

*Making Up
is Hard to Do*

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Outbid by the Boss

Undone by the Star

Making Up is Hard to Do

The Amber and Elliot Mysteries

Something's Fishy at Ash Lake

The Mad Hacker

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One

“Aachoo!” Nicki sneezed, blew her nose for the umpteenth time that day and tossed the soggy tissue into the wastebasket next to her desk. The year-end report she was preparing for the Bedford County Golf Club could go hang. She was going to go home, have a long, hot shower and crawl into bed.

“Ms. Hamilton?”

Nicki raised her red-rimmed, hazel eyes.

Madison Carswell, Gammage & Associates’ young receptionist, hovered in the doorway.

“Dwat?” Nicki blew her bangs out of the way.

The receptionist frowned. “Are you okay?”

“Despite the fact that I sound like a fwrog, my hair is greasy and my nose is red enough to unseat Rudolph, I’m just tickety-boo.” Nicki lobbed the half-finished report across her desk. “Dwhy, what’s up?”

“There’s this man...” with a slight twitch of the head, Madison indicated the reception area behind her, “...he’s asking for Mr. Gammage.”

Nicki sighed. She really was tired and out-of-sorts and now here was Madison, her nineteen-

year-old frame practically quivering with excitement over whatever piece of male flesh waited expectantly in the outer office. "You know the drill, Madison. Tell mister whoever-he-is that Doug is on paternity leave until further notice. If the guy stills wants an accountant, he can make an appointment to see me..."

Nicki peered at the clock on the wall. It was already close to four. "Tomorrow afternoon," she said firmly. "When I am looking...and feeling better."

"But..."

"But, what?" Nicki shoved her knuckles underneath her glasses and scrubbed. Her eyes were incredibly itchy.

"It's just...he's from out-of-town."

The old-fashioned horned-rims stopped bobbing up and down. "So am I," muttered Nicki.

Madison's voice fell to a whisper. "But you've got to see this guy. He's perfect for you."

The heavy frames dropped back into place. "I know this is a small town, Madison." Nicki said carefully, "but being thirty-one and single is not a crime. At least, not where I come from. Now go back and tell him..."

She reached for her appointment book and flipped it open.

"...that I can see him..."

Nicki never did discover what made her look up just then, but as she did, Madison shifted to one side of the doorway, leaving Nicki with a clear view of the man in the outer office.

He wasn't quite as gorgeous as her enthusiastic receptionist had suggested, but there was definitely something about the way he stood with his back to them, discreetly watching the traffic crawl along Main Street while he waited, that captured Nicki's attention.

And held it while she took in the broad sweep of his shoulders, the crisp lines of his tan chinos and the cotton shirt he so casually wore. She pegged him at about thirty-four or five. Unlike her own salon-styled highlights, which looked fabulous when freshly washed and disastrous when not, his sandy brown hair shone as though it had been touched by the sun. It was long enough to nudge the edge of his collar, but well cut so that it stayed in line. Except for one stray curl, a tiny cowlick determined to go its own way.

Nicki felt her fingers twitch in recognition. "Psst! Madison!" she whispered hoarsely, beckoning the receptionist closer. "Did he say where he's from?"

"Yeah. Watertown."

"As in New York?" Nicki squeaked. Her voice sounded as though it had risen an octave.

"Uh, yeah."

Nicki frowned. She knew the Lake Ontario town of Eastport was crawling with tourists this time of year, many of whom were American. Besides, she reminded herself, half the population of Bedford County had family and friends on both sides of the border, some of whom spent as much time in New York as they did here.

The trouble was none of them ever made her palms sweat or her heart lurch with sudden longing the way this man did.

“He didn’t happen to tell you his name, did he?”

“Um, Ruther-something, I think.”

For a split-second, Nicki felt her world go black around the edges.

Not Ruther-something. Rutherford. Jack. Born Syracuse, New York. Mother American, father Canadian. Summers spent in Bedford County. Heart given to teenaged girl. Undying love given to him in return. Three passionate letters exchanged. A dozen more sent.

And then nothing.

For fifteen long years.

Nicki blinked.

Madison was speaking to her. “What do you want me to do?”

Short of telling Jack Rutherford to go away until she could whip home, wash her hair, put her contacts back in and lose five pounds, there was nothing Madison could do.

“Give me two minutes,” Nicki said firmly. “And then show him in.”

Damn. This was not the way it was supposed to happen. She should have been sitting in a sidewalk café sipping an espresso, or strolling along the Champs-Élysées on a beautiful spring day wearing an elegant dress and a wide-brimmed hat.

It was too late now.

Nicki breathed in deeply, tucked a lank strand of hair behind one ear, and moistened her lips with her tongue. She grabbed her summary page on the golf course and tried to study it, but her hands were shaking so badly, the carefully prepared columns seemed to morph into a solid block of black ink.

And then, suddenly, Jack was there, filling the doorway to her office. He seemed taller somehow. At least six-foot-two from where she was sitting, and he'd filled out. Everywhere. In the way a man does when he earns his muscles the hard way.

"Ms. Hamilton?"

His accent had softened. From upstate New York to somewhere neither here, nor there. With great deliberation, Nicki set the papers she was holding on top of the desk, and rose to her feet. The moss-green summer suit she wore nipped in at the waist and flattered her full figure, but the skirt, which stopped just short of her knees, did nothing to hide the tremble in her legs as she walked towards him.

Jack was smiling politely, holding out his hand.

"Jack Rutherford."

"Mr. Rutherford." Nicki broke out in a grin. Now that he was this close she could see the tiny lines radiating from the corners of his incredible blue eyes, and she found herself wondering where the intervening years had taken him.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

She stared at his hand for a moment, caught short by the formality of his greeting, and then she slipped her hand in his.

