



The Daddy Wish (Those Engaging Garretts!)

By Brenda Harlen

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One night changed everything for Nathan. And now his executive assistant is strictly hands-off despite their intense physical attraction. Besides, Allison has a son, and Nathan's no family man. Then why is Nathan's head suddenly filled with fantasies of being a father? Perhaps this once-happy bachelor won't be single for long...

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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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Allison wasn't usually the type to spend too much time fussing over her appearance. She never left her apartment looking less than professional—that was a matter of pride—but she didn't usually bother with more than a cursory brush with the mascara wand to darken her fair lashes and a quick swipe of gloss to moisturize her lips.

On the first morning after the holidays, when she found herself digging into her makeup bag for rarely used eye shadow and lipstick, she told herself that she simply wanted a new image for the new year. That the extra care she was taking with her appearance was in no way linked to the possibility that she might cross paths with Nathan Garrett at the office today.

Finally satisfied with the results of her efforts, she poked her head into her son's bedroom. "Come on, Dylan. You don't want to be late on your first day back."

"Yeah, I do," he told her. "School sucks."

She held back a sigh. It worried her that he had such a negative attitude toward school when he was only in third grade, but she'd long ago given up trying to change his opinion and focused her efforts on getting him to class on time. "Okay, but *I* don't want to be late on my first day back."

He eyed her suspiciously. "How come you're all dressed up?"

"What do you mean? I wear this suit to work all the time."

"But you don't wear all that gunk on your face."

She had no ready response to that. If the "slight" improvement she'd been aiming for was obvious enough that her eight-year-old son noticed, she'd definitely gone overboard.

"And your hair's different," he said.

"Go eat your cereal, then brush your teeth," she told him.

It had taken her almost twenty minutes to do her makeup and hair, and less than five to wipe the color off her face and tuck her hair into its usual loose knot at the back of her head.

Dylan didn't comment on the changes, which she interpreted to mean that she now looked as she usually did. She certainly wasn't going to turn any heads when she walked into the office, and maybe that was for the best. Far too many women tripped over themselves trying to catch Nathan Garrett's eye, and she'd always taken pride in the fact that she wasn't one of them.

After dropping her son off at school, she drove across town to the offices of Garrett Furniture, trying not to think about what had happened at the company Christmas party.

Of course, her efforts were futile. It didn't matter that she hadn't seen or heard from Nathan in the twenty-three days that had passed since they'd connected under the mistletoe—she hadn't stopped thinking about him or THE KISS.

Which was ridiculous, because he really wasn't her type. Not that she had a type—she couldn't even remember the last time she'd had a date. But if she *did* have a type, it would *not* be a too rich, too sexy, too good-looking and far too self-assured man who had a reputation for enjoying women of *all* types.

She decided it was a good thing that she'd wiped off her makeup and tied back her hair. The last thing she needed was for Nathan Garrett—or anyone else in the office—to think that she was interested in him.

Maybe her response wasn't about the particular man so much as the fact that she hadn't been kissed (even in lowercase letters) in a very long time. Maybe that was the real reason he'd stirred up desires so long dormant, she hadn't been certain she was capable of feeling them anymore. Maybe she didn't want her boss's nephew so much as she wanted to connect with someone. *Anyone*.

As a single mother, she didn't have time to be lonely—except for every other weekend when Dylan was with his dad, and Dylan had been with his dad the night of the Christmas party. She never would have stayed out so late, or let herself drink so much, if her son had been waiting for her at home. Not that she'd had so much to drink—probably not more than three glasses of wine. But she'd decided that being under the influence of alcohol was a convenient explanation for her uncharacteristic behavior.

And now she was acting like a schoolgirl with a crush on the most popular boy in class—trying to pretty herself up to get his attention. It was pathetic, especially when she wasn't even sure that she liked the guy all that much.

Not that she *disliked* him.

Allison blew out a frustrated breath. This was ridiculous. *She* was being ridiculous—spending far too much time obsessing over THE KISS and in danger of starting to think about Nathan Garrett as THE MAN. He was simply *a* man—no more and no less. Even if he was a man who could kiss far better than any other man in her experience.

She pulled into her usual parking spot and turned off the ignition. After the holiday, she was eager to get back into the familiar routines of work again, but she stopped by the break room first to grab a cup of coffee. While there, she wished a happy New Year to Melanie Hedley, who was doing the same.

