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# Brittany's Castle

by Leigh Michaels

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## CHAPTER ONE

UNLIKE most doctors' examining rooms, this one was neither sterile white nor institutional green. But despite the cheery wallpaper and the bright furniture, there was no concealing the fact of what it was. *All examining rooms smell the same*, Brittany thought, *with that peculiarly sharp combination of disinfectant and air freshener*.

"And I know it even though I can't smell," she muttered morosely to herself, and sneezed.

It was the first time Brittany had ever come to the medical clinic which had recently become a part of First Federal Bank as a new service for the employees, and despite the discomfort of her stuffed-up nose, she was intrigued. The clinic was small, but it was well-equipped. There had been no one in the small, comfortably furnished outer room waiting to see the doctor. She wondered if the clinic wasn't being widely used, or if it was simply so efficient that no one had to wait. Brittany made a mental note to ask the bank vice-president who was in charge of medical services.

A young woman in a white coat came in with a smile, a clipboard in her hand. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Mrs. Masters," she said cheerfully, and pulled up a chair. "Everything indicates that you've simply picked up a nasty head cold. It's nothing serious—there's no lung congestion or other complication. So I recommend that you go home and go to bed, drink chicken soup—" She smiled wryly. "It really does work. I'll give you a decongestant to help, but sleep is the fastest cure for the common cold."

"All that's fine, Dr. Whittaker," Brittany said crisply. "But the Governor is coming to dinner tonight, and I have to be on my feet."

"I see." Dr. Whittaker looked thoughtful. "I don't suppose you could cancel?"

Brittany shook her head. "No. It's a long-standing engagement. And I have a Foundation board meeting tomorrow, and—"

"Goodness, do you ever rest?"

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“Not often.” *It gives me too much time to think*, Brittany almost added, but she reconsidered. “I simply haven’t time to lie in bed and wait out a cold.”

The doctor smiled wryly. “In that case, we’ll just have to see if we can get you through it, won’t we?” She reached for a prescription pad.

“I appreciate it, Dr. Whittaker.” Then, curiously, watching the woman’s slim hand as she wrote the orders, Brittany asked, “Aren’t you bored with practicing this kind of medicine? I mean, you’re obviously a very good doctor. I saw your qualifications before we hired you.”

“And you, too, are surprised that I settled for cream puff medicine?” Dr Whittaker mused. “That’s what some of my colleagues call it, you know. They think all I do is remove splinters and hand out decongestants.” She smiled and handed the prescription across the desk. “The pharmacy will fill that for you.”

Brittany glanced at it. “I really am interested in the clinic.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow. “And I’ll bet that’s why you never have time to rest. You’re interested in everything.”

“At least, everything about how this bank operates,” Brittany said. “I must admit, when my father had the brainstorm about putting a medical clinic for our employees right here in the building, I wondered if he’d gone a little crazy.”

“As a matter of fact, it was one of the best choices he ever made,” Dr Whittaker assured her. “Both for the bank and the employees.”

“Oh?” Brittany’s hazel eyes were intense on the doctor’s face. It was a simple question, but it would have been impossible to avoid answering it. Sara Whittaker wasn’t the first person she’d pinned down by a look.

“Just last week I found a fast-moving cancer, still in the early stages,” the doctor said. She sounded a little reluctant to talk about it.

“What happened?” Brittany prompted gently.

“The man stopped in on his lunch hour to get an immunization, and as an afterthought, asked about a symptom he’d been having. After I’d examined him, I ordered him to a specialist, and within two days the tumor had been removed. There’s an excellent chance that he can be cured.”

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Brittany raised an eyebrow. "And if he'd waited..."

"He probably would have died," Dr Whittaker said baldly. "He didn't think it was important enough to bother a *real* doctor about!"

Brittany laughed. "Anybody who thinks you aren't a real doctor hasn't been watching. But I still don't understand."

"Oh, I was going to be an obstetrician," said Dr Whittaker. "But after a while all newborn babies looked alike to me. I wanted variety. With the employees and their families here at First Federal I have as varied a general practice as it's possible to get. Besides, I don't have to worry about office expenses or whether the patients pay their bills!"

