

Loving Or Nothing By Cara Marsi

"I need a miracle." Tami Morrelle dropped the phone receiver back on its cradle with a loud clunk and rubbed her aching temples. *I will not cry. I will not cry.*

"Trouble?" Jennifer, her assistant at Wedding Dreams Bridal, looked up from a small table tucked in a corner of their crowded office. An expert in calligraphy, Jennifer sat addressing wedding invitations for one of their clients.

"That was Nancy Rizzo," Tami said. "She cancelled her wedding plans. Money issues. She says she'll have a very small wedding and wear a dress off the rack from one of the department stores." Tami glanced at the large calendar posted on the wall. This was April. Although they had weddings scheduled almost every week for the next year, their bookings were down ten percent from last year.

"Not another cancellation." Jennifer dropped her pen and pushed back from the table. "What'll we do with all those dresses?"

"Hope for a fairy godmother to wave her magic wand and fill this place with brides all wanting the gowns we've already paid for," Tami muttered. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be selfish, but that's the second cancellation in two months. Why do the brides always wait until *after* we've ordered the gowns to cancel?" When a wedding was cancelled, the bridal shop was obligated to pay the manufacturer for the gowns already ordered.

Jennifer swallowed. "Are you going to close?"

"Not if I can help it. Things will get better. They have to." Tami grimaced. "We're still fighting our way back to the surface after the hurricane last year."

Jennifer shot her a wry smile. "We sure didn't need *that* kind of gift from Mother Nature."

Although insurance had covered most of the flood damage to the basement and to the inventory, Tami had taken out a loan and maxed out her credit cards to pay for expenses not covered by insurance. She had four weeks to come up with the next loan payment.

She looked at her aunt's picture on the desk. *Sorry, Aunt Pauline, I've tried, I really have.*

The bell over the shop door tinkled. Tami closed her eyes and sent out a silent prayer. *Please let that be a new client.* She stood up and put on her best professional face. Then, smoothing her slacks over her hips, she went into the shop - and lost her smile.

Standing there, a look of boredom on her face, was Olivia Shea, real estate agent and local barracuda. The blonde was dressed as usual in the latest style and wearing a spectacular mohair coat. Tami resisted the urge to growl at the woman who since high school had rubbed her the wrong way. Homecoming queen turned real estate predator, Olivia hadn't changed a bit since school.

Tami shifted her attention to the tall man with Olivia. She knew him from somewhere. But where? The sunlight coming through the bay windows brought out reddish highlights in his dark brown hair. But it was his eyes, deep green and shuttered, that captured Tami and held her. There was something familiar about—

"Daniel? Daniel Ramsey?"

"Danny insisted on coming here," Olivia said, with a sniff of disdain.

"I hope we haven't come at a bad time," he offered quietly. His voice, deep and rich and dripping with masculine sensuality, slid over Tami like chocolate warmed by the sun as his eyes lit with an appreciative gleam.

"Tamsen, you're even more beautiful than I remember," he said.

A disconcerting wave of heat rumbled through her lower abdomen. *Oh. My. God.* She blinked, taking a startled moment to absorb both the sudden heat and his completely unexpected praise. Not to mention the smile that was about ten times sexier than she remembered. Daniel Ramsey. In her shop. With Olivia. The cheerleader and the bad boy.

"It's...it's Tami now. No one calls me Tamsen anymore." She mentally pulled herself together. "The last I heard of you, you'd joined the Army right after graduating from Loving High."

His mouth tightened. "That was seventeen years ago. A lifetime."

Tami couldn't help but stare. His shoulders had broadened and he'd gotten taller and filled out. Filled out very nicely. His beautifully tailored charcoal gray suit and snowy white shirt were out of place here at the Jersey shore. Too formal. But on him it looked perfect. *He* looked perfect. His thick hair was slicked back in a cut right out of GQ. So different from the shoulder-length hair he'd sported in high

school. A light stubble of dark beard covered his firm jaw, giving him a roguish look that made her pulse speed up.

She looked from the too-appealing Daniel to the supremely bored Olivia. "What...what can I do for you...two?" God truly had a sense of humor if He'd sent *this pair* to her as miracle clients.

"Danny is my client. He has a business proposition for you," Olivia said.

So they weren't a couple. Tami exhaled, tamping down the strange and unwelcome relief that washed over her.

"A business proposition?" She looked up at Daniel. He towered over her by a foot. The intensity in his green eyes made her shift uncomfortably.

He glanced around. "This house has a lot of character. How old is it?"

The fine hairs on Tami's arms rose in warning. "It's over 100 years old. It's been in my family for three generations. My aunt converted the bottom floors for her business."

His gaze touched on the missing pieces of crown molding, the chipped paint and the fading, worn woodwork. "So you live upstairs?"

"On the third floor. Why are you asking?"

He moved closer. "I've bought the properties on either side. I want to discuss buying yours."

Tami clutched the back of the nearest chair. "That's *you*? We heard rumors a developer wants to put up a small hotel and spa. I didn't believe them."

"It's true. I'm planning an upscale boutique hotel, spa, and catering facilities for romantic getaways." He smiled. "With a location on the beach and a name like Loving, this town is perfect."

. . . She lifted her chin. "My home is not for sale."

His confident smile told her he was a man who knew how to get what he wanted.