"How was your holiday?" Melanie asked.

"Quiet," Allison said. "Yours?"

"*Amazing*." The other woman fairly gushed the word. "I went to Vail before Christmas and stayed at this *fabulous* condo resort that had fireplaces in *every* bedroom and hot tubs on *all* the decks. And Nate and I discovered the most *incredible* little café tucked away in the foothills."

Allison sloshed coffee over the back of her hand and sucked in a sharp breath as the hot liquid scalded her

skin. "That does sound...amazing," she said, grabbing a paper napkin to wipe the spilled coffee off her hand.

"Lanie—" Enrico Sanchez poked his head into the room "—we need you on that conference call."

"Oh, right." Melanie smiled at her. "We'll catch up more later."

Allison added a splash of cream to her cup, stirring mechanically while all the excited anticipation that had fueled her buoyant mood only a few minutes earlier fizzled out like air from a balloon.

She wasn't unaware of Nate's reputation, but it still hurt to realize that, only a few days after he'd kissed her, he'd been dining with Melanie in Colorado. It shouldn't. She had no right to be upset or disappointed or anything. He'd certainly never made her any promises, and she wouldn't have believed him if he had.

So why had she let her own imagination paint unrealistic dreams? Why had she ever let herself believe that THE KISS had been anything more than a kiss?

She hated being taken for a fool. Worse, she hated *being* a fool. She sat down at her desk and turned on her computer, determined to put all thoughts of the man from her mind once and for all.

John Garrett walked in while she was still reviewing email messages that had come through over the holidays. He was a good boss and a genuinely wonderful man, and she greeted him with a sincere smile.

The smile froze on her lips when he said, "I'm glad you're here—I need to talk to you about Nathan."

* * *

Allison took her iPad into John Garrett's office.

Though he'd said he wanted to talk to her about Nathan, she didn't think there was any way he could know what had happened at the Christmas party. But HR frowned upon personal relationships in the workplace, and her heart was hammering against her ribs as she perched on the edge of the chair facing his desk.

The CFO looked uncharacteristically burdened and weary. She could practically feel the knots forming in her belly—twisting and tightening—as it occurred to her that she might very well be on the verge of losing her job because she'd had too much to drink and had foolishly and impulsively let herself get caught under the mistletoe by her boss's heir apparent.

"You're no doubt aware that Nathan has been chosen to take over as CFO when I retire," John continued.

She exhaled slowly, reassured by his opening that whatever this was about, it wasn't about the kiss. (The brief exchange with Melanie in the staff room had succeeded in relegating the event to lowercase status.) Her relief was so profound, it took several seconds longer than it should have for the rest of his statement to sink in.

Retirement? Why was he mentioning it now?

"But that's not until June," she noted. And only then if he didn't decide to postpone it again, as he'd done twice already.

"Actually, I'm going to be finished here as of the end of January."

"What? Why?"

"I had a little bit of a health scare over the holidays," he admitted.

She was instantly and sincerely concerned. John Garrett might be her boss, but over the six years that they'd worked together, he'd also become a friend and something of a father figure to her. "What happened? Why didn't anyone call me?"

"It was just a minor blip with my heart—nothing too serious."

The fact that he was sitting behind his desk and not in a hospital bed confirmed that it wasn't too serious, but she knew him well enough to suspect that he was downplaying the "minor" part.

But what did this mean for her? Would she be let go? Was John telling her now as a way of giving her notice that she would be out of a job at the end of the month?

"Nathan's worked hard for the company for a lot of years," he continued. "He's not getting this promotion just because his name is Garrett but because he's earned it."

She nodded, her heart sinking as she considered the repercussions of his announcement. She was confident that she could find another job; she knew John would give her a glowing recommendation. But she wasn't nearly as confident that she would find another job with the comprehensive health-care benefits she needed for the ongoing treatment of her son's asthma.

"That being said, I wanted to be certain that you don't have any concerns about working with him."

"Working with him?" she echoed.

"Is that going to be a problem?"

"No, of course not," she hastily assured him, because she wouldn't let it be a problem. Because he was offering her the chance to keep her job—and her benefits—and she would make it work.

As for the mind-numbing, bone-melting kiss she'd shared with her soon-to-be boss...what kiss?

"I just assumed he'd want to choose his own executive assistant," she said, still not entirely sure Nathan wouldn't do exactly that.

