



The Bachelor Takes a Bride (Those Engaging Garretts! Book 8)

By Brenda Harlen

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"You don't know me...but will you marry me?"

It strikes him like a lightning bolt when he lays eyes on Jordyn Garrett. Just like his grandma always says, *You'll know her when you see her*. Now restaurateur Marco Palermo knows he's just met his wife—if only she'll date him!

Jordyn's heard every line...and deflected them all. She's walked through heartbreak and come out stronger, albeit lonelier. She'll never love again. But the scrumptious Italian with the melted-chocolate eyes is nothing if not persistent. And sexy. *So* sexy. Just her luck to find the only man in the world who wants marriage and a family. Things Jordyn can't give. But can he convince her that he's everything she's ever wanted...forever?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Brenda Harlen is a multi-award winning author for Harlequin Special Edition who has written over 25 books for the company.

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As Marco Palermo squinted through the windshield of his small SUV—as if squinting might somehow improve visibility—he realized that he might as well have been blindfolded.

Though it was early May and not yet eight o'clock, the sky was black and the rain was pouring down so hard the windshield wipers couldn't clear it away fast enough for him to see more than three feet beyond his vehicle's headlights. Why anyone would choose to be out in such weather was a mystery to him, and yet here he was, at the behest of his sister—because he never could refuse her anything.

"I have an insatiable craving for tiramisu," Renata had said, explaining the reason for her call. "I'd come to the restaurant myself, but Anna and Bella are in their pj's and ready for bed."

The restaurant was Valentino's—an establishment in Charisma's downtown core that had been started by their grandparents nearly half a century earlier; Adrianna and Isabella were Renata's daughters, ages five and three years respectively, and Marco loved them both to bits. A definite benefit of doing this favor for his sister was getting to spend some time with his adorable nieces.

"Tiramisu, huh?"

"It's not me—it's the baby," she said, referring to the third child she was carrying.

He figured pregnancy cravings were the responsibility of the baby's father, and he knew that his brother-in-law wouldn't hesitate to drive through a torrential downpour to get his wife anything she wanted or needed. The fact that Renata had called Marco suggested that her firefighter husband was at work and unable to cater to her every whim, as Craig was usually happy to do.

"Well, the baby's going to have to wait at least half an hour," Marco told her. "Because I'm not at the restaurant right now."

"Oh. I'm sorry, I just assumed..."

"That I spend twenty-four hours a day at Valentino's?"

"Something like that," she admitted.

"It's Saturday night," he said, reminding her of the one night a week he forced himself to take away from work to ensure that it didn't become all consuming. He could—and often did—take more days and nights, because a well-established restaurant pretty much ran itself even without one of his siblings or cousins on-site to oversee every little detail.

"Ohmygod—I didn't think...you have a date. I'm interrupting a date. I'm *so* sorry."

"Relax, Nata. I'm just working at home tonight—you're not interrupting anything."

"It's Saturday night," she repeated his words back to him. "*Why* don't you have a date?"

He shook his head. The abrupt change of topic and the demanding yet concerned tone in her voice were so typical of his sister, he didn't know whether to chuckle or sigh.

"I'll be there with your tiramisu in half an hour," he said. "You can grill me in person then."

"And I will," she assured him.

He had no doubt, but all he said was, "Don't let the girls go to bed before I get there," then he disconnected the call.

And so he'd abandoned the blueprints on his desk, picked up his keys, dashed through the rain to his car and headed to Valentino's.

Why don't you have a date?

He considered various responses to Renata's question as he drove the familiar route, hoping to come up with something that was believable and reassuring. The truth—that he was tired of dating the wrong women—wouldn't satisfy his sister. She would insist that he not give up, because the right woman was out there, waiting for him as much as he was waiting for her. But he was getting tired of waiting.

All of his siblings were in settled relationships. Nata and Craig had been married for almost eight years. His oldest brother, Tony, had been married to his high school sweetheart, Gemma, for nine. And Gabe, his other brother, had recently—finally—gotten engaged to Francesca, the woman he'd started to fall in love with more than two years earlier but for whom he'd only recently acknowledged his feelings. His sister and brothers had each found the right people to share their lives with and were happy and settled. Marco yearned for the same thing.

When you find her, you'll know. Nonna's words—spoken to him at Gabe and Francesca's engagement celebration—echoed in the back of his mind.

Caterina loved to tell the story of her first meeting with Salvatore, which happened to be on their wedding day. "It was like lightning—a surge that tingled through my veins. I had worried about what marriage to a stranger would bring, but I knew then that I would love him forever."

Marco figured sixty-one years was pretty close to forever. And from what he could see, his grandparents were still very much in love with each other. Sure, they argued—sometimes loudly and passionately—and they often made up the same way. The key to a long and happy marriage, Nonna told him, was to never go to bed alone or angry.

