuddered a little. When she stopped to consider it, she couldn’t think of anyone who had set foot inside Justin Abernathy’s house in the four months he’d owned it. Now, she suspected, she knew why.

“They all seem to detest clutter,” he went on. “They don’t understand that’s why I bought a big house in the first place—so I don’t have to worry about the clutter. Now stop trying to distract me and let’s go eat.”

She found herself standing on the sidewalk, clutching her handbag and sweater, while he locked the door. He tossed his briefcase into the back of the bright red Cadillac convertible that was snuggled against the building. “I’ll follow you—there’s no sense incoming all the way back across town to pick up your car.” The Cadillac’s engine roared to life.

She sighed and pulled her car keys out of her handbag, and thought briefly about driving off in the other direction. But there was no sense in making a scene; she had to eat, after all. As for Shelley—well, another hour certainly couldn’t make any difference. And not even Debbie Baxter could raise much of a fuss about a man taking his secretary out for something to eat after a late night’s work.

Of course, Alisa thought, if it had been Debbie they’d have left her car here no matter how far they were going, and she’d have nestled down in the front seat of the Cadillac and let her hair blow wildly in the wind...

“And he says he hates going to restaurants alone,” she muttered. “I wonder how he could possibly know!”

An Imperfect Love

by Leigh Michaels

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