Brittany smiled at that. It had probably been her father's best idea; a token payment for each medical service was withheld from the employee's pay check, simply to discourage abuse. But the bank itself paid Sara Whittaker's salary.

"And it gives me plenty of time to spend with my daughter," added Dr. Whittaker, and rose. "But I'm boring you."

"Of course you're not!" Brittany's interest was firm now. "I didn't even know you were married."

"I'm not."

"Oh—I'm sorry. I..." Brittany was seldom at a loss for words, but this time she was speechless. It had been a long time since she had put her foot in her mouth quite so firmly.

The doctor started to laugh. "Perhaps I'd better explain," she said. "I'm in the process of adopting Amanda."

Brittany let the silence drag out for a moment, and then asked wistfully, "Is it difficult to adopt a child?"

Dr. Whittaker raised an eyebrow. "You sound very serious."

Brittany hesitated. "I am," she said finally. "I've been thinking about starting a family, and it seemed that adoption would be the ideal way for me."

Dr Whittaker smiled. "If you're doing it because you're too busy to be pregnant... I'm sorry. That was tactless of me."

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Brittany bit her lip.

The doctor sat down again. "Adoption isn't an easy road. Cute, cuddly babies are hard to find, and as a single parent, I wasn't even in consideration for one. I waited three years for Amanda to be released for adoption. She's six years old and slightly handicapped—which makes two strikes against her, as far as most prospective parents are concerned."

"I see," said Brittany.

"You're married, and that's in your favor. Have you ever been pregnant? It sounds like a prying question, I know, but it's one the agencies will ask."

"Once." Brittany's voice was soft with remembered pain. "I miscarried in my third month."

"That's not good," said Dr Whittaker. "When it comes to adoption agencies, I mean. It proves that you aren't incapable of having children of your own, so you'd be further down the list than most." She looked Brittany over carefully, then said, "Why not just have your babies the ordinary way, Mrs. Masters? Having a miscarriage that early isn't unusual, you know."

Brittany bit her lip. "My husband and I don't live together, Dr Whittaker."

"I see. That does present problems, doesn't it?" She stood up again. "I'll bring you some information from my agency. Heaven knows I collected drawers full of pamphlets while I waited for Amanda. Perhaps you'll find something helpful."

Brittany picked up her handbag. "Thank you, Dr. Whittaker, I'd like that," she said, and added, with gentle authority, "I can give a child a good home, you know."

"That's obvious to me, Mrs. Masters. But the agencies may not see it the same way, especially if your marriage is breaking up. I'm sorry if that sounds harsh—but I've never believed in sugar-coating reality."

"Honesty is a quality I appreciate," said Brittany. "Of course, I hope you'll keep this confidential."

"That, Mrs. Masters, is the thing I do best." Dr. Whittaker's voice was cheerful, but there was a small frown between her brows.

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Brittany stopped at the pharmacy to get the pills the doctor had prescribed. A percentage of that cost, too, would be withheld from her next pay check, with the company picking up the rest. And the result, she saw when she reached the executive floor, was less than an hour of lost time—half of which she had spent talking about adoption. To have gone to a *real doctor*, as Sara Whittaker had called the physicians in private practice, would have taken all afternoon, and the bank would have lost her services for half a day.

“Not that I’m worth much in this condition,” Brittany muttered, and sneezed. She stopped outside the walnut door of her office and, making sure that no one was about, ran a gentle hand across the brass nameplate.

“Brittany Masters, Vice-President,” she murmured to herself. It had such a nice ring, and she had worked so hard to earn that title. Harder, probably, than any of the other hundred vice-presidents in the whole First Federal network. They, after all, had only needed to convince the chairman of the board that they were worthy of promotion. Brittany had had to convince her father as well. The fact that Clint Bridges was both chairman and father had not made it any easier for her, despite what a few of the officers of the bank thought.

