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Finding the Dream

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Extract

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Chapter One

On the day of her eighteenth birthday, Laura was in love. She knew she was lucky to be so certain of her feelings, and her future, and the man who would share them both with her.

His name was Peter Ridgeway, and he was everything she had ever dreamed of. He was tall and handsome, with golden good looks and a charming smile. He was a man who understood beauty and music, and the responsibilities of career.

Since he had been promoted in the Templeton organization and transferred to the California branch, he had courted her in a fashion designed to win her romantic heart.

There had been roses delivered in glossy white boxes, quiet dinners at restaurants with flickering candlelight. Endless conversations about art and literature—and silent looks that said so much more than words.

They had taken walks in the garden in the moonlight, long drives along the coast.

Her fall into love had not taken long, yet it had been a

gentle tumble with no scrapes or bruises. Very much, she thought, like sliding slowly down a silk-lined tunnel into waiting arms.

Perhaps, at twenty-seven, he was a bit older than her parents might have liked, and she a bit younger. But he was so flawless, so perfect, Laura couldn't see how the years could matter. No boy of her own age had Peter Ridgeway's polish, his knowledge, or his quiet patience.

And she was so much in love.

He had hinted at marriage, gently. She understood that this was to give her time to consider. If only she knew how to let him know she had already considered, already decided he was the man she would spend her life with.

But a man like Peter, Laura thought, needed to be the one to make the moves, the decisions.

There was time, she assured herself. All the time in the world. And tonight, at the party to celebrate her eighteenth birthday, he would be there. She would dance with him. And in the pale blue dress she'd chosen because it matched his eyes, she would feel like a princess. More, she would feel like a woman.

She dressed slowly, wanting to savor every moment of preparation. It was all going to be different now, she thought. Her room had been the same when she'd opened her eyes that morning. The walls were still papered with those tiny pink rosebuds that had grown there for so many years. The winter sunlight still tilted through her windows, filtering through lacy curtains as it had done on so many other January mornings.

But everything was different. Because she was different.

She studied her room with a woman's eyes now. She appreciated the elegant lines of the mahogany bureau, the glossy Chippendale that had been her grandmother's. She touched the pretty silver grooming set, a birthday gift from Margo, studied the colorful, frivolous perfume bottles she'd begun to collect in adolescence.

There was the bed she had slept in, dreamed in, since childhood—the high four-poster, again Chippendale, with its fanciful canopy of Breton lace. The terrace doors that

led to her balcony were open, to invite the sounds and scents of evening inside. The window seat where she could curl up and dream about the cliffs was cozy with pillows.

A fire burned sedately in the hearth of rose-grained marble. Atop the mantel were silver-framed photos, the delicate silver candlesticks with the slim white tapers she loved to burn at night. And the Dresden bud vase that held the single white rose Peter had sent that morning.

There was the desk where she had studied all the way through high school, where she would continue to study through what was left of her senior year.

Odd, she mused, tracing a hand over it, she didn't feel like a high school student. She felt so much older than her contemporaries. So much wiser, so much more sure of where she was going.

This was the room of her childhood, she thought, of her youth and of her heart. As Templeton House was the home of her heart. Though she knew she would never love any place as much, she was prepared, even eager to build a new home with the man she loved.

At last, she turned and looked at herself in the cheval glass. And smiled. She'd been right about the dress, she decided. Simple, clean lines suited her small frame. The scoop neckline, the long, tapered sleeves, the straight column that skimmed down to flirt with her ankles—the effect was classic, dignified, and perfect for a woman who met Peter Ridgeway's standards.

She might have preferred that her hair be straight and flowing, but since it insisted on curling frivolously, she'd swept it up. It added maturity, she thought.

She would never be bold and sexy like Margo, or casually intriguing like Kate. So she would settle for mature and dignified. After all, those were qualities that Peter found appealing.

She so badly wanted to be perfect for him. Tonight—especially tonight.

Reverently she picked up the earrings that had been her parents' birthday gift. The diamonds and sapphires winked

flirtatiously back at her. She was smiling at them when her door burst open.

''I am not putting that crap all over my face.'' Flushed and flustered, Kate continued her argument with Margo as both of them strode inside. ''You have enough on yours for both of us.''

''You said Laura would be the judge,'' Margo reminded her, then stopped. With an expert's eye she studied her friend. ''You look fabulous. Dignified sex.''

''Really? Are you sure?'' The idea of being sexy was so thrilling, Laura turned back to the mirror. All she saw was herself, a small young woman with anxious gray eyes and hair that wouldn't quite stay in place.

''Absolutely. Every guy at the party is going to want you, and be afraid to ask.''