"We've already discussed it," John said. "He wants you."

She knew he only meant that his nephew wanted her to work for him, but that knowledge didn't prevent her cheeks from flushing in response to his words.

"Now that that's settled, I need you to book a flight to St. Louis for next Thursday," he told her. "There are some minor discrepancies in their numbers that need to be looked at."

Which could probably be done via email, but John had always preferred a hands-on approach.

"Considering the 'minor blip' with your heart, I'm surprised your doctors have given you the okay to fly."

"They haven't," he admitted. "So you'll be going with Nathan."

Allison had to bite her tongue to hold back her instinctive protest as she rose from her chair. It wasn't unusual for John to request that she accompany him on his business trips, but going anywhere with the man who'd kissed her more thoroughly than anyone else in recent memory—maybe ever—filled her with apprehension.

Thankfully, St. Louis was only a two-hour flight from Raleigh, which meant that the trip would be completed in one day. It would be a long day—with a departure at 8:35 a.m. and a return fourteen hours later—but only one day. The trips that the CFO made to review the books of the Gallery stores—more upscale showrooms that carried exclusive, higherend inventory—located in Austin, Denver, San Francisco, Saint Paul, New York, Philadelphia and Miami, required more time and attention, sometimes necessitating a two or three-night stay.

As Allison returned to her desk, she could only hope that Nathan would decide he didn't need his executive assistant to accompany him on those, because she didn't trust herself to spend that much time in close proximity to the man. Sex had never been casual to her. Even when she was in college, she'd never hooked up with a guy just for a good time. And she'd tried to steer clear of the guys who were reputed to sleep with different girls every weekend. No doubt, Nathan Garrett had been one of those guys.

She'd heard rumors of his extracurricular activities, and while the whispered details might vary, the overall consensus was that the current VP of Finance definitely knew how to pleasure a woman.

Which was definitely *not* something she should be thinking about right now—especially when the man himself was standing in front of her desk.

He was the only man she'd ever met who managed to make her feel all weak-kneed and tongue-tied in his presence. She hadn't worked at Garrett Furniture long before she'd recognized that the family had won some kind of genetic sweepstakes. The three brothers who ran the company were of her parents' generation but still undeniably handsome, and all of their children—most of whom were employed at the company in one capacity or another—were unbelievably attractive.

It had been an impartial observation—nothing more. She'd been too busy trying to settle into her new job, put her life back together and be a good mother to her toddler son to be attracted to anyone. And then, in her second year of employment in John Garrett's office, his nephew Nathan moved back to Charisma.

By then, Allison's wounded heart had healed and her long-dormant hormones were ready to be awakened again. And they had jolted to full awareness when Nathan walked into the office and found her struggling to fix a paper jam in the photocopier.

He'd come over to help, and just his proximity was enough to make her skin prickle. When he'd reached around her, his chest had bumped her shoulder, and the incidental contact had made her nipples tingle and tighten. He'd dislodged the paper, she'd stammered out a breathless "thank you" and then he'd gone in to see his uncle.

Four years later, she still wasn't immune to him. She'd learned to hold her own in conversations with him, but she hadn't learned to control her body's involuntary response to his nearness. Even now, even with him

standing on the other side of her desk, her blood was pulsing in her veins.

She forced a smile and desperately hoped that her cheeks weren't as red as they felt. "Good morning, Mr. Garrett."

His answering smile didn't seem forced. It was effortless and easy and so potent; she was grateful that she was sitting down because it practically melted her bones. "Good morning, Allison."

She forced herself to glance away, down at the calendar on her desk. "Your uncle is free, if you want to go in."

"I will," he said, but eased a hip onto the edge of her desk. "But first I wanted to apologize for not calling you when I got back from my ski trip."

"Oh, well." She kept her gaze focused on the papers on her desk, because his proximity was wreaking enough havoc on her hormones without looking at him and remembering how his mouth—somehow both soft and strong, and utterly delicious—had mastered hers, or how those wickedly talented hands had moved so smoothly and confidently over her body. "I know the holidays are a busy time for everyone."

"And then Uncle John had his heart attack the day after Christmas." She glanced up and could tell, by the seriousness of his tone and the bleakness in his eyes, that he was still worried about his uncle.

"So it was more than a minor blip," she remarked.

"Is that what he told you?"

She nodded.

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