At any rate, all that was long behind her, Brittany told herself. The political fighting inside the bank would never vanish completely, but she had proved herself now. In the two years since her coveted promotion had come through, she had convinced most of the skeptical ones that she could do her job, that she hadn’t been given the title only because she was Clint Bridges’ daughter. The ones who remained unconvinced just didn’t matter any more, she told herself.

Her secretary looked up with a smile. “Feeling better?” she asked.

“Of course,” said Brittany, and spoiled it by sneezing. “That reminds me. I want to find out all I can about that clinic—how it’s doing, whether it’s being used.”

The secretary was jotting notes to herself on her shorthand pad. “You had some calls, by the way,” she said. “The crazy lady in Accounts Payable called again.”

Brittany sighed. “What’s she complaining about this time?” she asked. “Did we use more than the usual number of deposit slips last month?”

“No. It’s paper towels this time. Six extra cases, which she says is an increase of ten percent. She can’t figure out where they went.”

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“Tell her the money was extra dirty, and the tellers had to wash their hands ten percent more often,” Brittany suggested. “Why is she calling me about it, anyway? Eric Rhodes is in charge of supply.”

“She said he didn’t seem to be interested.”

“I can’t imagine why,” muttered Brittany. “The subject is such a fascinating one. Anything else?”

“Mr. Bridges wanted to see you.”

Brittany glanced at the clock and sighed. “I’ll go in to see him right now. Pull up the Randolph Corporation’s file for me, please, and check its deposit and loan balances.”

“Right away, Mrs. Masters.” The secretary looked up, with concern in her eyes, as Brittany sneezed again. “You must feel awful,” she ventured.

“Oh, it’s nothing. This, too, shall pass,” Brittany assured her, and thought as she walked down the hall, *I only hope I’m right*. She stopped at the water cooler and swallowed one of the decongestant capsules, then went on toward the lush corner office suite that belonged to the chairman of the board.

His secretary was on the phone, but she waved a hand toward the door of the executive office.

In the reception room, the carpet was lush and thick, a heavy pile that Brittany’s feet sank into. But inside the office, the floor was covered with a tightly-woven, low carpet just the texture of a putting green. And across the room, the chairman of First Federal Bank was lining up a golf ball with his putter.

Brittany waited patiently until the practice shot had been made and missed. “I’ve caught you!” she announced.

Clint Bridges sighed. “And messed up my shot,” he agreed with long-suffering patience. “This climate is terribly hard on my golf. I’m thinking of moving the whole bank to Phoenix, or some place where the sun shines all year.”

Brittany laughed and dropped into a chair beside the huge carved desk. “Why don’t you leave the bank where it is, and just move yourself to Phoenix, or Pebble Beach, or Palm Springs?”

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Clint Bridges scowled, his heavy white eyebrows drawing together. "Are you trying to get rid of the old man, Britt?" He sounded a little like a wounded tiger, but it did not frighten Brittany.

"Of course not, Dad. But if you'd be happier, there's really no reason for you to stay here." Her voice was gentle.

There was a long, thoughtful silence. Clint sat with one elbow on the arm of his chair, his hand against his cheek. "If your mother had lived," he said finally, "we'd be in Florida right now."

"Mother wouldn't have wanted you to bury yourself in this office, you know. It's been more than a year since she died, Dad."

"Fourteen months, actually." He sounded absentminded. Brittany didn't doubt that he could, if he chose, tell her precisely how many days had passed since her mother had lost her long fight for life.

He looked up, with a forced smile. "There's no fun in traveling by myself," he pointed out. "It's lonely down there."

"You might find someone else," she said softly.

There was surprise in the way his eyebrows arched. "You wouldn't mind?" he asked.

Brittany shook her head. "Not if she made you happy. You're still a young man, Dad."

"Fifty-six my last birthday. Not exactly a kid."

"Just one thing, Dad," she said earnestly. "I want your promise that you'll warn me before you marry a teenager and look for a house near a school so you can start another family--"

He crumpled the top sheet of a memo pad and threw it at her. "Mind your manners, Brittany," he ordered.