Kate snorted and plopped onto Laura's bed. ''They won't be afraid to ask you, pal. You're a prime example of truth in advertising.''

Margo merely smirked and ran a hand over her hip. The lipstick-red dress dipped teasingly low at the bodice and clung to every generous curve. ''If you've got it—which you don't—flaunt it. Which is why you need the blusher, the eye shadow, the mascara, the—''

''Oh, Christ.''

''She looks lovely, Margo.'' Always the peacemaker, Laura stepped between them. She smiled at Kate, spread out on the bed, her angular frame intriguing in thin white wool that covered her from throat to ankle. ''Like a wood nymph.'' She laughed when Kate groaned. ''But you could use a little more color.''

''See?'' Triumphant, Margo whipped out her makeup bag. ''Sit up and let a master do her work.''

''I was counting on you.'' Complaining all the way, Kate suffered the indignity of Margo's brushes and tubes. ''I'm only doing this because it's your birthday.''

''And I appreciate it.''

''It's going to be a clear night.'' Margo busily defined Kate's cheekbones. ''The band's already setting up, and the kitchen's in chaos. Mum's rushing around fussing with the

floral arrangements as though it's a royal reception.''

''I should go help,'' Laura began.

''You're the guest of honor.'' Kate kept her eyes closed in self-defense as Margo dusted shadow on her lids. ''Aunt Susie has everything under control—including Uncle Tommy. He's outside playing the sax.''

Laughing, Laura sat on the bed beside Kate. ''He always said his secret fantasy was to play tenor sax in some smoky club.''

''He'd have played for a while,'' Margo said as she carefully smudged liner under Kate's big doe eyes. ''Then the Templeton would have come out, and he'd have bought the club.''

''Ladies.'' Josh loitered in the doorway, a small florist's box in his hands. ''I don't mean to interrupt a female ritual, but as everyone's slightly insane, I'm playing delivery boy.''

The way he looked in his tux shot heat straight through Margo's loins. She sent him a sultry look. ''What's your usual tip?''

''Never draw to an inside straight.'' He struggled not to let his gaze dip to her cleavage and cursed every man who would be offered a glimpse of those milky white curves. ''Looks like more flowers for the birthday girl.''

''Thanks.'' Laura rose to take the box, and kissed him. ''That's my tip.''

''You look wonderful.'' He caught her hand. ''Grown up. I'm starting to miss my annoying little sister.''

''I'll do my best to annoy you, as often as possible.'' She opened the box, sighed, and forgot everything else. ''From Peter,'' she murmured.

Josh set his teeth. It wouldn't be fair to say that she was already annoying him in her choice of men. ''Some guys think single roses are classy.''

''I'd rather have dozens,'' Margo stated. And her eyes met Josh's in perfect agreement and understanding.

''It's lovely,'' Laura murmured as she slipped it into the vase with its mate. ''Just like the one he sent this morning.''

* * *

By nine, Templeton House was overflowing with people and sound. Groups of guests spilled out of brightly lit rooms onto heated terraces. Others wandered the gardens, strolling down bricked paths to admire the blooms and the fountains, all lit by the white ball of a winter's moon and the charm of fairy lights.

Margo had been right. The night was clear, a black sky stabbed by countless diamond-bright stars. Under it Templeton House stood awash in lights.

The music pulsed, inviting couples to dance. Huge tables elegantly clad in white linen groaned under the weight of food prepared by a fleet of caterers. Waiters trained by Templeton Hotels standards wandered discreetly among the guests, carrying silver trays filled with flutes of champagne and tiny delicacies for sampling. Half a dozen open bars were set up to serve mixed or soft drinks.

Steam rose off the swimming pool in misty fingers, while dozens of white water lilies floated on the surface. On terraces, under silky awnings, over the lawns, dozens of tables were draped in white linen, centered with a trio of white tapers ringed by glossy gardenias.

Indoors, there were more waiters, more food, more music, more flowers for those who wanted the warmth and relative quiet. Two uniformed maids upstairs stood ready to assist any lady who might wish to freshen up or fix a hem.

No reception ever held at any Templeton hotel around the world was more carefully planned or executed than the celebration of Laura Templeton's eighteenth birthday.

She would never forget that night, the way the lights flashed and glowed, the way the music seemed to fill the air, mating with the scent of flowers. She knew her duties, and she chatted and danced with friends of her parents and with her contemporaries. Though she wanted only Peter, she mixed and mingled as was expected of her.

When she danced with her father, she pressed her cheek against his. ''It's a wonderful party. Thank you.''

