



After Hours Preview

Marla Shepherd glanced up as her boss, Michael Gates, strolled past her desk, all tall and broad and handsome in his dark Armani suit.

Then she imagined him naked.

Of course, it wasn't the *first* time she'd imagined him that way. In fact, a little quick math told her it was quite possibly around the seven-hundredth time, since she'd been his administrative assistant for two years now and probably thought of him naked at least once a day, starting with the very moment she'd met him.

Although on some days – okay, a lot of them – she'd envisioned him naked more than once, so that probably upped the total to a thousand, minimum.

She let her head droop with a sigh. A thousand fantasies and not one reality.

And now, it would *never* be a reality.

Which maybe wouldn't feel quite so devastating if she wasn't in love with the guy. Yep, what had started out as pure, unadulterated lust had, over time, transformed into love. That gut-wrenching want/need/just-adore-being-around-him sort of love that she recalled from her first such affliction in high school, when she'd fallen desperately for Tommy Jamison, quarterback and student council president. One more fantasy that had never become a reality. She sighed again, then tried to focus on her last few tasks of the work day – sending a couple of e-mails, and going through her inbox to prioritize items for tomorrow.

She and Michael had both stayed late tonight, wrapping up a large mailing to his clients. At thirty-three, he was the youngest investment advisor at Keating & Company and she was his veritable Girl Friday, always ready to lend a hand, work overtime, or move heaven and earth if necessary. Whatever he needed, she gave him. Both because she was a hard worker and because she was just so darn gaga over him.

The love part had happened not at work, though, but when professional lunches had turned personal. The two of them had simply clicked, become friends. So she knew a lot about him – how he'd grown up locally in Cincinnati, a hometown boy who loved being near his family. And how he loved to travel, and that he placed a high value on friends, and that his secret fantasy was to be a relief pitcher for the Reds. She also knew about Dahlia, the one big love of his life, who he'd wanted to marry but had lost due to a long distance relationship that just didn't work out when she took a job in another city. Marla had shared just as much of herself with Michael – and along with everything *else* she knew about him, she knew they'd be a perfect match if only he ever started seeing her as a woman and not just a co-worker and friend.

But now ... well, now that would never happen. Because her life was changing.

Through no effort of her own, she'd been offered a great job in Pittsburgh, a five-hour drive away. She'd been born and raised in the Cincinnati area, too, so the idea of packing up and leaving her whole life behind was terrifying – but she had to do it, she just had to. The job was perfect and would fulfill her in a way administrative work never could. And despite how difficult it was to be so brave, the hardest part, she knew, would be leaving Michael – her unrequited love.

Oh Lord, how stupid that made her feel – to be so wrapped up in a guy who had no romantic interest in her whatsoever. It was Tommy Jamison and high school all over again. But maybe that aspect of the situation provided some of the impetus helping her to leave. A girl had to know when to lick her wounds and move on, had to hang on to her self-respect. After all, she was thirty years old. If she didn't take control of her life now, when would she?

So, as much as she'd been dreading this moment, she drew in a deep breath, rose from her chair, and took the few steps to Michael's office.

Peeking through the door to see him shutting his briefcase, she tapped on the door frame.

He looked up with his usual winning smile, his blue eyes owning her. Even after ten hours at the office, every dark hair on his head was in place, and the only hint of a long day was the sexy stubble shadowing his face “Ready to take off?” he asked, acknowledging that they were both probably exhausted. The rest of the office sat quiet, dark, and indeed her stomach was starting to growl for dinner.

“Almost,” she said, then bit her lip. God, this was even harder than she’d expected. It wasn’t just about quitting a job, it was about quitting her love for him. “But first, I need to tell you something.”

“Come in,” he said, eyebrows knitting with concern. Clearly, her tone had informed him something big was coming. Although he’d been half out of his seat, preparing to leave, now he settled back into it.

Taking another deep, fortifying, you-can-do-this breath, Marla walked around his desk and perched on the edge, near his chair. They were comfortable enough together, good enough friends, that she could do that. And she would miss that comfort. Along with his very nearness – the musky, manly scent of him, the warmth his eyes emitted, the sense of almost knowing what it was like to be wrapped in his strong arms just from being so close to him.

But you can’t think about that right now. And you also can’t think about the way the crux of your thighs is tingling so madly, how heavy your breasts feel, how easy it would be to just grab him and kiss him.

Another deep breath. In, out. *Okay, you can do this.*

“What’s wrong, Marla?”

She pursed her lips, wishing she knew where to begin. One would think she’d have a plan, have rehearsed this, but she hadn’t. She’d been more wrapped up in the emotion of it than the execution.

“This is really difficult for me,” she started. She’d crossed her ankles and now casually swung her pointy black pumps to and fro, but the way she gripped the edge of the desk with both hands surely belied her nervousness.

“What is it, honey? Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

Whoa. He'd just called her *honey*. *That* was new. And possibly inappropriate given their positions – but she loved it.

She swallowed back the lump in her throat and tried to go on, tried to spit this out. “I’ve ... I’ve been thinking about this a long time, Michael, and – and yet, I still don’t know how to tell you. Maybe I shouldn’t make such a big deal out of it, people do this all the time, but ... I guess I’m not most people. So it’s ... harder for me than it probably *should* be.”

His voice came warm, soft, reassuring. “I’m *glad* you’re not most people.” And he reached out a hand to cover one of hers.

As the small shock of pleasure rippled up her arm and straight down into her panties, she forgot her nervousness long enough to look up at him. “Huh?”

His eyes narrowed on her with a sexy determination she’d never witnessed in them before and it made her surge with moisture. “Marla, if you’re trying to say what I *think* you’re trying to say ... well, I’ve been feeling the same way for a long time, too. And I haven’t known what to do about it, because we work together, and because you know the company policy about that – but hell ... maybe I don’t care anymore.”

Before Marla could even think, Michael slid his hand onto her knee, just below the hem of her skirt. She gasped involuntarily as the sensation ricocheted through her body like a pinball.

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