She gave him a warm smile. "What did you want to see me about?" she asked, suddenly all business.

"I can still cancel that dinner tonight, you know, if you don't feel up to entertaining. Dan Curtis would understand."

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"That would be silly. All the work is already done."

"Nevertheless, it is my party, and it isn't fair to inflict it on you."

"Dad," she interrupted. "I'm not going to cancel. You might as well stop arguing."

"All right," he sighed. "On condition that you go home right now and take a nap."

"In the middle of the afternoon? Don't be ridiculous!" It was a wonderful line, with just the right touch of delicate horror at the notion of a career woman needing a nap. If she hadn't followed it up with a sneeze, it would have been perfect.

"Either that or I call Governor Curtis and tell him we'll have dinner another time."

Brittany knew her father well enough to know that it was not an idle threat. Besides, she had to admit that the very thought of her warm bed was an inviting one. "All right," she agreed. "As soon as I finish the paperwork on the Randolph file."

"Now," Clint Bridges said sternly. He punched a button on the intercom. "Nancy, have Mrs. Masters' chauffeur waiting for her. She's going home."

Brittany sighed. "Yes, boss," she said meekly, and marched towards the door.

"I have a wonderful idea," Clint said suddenly. "How about both of us taking some time off next week and going down to Palm Springs to play golf?"

"Can't," said Brittany. "I'm too busy right now."

He shrugged and picked up his putter. "Too bad," he said. "You could have chaperoned and introduced me to all the eligible ladies. But if you won't go with me, I guess I'll just have to stay home this winter and look for a teenager!"

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The back seat of the Rolls was so comfortable that Brittany almost fell asleep on the half-hour drive from the frantically busy financial district to the quiet little residential street where she lived. The car rode so smoothly, and the driver was so expert, that it hardly seemed like motion at all.

She closed her eyes. She was dreadfully tired. Dr. Whittaker's words came back to her. *Do you ever rest?* the woman had asked.

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*Not often, Brittany thought. There's too much to think about, too many things that cause too much pain to remember.*

She was surprised that she had even told Sara Whittaker about the miscarriage. She didn't talk about it much. But there wasn't a day that she didn't think about it.

She had wanted the baby. From the instant she had first suspected her pregnancy she had lived for that child. She had felt marvelous, too, most of the time. Not for her the horrible nausea and irritability and weariness; pregnancy made Brittany bloom.

Ryan had laughed at the change in her. He had been delighted, too, by the thought of a child. At least, she told herself wearily, she had thought he was as excited as she. But that was when he had started staying late at the legal clinic. She had been so busy following the rules that she hadn't even seen what was happening. But in the end, it had made no difference.

The familiar choking pain rose in her throat as it did whenever she thought of the baby that might have been hers, and she swallowed hard and tried to turn her thoughts aside.

An adopted child—that would be safe to think about. The idea was not a new one for Brittany, but there had never been anyone to discuss it with. Most people would think it was silly, a woman whose career absorbed so much of her, and who never talked about the baby she had lost, wanting to adopt a child. And yet, in the months since her mother had died, Brittany had begun to long for a baby, someone who would continue the family, to take away the awful loneliness she felt sometimes. As an only child, she was the last of the Bridges family, and when her father died she would be alone in the world.

Once, she thought painfully, she hadn't been alone. Once, long ago, there had been Ryan, and the promise of a future together. Then she had suffered the miscarriage, and the shocking loss of their unborn baby had brought their whole marriage down like the house of cards it had been...

If only, she thought bitterly, it hadn't happened on that particular day. If it had been the day before, or the day after, then Ryan would have been there. *And I would never have known about Diana Winslow. Then I could have gone on in cheerful ignorance.*

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And have been awakened even more rudely, much later, she told herself sharply. For Ryan's affair with one of his clients had been no one-time thing. Brittany would have stumbled across it sooner or later; it was just Ryan's bad luck that his timing had been off on that day. And bad luck for him that his secretary had not been able to still her conscience, and had told Brittany the truth about where he had been that day.