So he didn't question the conviction in her words, because that was how it happened in his family—starting with his grandparents, then his parents, and his sister and both of his brothers. No, he didn't doubt it would happen that way, but he was starting to worry about the *when*—or even if—it would happen for him.

He'd dated a lot of perfectly nice and undeniably attractive women, but none of them had been the right woman. He'd wanted them to be; each time he'd embarked on a new relationship, he'd had high hopes that *this* woman would turn out to be *the* woman who would make him fall head over heels in love forever after. But it had never happened. Not yet.

So he was waiting, albeit a little less patiently with each year that passed. He wasn't ready to give up, but he wasn't holding his breath, either. And if he didn't actually experience a lightning moment of recognition, he would settle for a tingle of attraction—or even a spark of static electricity.

He backed into his usual parking spot behind the restaurant and turned off the engine. As he did, thunder crashed and the skies opened up again, the strong and steady thrumming of the rain on his windshield washed away by an absolute deluge. He unhooked his belt but didn't reach for the door handle—he wasn't leaving the shelter of his vehicle until the downpour eased up.

After a couple more minutes, when the rain finally began to slow, he saw the take-out door of Valentino's open and a woman step out. She exited from under the red-and-white-striped awning with her pizza box in hand and hurried across the parking lot. Despite the ongoing storm, something about her snagged his attention and wouldn't let go.

Her hair was short, dark and wet from the rain. She didn't wear a coat, and her dress showcased some nice curves as she moved surprisingly fast in the heels she wore on her feet. Lightning flashed, illuminating the sky for what might have been a heartbeat if not for the fact that his heart literally skipped a beat.

His eyes continued to track the mystery woman's path to her vehicle. She opened the driver's side of a light-colored compact car and ducked inside, setting the pizza box on the empty passenger seat before closing the door, extinguishing the interior light.

He'd barely caught a glimpse of her, yet he felt an ache beneath his breastbone, a yearning that suggested she might be the one. Finally.

The initial sense of jubilant relief was supplanted by frustration as he watched her taillights disappear in the night.

He might have finally found her—but he didn't have the first clue as to who she was or when and where he might see her again.

When Marco entered the restaurant through the same take-out door a few minutes later, he found his sister-in-law, Gemma, behind the counter.

Usually a hostess in the dining rooms, Gemma was happy to fill in wherever she was needed. And since their cousin Maria was currently on an extended holiday/ honeymoon with her new husband—because it wasn't just his siblings but also his cousins who were happily pairing up—they were short-staffed at the take-out counter.

Gemma glanced up when she heard the bell over the door and smiled at him. "What are you doing in here on a Saturday night?"

"Renata says the baby wants tiramisu," he told her.

"She couldn't even stand the scent of coffee when she was pregnant with Adrianna and Isabella," Gemma noted. "Makes me think Nonna is correct in her prediction that this one's a boy."

"Well, she does have a fifty percent chance of being right."

"She predicted that both Adrianna and Isabella would be girls," Gemma reminded him. "And that Christian and Dominic would be boys."

"She also predicted that you and Tony would have half a dozen babies."

His sister-in-law laughed. "Well, I can promise you that's *not* happening."

"But speaking of Nonna's predictions," Marco said, "did you notice the woman who walked out that door?"

"Lots of women walk out that door. And sometimes they come in. Sometimes men, too."

He rolled his eyes. "I was referring to the last customer who left with a pizza box in her hands."

"You mean Jordyn Garrett?"

"You know her?"

"Yeah—she's Rachel's husband's cousin."

Rachel Ellis—now Garrett—had been a friend of Gemma's since high school, and Rachel and her husband, Andrew, were regular customers at Valentino's, along with Maura, Andrew's daughter from his first marriage. The previous November, they'd added another daughter, Lily, to their family.

"What else do you know about her?" he asked.

"I know that she left her phone on the counter," Gemma said, glancing at the slim case on the ledge in front of the cash register.

"How do you know it's hers?"

"Because I saw her set it down when she got out her wallet to pay for the pizza."

The device hummed quietly, a light in the corner blinking.

"Maybe you should answer that," she suggested.

"Why me?"

"Because I'm going to the kitchen to get the tiramisu for Nata."

"Throw in a couple of cannoli for the girls," he suggested.

"Of course," she agreed, already moving past the pizza ovens and slipping through the door to the main kitchen.

Leaving him alone with Jordyn's phone and its blinking light.

He touched the screen, expecting to see a password request, which would, of course, prevent him from accessing anything on her phone. But there was no password protection—the screen immediately illuminated to reveal the recent communication to the phone's owner—assumed to be Jordyn—from someone identified at the top of the screen as Tristyn.

12 med wings would go good with the pizza and wine ©

He stepped behind the counter and peeked through the window into the take-out kitchen.