He sighed, realizing she smelled like a woman—soft,

elegant. ''Part of me wishes you were still three years old, bouncing on my knee.''

Thomas drew her back to smile at her. He was a striking man, his bronzed hair lightly touched with silver, the eyes he had passed on to both of his children crinkled at the corners with life and laughter.

''You've grown up on me, Laura.''

''I couldn't help it.'' She smiled back at him.

''No, I suppose you couldn't. Now I'm standing here aware that a dozen young men are aiming arrows at my back, hoping I'll keel over so they can dance with you.''

''I'd rather dance with you than anyone.''

But when Peter glided by with Susan Templeton, Thomas saw his daughter's eyes go soft and dreamy. How could he have predicted, he thought, when he brought the man out to California, that Ridgeway would take his little girl away?

When the music ended, Thomas had to admire the smooth skill with which Peter changed partners and circled away with Laura.

''You shouldn't look at the man as though you'd like to flog him, Tommy,'' Susan murmured.

''She's just a girl.''

''She knows what she wants. She's always seemed to know.'' She sighed herself. ''Apparently it's Peter Ridgeway.''

Thomas looked into his wife's eyes. They were wise, always had been wise. She might be small and delicate-framed like her daughter, and perhaps she gave the illusion of fragility. But he knew just how strong she was.

''What do you think of him?''

''He's competent,'' she said slowly. ''He's well bred, well mannered. God knows, he's attractive.'' Her soft mouth hardened. ''And I wish he was a thousand miles away from her. That's a mother talking,'' she admitted. ''One who's afraid she's losing her little girl.''

''We could transfer him to Europe.'' He warmed to the idea. ''No—Tokyo, or Sydney.''

Laughing, she patted her husband's cheek. ''The way

Laura looks at him, she'd follow him. Better to keep him close.'' Struggling to accept, she shrugged her shoulders. ''She could have fallen for one of Josh's wilder friends, or a gigolo, a fortune hunter, an ex-con.''

He laughed himself. ''Laura? Never.''

Susan merely raised an eyebrow. A man wouldn't understand, she knew. Romantic natures like Laura's most usually were drawn to the wild. ''Well, Tommy, we'll just have to see where it goes. And be there for her.''

''Aren't you going to dance with me?'' Margo slid into Josh's arms, fit there, before he had a chance to agree or evade. ''Or would you rather just stand there brooding?''

''I wasn't brooding. I was thinking.''

''You're worried about Laura.'' Even as her fingers skimmed flirtatiously up the nape of his neck, Margo shot a concerned glance toward Laura. ''She's mad for him. And bound and determined to marry him.''

''She's too young to be thinking of marriage.''

''She's been thinking of marriage since she was four,'' Margo muttered. ''Now she's found what she thinks is the man of her dreams. No one's going to stop her.''

''I could kill him,'' Josh considered. ''Then we could hide the body.''

She chuckled, smiled into his eyes. ''Kate and I would be happy to help you toss his lifeless corpse off the cliffs. But hell, Josh, maybe he's right for her. He's attentive, intelligent, apparently patient in certain hormonal areas.''

''Don't start that.'' Josh's eyes went dark. ''I don't want to think about it.''

''Rest assured your little sister will walk down the aisle, when the time comes, in blushing-bride white.'' She blew out a breath, wondering why any woman would consider marrying a man before she knew if he was her mate in bed. ''They have a lot in common, really. And who are two jaded cynics like us to judge?''

''We love her,'' Josh said simply.

''Yeah, we do. But things change, and before much longer we're all going to be moving in our own directions.

You've already started,'' she pointed out. ''Mister Harvard Law. And Kate's chafing at the bit for college, Laura for marriage.''

''What are you chafing for, duchess?''

''Everything, and then some.'' Her smile turned sultry. She might have pushed the flirtation a bit farther, but Kate swung up and pried them apart.

''Sexual rituals later,'' she muttered. ''Look, they're going off.'' She scowled in Laura's direction, watching her walk away hand in hand with Peter. ''Maybe we should go after them. Do something.''

''Such as?'' But understanding, Margo draped an arm over Kate's narrow shoulders. ''Whatever, it won't make any difference.''

''I'm not going to stand around and watch, then.'' Disgusted, Kate peered up at Josh. ''Let's go sit in the south garden for a while. Josh can steal us some champagne.''

''You're under age,'' he said primly.

''Right, like you've never done it before.'' She smiled winningly. ''Just a glass each. To toast Laura. Maybe it'll bring her luck, and what she wants.''

''One glass, then.''

Margo frowned, noting the way he scanned the crowd. ''Looking for cops?''

''No, I thought Michael might show after all.''