It was funny that she had chosen to tease her father about needing a house near a school, she thought as the car swept through quiet, tree-lined streets, with houses set far back on rolling lawns. For she had searched out this neighborhood, and carefully selected this house, because of the location. It was not only within easy commuting distance of the bank, but it was surrounded by advantages for children... the children she had been so certain that she and Ryan would have.

Perhaps it was time, she thought, to put all that behind her—to put Ryan finally in her past. It had been two years, after all, since that awful revelation had struck her like an axe. In that time, it hadn't seemed to matter that she was still technically Ryan's wife. As soon as she had recovered from the miscarriage, she had plunged with all her soul into the new job that Clint had given her, and there had been no room in her life for men. Besides, if one man could treat her as Ryan had, what was to say that the next would be any different? Brittany had felt no desire to find out.

But now—

*Am I ready to fall in love again? Brittany asked herself. Is that what this desire for a child is really all about? Is it really a new marriage I want, instead?*

All men were not like Ryan. There was Eric Rhodes, for instance, one of the young vice-presidents at First Federal. He treated her so gently, with such concern, that it had startled her at first. He was so different from Ryan...

The Rolls swept into the long, curving drive and braked smoothly at the front door of a sprawling stone house. The mansion lay in the weak December sunlight like a kitten, soaking up every last warm ray on the bright slate roof, as if to conserve it for the winter ahead. Brittany's Castle, her father had called it, teasingly, when she had selected it to be her wedding present from him, and the nickname had stuck. Though the house had a perfectly good aristocratic name, chosen after days of thought and research, Brittany's Castle it had remained.

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And perhaps that had been part of the problem, she thought with new insight, as the chauffeur helped her out of the car. It had never been Ryan's castle. It had never even, really, been his home.

Peters was at the front door before she had reached the step, swinging the carved panel wide. "Welcome home, madam," he said.

"You must have been expecting me," Brittany murmured.

The butler nodded. "Mr. Bridges called."

The hall table held a dozen red roses in a crystal vase, with a small card discreetly tucked in among the greenery. She opened it. "I'm looking forward to the party tonight," Eric Rhodes had written. How sweet of him, she thought. It was the first time that she had invited Eric to the Castle, and the first time he had ever sent her flowers. Brittany wasted a moment in regret that she couldn't smell the roses, then shrugged. There would be other parties, and other roses, after all.

She wandered through the downstairs rooms. In the dining room, the table was already laid with crisp white linen, each service plate perfectly polished, each crystal goblet like a prism in the sunlight. In the drawing room, every cushion was precisely in order, the chairs drawn up for easy, comfortable conversation, the flowers arranged, the cocktail tables already in place. In Brittany's small morning room, behind the drawing room, the rolltop desk was closed, concealing the small computer that linked the Castle to the bank, and her basket of needlepoint supplies stood ready beside her favorite chair. In the library, which had become her father's favorite haunt, the cigar box had been replenished, in case the gentlemen wished to retire there after dinner.

She stood in the library door for a moment, looking thoughtfully across the drawing room and down the long hall, thinking about her first days in this house. Love had been young then, and the world was a new discovery. Then it had been Ryan's library, and the shelves had been full of law books...

*There's no point in thinking about that, she told herself firmly. It was all false, all a lie, from the beginning.*

She climbed the marble steps to the second floor, feeling suddenly exhausted, and hesitated. The closed door at the top of the stairs taunted her. It would have been the nursery, and there—if things had been different—her toddler would now be

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taking an afternoon nap. It took determination to walk past that door, but she did it. Down the hall, she paused in mid-step before she went into the master bedroom suite.

“That’s silly, too,” she told herself firmly. “It’s been your bedroom for two years, and that’s a lot longer than you shared it with Ryan.” But it still took a bit of determination each time she stepped across that threshold.

Her maid was in the dressing room, humming to herself as she shook out a fluffy negligee. “I thought perhaps you’d feel better if you changed before your tea, Mrs. Masters,” she said cheerfully.