"Hey, Rafe—how long would it take for a dozen wings?"

"Ten minutes," his cousin said, already with tongs in hand to count them out and toss them into the fryer basket. "You want 'em extra hot?"

"Medium," he said. He figured it wouldn't take Jordyn long to realize she'd left her phone behind, and when she came back for it, hopefully the wings would be ready for her.

"Your taste buds getting soft in your old age?" Rafe teased, dropping the basket into the hot oil. "They're not for me."

He returned his attention to her phone—feeling a little like the prince left at the ball with no clue to Cinderella's identity except a single glass slipper. The phone wasn't nearly as sexy as a shoe, but at least it was something.

The bell over the door rang and he glanced up to greet the new customer, but the words died in his throat when she walked in. Obviously it had taken less time than he'd anticipated for Jordyn to realize she'd left her phone—the phone that was currently in his hand.

In the bright light of the take-out area, he could see her clearly now: smooth, creamy skin; a delicate heart-shaped face; and short, dark hair dripping with rain. Her eyes were dark green and framed by thick, long lashes.

He'd thought the dress she wore was black, but he could see now that it was a deep shade of purple. But he'd been right about her curves—the sleeveless sheath style hugged her feminine shape in all the right places. The wedge heels on her feet made it difficult to accurately estimate her height, but he guessed that she was about five feet five inches tall.

Her fingernails were neatly trimmed and unpolished, her makeup subtle. Earrings dangled from her ears, colorful purple and silver beads on different lengths of chain jingled as she moved, suggesting a playful side that contrasted with the simple dress and no-fuss hairstyle.

She was simply and spectacularly beautiful, and in that moment, the possibility that had been teasing the back of his mind—and nudging at his heart—since that first quick glimpse through the rain became a certainty.

"Nonna's going to love hearing that she was right."

Neatly arched brows drew together. "I beg your pardon?"

He shook his head. "Sorry. My mind was wandering."

"A wandering mind and sticky fingers," she noted.

"Huh?"

She gestured to the phone in his hand. "That's mine."

"Oh. You left it on the counter."

"Apparently."

He held it out to her.

When she reached for it, her fingertips brushed against his—and he felt it again, an arrow of heat straight through his heart. She snatched her hand away quickly, making him suspect that she'd felt the same thing—or at least something.

"That's it?" she said. "No explanation for reading my text messages? No apology?"

"You left the phone on the counter—I was only trying to figure out who it belonged to."

"Me," she said again.

"And you are?"

"Hoping to get home before my pizza's cold." And with that, she turned away.

"Wings up," Rafe said, setting the take-out container on the ledge.

"Wait," Marco called out to her.

She paused at the door.

"You forgot your wings."

"I didn't order any wings."

"There was a message on your phone—from Tristyn. A dozen medium."

She scrolled through the text conversation on her phone, frowned. He offered her the foam container.

"I didn't pay for those."

"Consider them an apology for reading your message."

"You wouldn't have to apologize if you hadn't read my message," she pointed out.

"And you'd be going home without the wings," he countered.

She took the container from him, making sure that there was no contact between them in the transfer. "Thank you."

"Marco," he told her. "Marco Palermo."

"Thank you, Marco."

He smiled. "You're welcome..."

"Jordyn," she finally said, confirming the identification his sister-in-law had made as she moved toward the door.

He reached the handle before she did, pushed it open for her. "Enjoy your pizza and wings, Jordyn."

"We always do," she assured him.

He stood at the door and watched as she made her way back to her vehicle.

"Jordyn came back for her phone," he told Gemma, when he turned and saw her standing at the counter with a take-out bag in hand.

"I caught the end of your conversation," she admitted. "Actually, most of your conversation."

His heart was so filled with happiness it was overflowing, and he couldn't hold back the smile that curved his lips. "She's the one—I've finally found her."

His sister-in-law sighed. "*Caro*, why do you do this to yourself?"

"Maybe because I see how happy you and Tony are, and I want to know the same thing."

"You will fall in love with the right woman at the right time, but if you keep throwing yourself headfirst over cliffs looking for it to happen, you're only going to get hurt again."

"There was a spark," he insisted.

"It wasn't a spark—it was a flame," Gemma said. "You just crashed and burned, and you don't even know it."

He was disappointed by her response. He knew that she cared about him—she'd been part of his family for so many years he'd thought of her as a second sister even before she became his sister-in-law—so he didn't understand why she was determined to burst his happiness bubble.

Or maybe he did. And maybe there was some foundation to her concern that he'd been trying too hard to find the right woman. Certainly, his recent relationship experience would substantiate her point.

But the alternative—to passively sit back and wait for his soul mate to land in his lap—was inconceivable to him. Sometimes destiny needed a helping hand, and he was more than willing to give it. But first he had tiramisu to deliver.

Users Review

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