''Mick?'' Kate angled her head. ''I thought he was down in Central America or somewhere, playing soldier of fortune.''

''He is—was,'' Josh corrected. ''He's back, at least for a while. I was hoping he'd take me up on the invitation.'' Then he shrugged. ''He's not much for this kind of thing. One glass,'' he repeated, tapping a finger on Kate's nose. ''And you didn't get it from me.''

''Of course not.'' After tucking her arm through Margo's, Kate wandered toward the gaily lighted gardens. ''We might as well drink to her if we can't stop her.''

''We'll drink to her,'' Margo agreed. ''And we'll be there, whatever happens.''

* * *

''So many stars,'' Laura breathed in the night as she and Peter walked across the gently sloping lawn. ''I can't imagine a more perfect evening.''

''Much more perfect now that I have a moment alone with you.''

Flushing, she smiled at him. ''I'm sorry. I've been so busy, I've hardly had a moment to talk with you.'' Be alone with you.

''You have duties. I understand. A Templeton would never neglect her guests.''

''Not ordinarily, no. But it is my birthday.'' Her hand felt so warm and sheltered in his. She wished they could walk forever, down to the cliffs, so she could share that most intimate place with him. ''I should have some leeway.''

''Then let's take advantage of that.'' He guided her toward the fanciful white shape of the gazebo.

From there the sounds of the party became muted background, and the moonlight filtered through the latticelike lace. Scents from the flowers perfumed the air. It was precisely the setting he'd wanted.

Old-fashioned and romantic, like the woman he intended to have.

Drawing her into his arms, he kissed her. She came so willingly, he thought. So innocently. That lovely mouth parting for his, those delicate arms winding around him. It stirred him, this youth combined with dignity, eagerness flushed with innocence.

He could have her, he knew. He had the skill and the experience. But he was a man who prided himself on control, and he drew her gently back. He wouldn't soil the perfection, or rush into the physical. He wanted his wife untouched, even by himself.

''I haven't told you enough how lovely you look tonight.''

''Thank you.'' She treasured those warm, liquid pulls of anticipation. ''I wanted to. For you.''

He smiled and held her tenderly, letting her head rest against his heart. She was so perfect for him, he thought.

Young, lovely, well bred. Malleable. Through the slats he spotted Margo, flashy in her clinging red dress, laughing bawdily at some joke.

Even though his glands stirred, his sensibilities were offended. The housekeeper's daughter. Every man's wet dream.

His gaze shifted to Kate. The prickly ward, with more brains than style. It amazed him that Laura felt this childish attachment for those two. But he was sure it would fade in time. She was, after all, sensible, with a dignity admirable in one so young. Once she fully understood her place in society—and her place with him—she could be gently weaned from inappropriate attachments.

He had no doubt she was in love with him. She had so little experience in coyness or deception. Her parents might not completely approve, but he was confident that their devotion to their daughter would sway them in his favor.

They would find no fault with him personally or professionally, he was certain. He did his job, and did it well. He would make a suitable son-in-law. With Laura beside him, with the Templeton name, he would have everything he wanted. Everything he deserved. The proper wife, the unshakable position in society, sons. Wealth and success.

''We haven't known each other long,'' he began.

''It feels like forever.''

Over her head, he smiled. She was so sweetly romantic. ''Only a few months, Laura. And I'm nearly ten years older than you are.''

She only pressed closer. ''What does it matter?''

''I should give you more time. God, you're still in high school.''

''Only for a few more months.'' Her heart beat wildly with anticipation as she lifted her head. ''I'm not a child, Peter.''

''No, you're not.''

''I know what I want. I've always known.''

He believed her. And he, also, knew what he wanted. Had always known. That, too, he mused, they had in common.

''Still, I told myself I would wait.'' He brought her hands to his lips, watched her eyes. ''Another year, at least.''

She knew this was what she had dreamed of, had waited for. ''I don't want you to wait,'' she whispered. ''I love you, Peter.''

''I love you, Laura. Too much to wait even another hour, much less another year.''

He eased her down onto the padded bench. Her hands trembled. With all her heart she absorbed every aspect of the moment. The sound of music in the distance that carried over the clear night air in quiet notes. The scent of night-blooming jasmine and hints of the sea. The way the shadows and lights played through the sheltering lattice.

He got down on one knee, as she'd known he would. His face was so beautiful in the delicate, dreamy light, it broke her heart. Her eyes were swimming with tears when he took a small black-velvet box from his pocket, opened it. The tears made the light that glinted off the diamond refract into rainbows.

''Will you marry me, Laura?''

She knew what every woman felt at this one shining moment of her life. And held out her hand. ''Yes.''