*Dad at work again*, Brittany thought, and smiled to herself. *I’m almost thirty years old, and he’s still taking care of his little girl.* “Thank you, Felice.”

Felice tucked her into the king-sized bed, propped her up with pillows, and brought her tea. Brittany sipped it thoughtfully and told herself that it was a luxury to be at home in the middle of the day, a luxury to have time to think. Perhaps, if she put it that way, the things that haunted her might stay away today.

She thought about the red roses down in the hall. Was Eric Rhodes just being especially polite, to send flowers to his hostess, or was he becoming particular in his attentions toward her? Brittany smiled at herself. “What a Victorian way to put it,” she murmured.

“Madam?” The little maid looked up, startled.

“Oh—nothing, Felice. That’s all for now. I doubt I’ll sleep, but please come up early so I have plenty of time to dress before the Governor arrives.”

After the maid had gone, Brittany set her cup aside and settled down into the pillows, thinking about Eric. He was a wizard at the complicated formulas that kept a bank humming, and when it came to the computers that were the lifeblood of the industry, he could make them do things that even the manufacturer hadn’t thought of. But she wasn’t quite sure what she thought of him personally. He was nice enough, but—

She was sound asleep with a smile on her lips and a hand curved around a pillow, when Felice came to help her mistress dress for dinner.

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“Lovely dinner, Brittany,” Dan Curtis told her. He leaned back in his chair with a contented smile.

“Thank you, Governor.” Brittany glanced around the table, watchful of her guests’ comfort. The nap had helped, but she was feeling the strain, and she was glad there were only six at her table tonight, instead of the twenty-four she sometimes entertained here. Thank heaven for the upcoming holidays, she thought; several of the couples on her original guest list were at other parties tonight. And thank heaven for Dr. Whittaker’s pills. At least she had stopped sneezing!

To her left, Eric Rhodes was chatting animatedly with Mrs. Curtis. Beside the Governor, Brittany’s Aunt Lydia was listening to Clint, at the foot of the table, diagnosing the economic affairs of the state. “Don’t you think so, Dan?” Clint asked just then.

“Haven’t any idea,” Dan Curtis returned amicably. “I’ve been too busy admiring your daughter to pay any attention to what you’re saying. You’re a lucky man, having Brittany to act as your hostess, Clint.”

Clint smiled. “The shoe’s on the other foot, Dan. I’m fortunate to be Brittany’s guest. It’s her house, you know—she took me in after her mother died.”

“I didn’t know that,” Eric said softly.

Brittany nodded. He had been beside her all evening, watchful of her comfort. It was nice, she found herself thinking, to be taken care of like that.

“We miss Anne so much,” Mrs. Curtis said softly. “It seems to me that marriage is the natural state. It settles a man so to be married.”

*Not always, Brittany found herself thinking. It didn’t settle Ryan at all.*

Mrs. Curtis patted Eric’s hand playfully. “You should go and find yourself a wife, young man, and then your career would really take off.”

“That’s quite true, you know,” said the governor. “I find it in government all the time. Married men are more stable.”

“And what about married women?” Lydia Stratman asked softly. “Or don’t they have a place in your government at all?”

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The Governor laughed. "You wouldn't happen to want a job, would you, Miss Stratman? With that quick tongue, I could find a place for you in my press office any time."

"No, thank you, Governor," Lydia said placidly. "I'm quite content to go on as I am. But you didn't answer my question."

Dan Curtis threw up his hands in mock horror. "Just promise me this," he begged, "don't go to work for the opposition!"

Clint chuckled. "Tell us, Dan, when are we going to see some action on all these new ideas you promised during the campaign? Now that you've won your second term..."

"Patience, Clint. All things in good time, and most of them will wait till after the first of the new year. But we're already looking about for the right people, and I'm confident we'll have a new team on board by the end of January."

Lydia sipped her wine and said gently, "Which is a polite way to tell you, Clint, that he has no intention of giving you any details. We're all friends here, Governor. It's perfectly safe."

Eric broke in. "What about the new state ombudsman, Governor? Any progress on that?"

Dan Curtis seemed relieved by the interruption. "Not an ombudsman, exactly, my boy," he corrected. "A consumer advocate—that's what we're going to call him. Or her," he added, with a pointed look down at Lydia.

She merely smiled.

"He will deal with any sort of problem a citizen has— whether it's with the government itself, as an ombudsman does, or the other sorts of problems that arise. Faulty products, fraud, companies going into bankruptcy and leaving the consumer holding the bag."

"I thought the state did all those things already," murmured Brittany.

"Most of them. But each part of the government took care of one little area, and by the time the consumer found the people who could help him, he was tired of fighting. This is a new concept. We're going to have one person, one office, which deals with all problems and gets them directed to help right away." He glanced at

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Lydia again. "It will take a special person, Miss Stratman. If you'd rather do that than be in the press office..."

Brittany decided she'd better put an end to this, before two of her guests came to blows in her dining room. Whatever had possessed quiet, ladylike Lydia to bait the Governor anyway? she wondered, and put her napkin down. "We'll have coffee in the drawing room," she said softly. "Lydia, if you'll pour..."

Lydia nodded, frowning a little. It was obvious that she had noticed Brittany's exhaustion, but Brittany hoped no one else would be as sensitive to it as Lydia was. But then Lydia had known her from babyhood; she and Brittany's mother had been fast friends. It was no surprise if Lydia was extraordinarily sensitive to Brittany's moods.

The Governor and Mrs. Curtis left soon afterwards, pleading a busy schedule the next day. Clint directed a pointed look at Eric, who had brought Brittany's coffee to her and not left her side since, and said, "If you don't mind being left alone, Britt, I'll drive Lydia home."

Eric said quickly, "Oh, I'll be happy to stay with her till you get home, Mr. Bridges."

Clint's eyebrows drew together, and Brittany could see a lecture coming. She forestalled it. "It's all right, Dad."

There was silence in the drawing room for a few moments after the older couple had left. Eric rose and walked the length of the room, turned hastily, walked back. "Do you think your father suspects?" he asked abruptly.

"Suspects what?" Brittany refilled her coffee cup. She knew better than to consume so much caffeine, but she needed something to do with her hands.

"That I'm in love with you."

So—here it was, then. "I don't know why he should," she said quickly. "I hadn't suspected it myself."

He laughed. "Oh, come on, Brittany! You must have known I wanted to marry you. Don't give me the old this-is-so-sudden routine!"

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by Leigh Michaels

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*And now what do I do?* she wondered, and wished that her head didn't ache so. "Well, *it is* a little sudden, Eric," she parried. "For a proposal, at least. And haven't you forgotten something?"

"What?"

"I'm married," she said gently.

Eric bit his lip. For a moment, he looked like a scolded puppy. "I know. It's been so difficult for me, loving you as I do, and knowing that you were tied to that—that monster."

She wondered idly where the description of Ryan had come from.

"I think about you all the time. I want to be with you every minute. I hoped you felt the same about me, and when you didn't make any move toward getting a divorce..." He sighed. "But then I realized just now that maybe a divorce would hurt your career."

"It wouldn't do it any good," Brittany told him. "And you thought perhaps I was holding on to Ryan until someone better came along? Poor Ryan!"

"You do like me," he said. "I can tell it. I can make you smile when no one else can."

He was right about that, she thought. He was a charmer, and she did enjoy his company. "That's not a solid foundation for a marriage, Eric," she said. "Believe me, I know."

"But it's a start. I'll wait, Brittany," he said eagerly. "I'll wait till you get your divorce." He looked boyishly pleased with himself. "I'll go home now, before your father comes back. The way I feel right now, I couldn't keep from telling him!"

"Eric..." He was gone before she could get the words out. Then she smiled a little to herself. She'd have to straighten Eric out in the morning, tell him that she wasn't ready to be engaged until her divorce was final.

Only then did she realize that she had made her choice. She'd talk to Ryan tomorrow too, and get the paperwork started. It was long past time to be free.