It was warm, and slightly calloused. She could feel the strength in his grip. It sent a delicious signal of familiarity to every nerve in her body. The yearnings of a sixteen-year-old girl roared to the surface of the woman she had become.

Swallowing her tears of happiness, Nicki raised her glance to his once more. He stared down at her and she started, suddenly reminded of how truly revealing the colour of Jack's eyes could be. From sky blue to cobalt and back again depending on his mood.

A sharp chill, as cold and grey as liquid mercury, rippled through Nicki's veins. It wiped the goofy grin from her face and sent her heart into overdrive.

Jack Rutherford, the man she had loved unconditionally for nearly half her lifetime, had no idea who she was. She could see it in his eyes.

Nicki jerked her hand away so fast she would have fallen had Jack not grabbed her by the elbow.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice full of concern.

"I'm fine." Feigning a cough, she stepped neatly from his grasp.

"Summer cold?"

Nicki nodded, waving Jack towards a nearby chair while she groped for a tissue. She had to get

a grip. It wouldn't take long for a man like Jack to realize there was more to her erratic behaviour than a bad case of the sniffles. Far better he not recognize her at this point than have them both humiliated by the situation.

Turning her back to him, Nicki allowed herself one brief flash of anger, then she blew her nose, smoothed her wrinkled skirt and locked up her heart.

By the time she sat down at her desk, she was everything she wanted Jack to see. A professional accountant ready to do business. "Sorry about that."

"You're filling in for Doug Gammage, I understand."

"That's right." Nicki laced her trembling fingers together and set them firmly on the desk in front of her. "Doug's on what he calls a pre-paternity leave."

"Ahh," said Jack.

"His wife's expecting twins and they have a very active four-year-old," she heard herself say. "However, he is available if it's extremely important."

Jack shook his head. "You'll do...sorry," he added sheepishly, "that didn't come out very well. It's just that I'm a little short of time."

Nicki dug her thumbnails into the palms of her hands, anything to stop them shaking. "I see." She didn't, of course, but that was beside the point. "And you chose Gammage's because...?"

“I asked around town. It’s as simple as that.”

He wouldn’t have known Doug anyway, thought Nicki. The Gammages had only moved to Bedford County a few years ago. She uncurled her fingers and reached for the familiar comfort of pen and paper. “So, Mr. Rutherford, what can I do for you?”

“You could start by calling me Jack.”

Nicki cleared her throat. “I don’t mean to be rude. Jack. But you may have noticed I’m not feeling very well. Perhaps we could dispense with the small talk.”

Jack’s jaw tightened, but he got right to the point, asking Nicki if she was familiar with the Bedford Inn north of town.

Nicki’s chest ached with memories she couldn’t afford to acknowledge. Not about the Inn itself – she was just a local kid – but with the small marina and tack shop where Jack had worked in the summers selling soda and ice cream to guests and giggling young girls. She’d been Nicki Wilcox then, the only child of a single mother who had dropped out of school to raise her. Their small apartment above the Main Street Grill where Christine Wilcox worked, first as a waitress and then as a bookkeeper, had been their refuge from an unkind world.

“And who owns it now?” asked Nicki fighting to keep her focus where it belonged.

“Technically, me.” Jack shrugged. “And the bank. The property taxes are in arrears, and the

place is so run down, I'm sleeping on my boat while I decide what to do with it."

Nicki tried not to look at Jack's well-honed physique. He'd always shown the promise of what was to come, but she'd had no idea he would be so attractive.

Blue eyes connected with hers. "I'm not boring you, am I?"

"No."

Jack held her in his gaze for another moment, frowned briefly, and then resumed his story. "The property went from my grandfather in trust to my father, who was less than interested in it, and then when he died, my cousin and I inherited. Roy Harper. I don't suppose you've had the pleasure."

Nicki shook her head. She remembered Jack's cousin all right, but there was nothing to be gained by admitting it. He was probably a dozen years older than Jack, red hair, liked fast cars and... something else...but she couldn't shake it loose. "And he is where?"

"Either at the marina or at a casino somewhere."

"Ah...."

"Roy's mother was my father's kid sister. Like chalk and cheese, my grandfather used to say. So when Roy had money problems a few years back, I bought him out." Jack hesitated, seemingly trapped by elusive memories of his own. "And now it's time to fish or cut bait."

"Which means 'what' exactly?"

“If the numbers add up ...restoring the Inn to her former glory.”

“Really?” Nicki quickly bent her head and scribbled a note to remind herself to never, ever come back to Bedford County again.

“You are very thorough,” observed Jack.

“Too thorough according to some.” It was out of her mouth before she knew it. Not that there was any point in hiding it. One long-time boyfriend had certainly seen her affinity for numbers as a negative. “I want someone who will let loose and enjoy life a bit more instead of totting it up like a balance sheet,” he’d said on his way out the door.

And I want someone worth falling in love with, Nicki had thought, but true to her nature, had not said. Because he’d been right. Her heart had been shattered a long time ago, and she would do well to remember that the extremely handsome man sitting not six feet away from her was the reason.

“So where are you when you’re not at Gammage’s?” Jack asked.

“Kennedy and Harris in Toronto. Big Bay Street firm with a gazillion other accountants just like me.” Nicki felt a moist trickle threatening her upper lip. She plucked a tissue from the box on her desk. “We specialize in mergers and acquisitions, dat kind ob thing.”

Jack leaned his left elbow on the arm of his chair and cupped his chin in his hand while Nicki

blew her nose. “Hot rum and honey always works for me.”

Nicki crumpled her used tissue and tossed it in the basket beside her desk. “And what do you do, Mr. Rutherford, when you’re not trolling the streets in search of an accountant.”

“Oil rigs mainly...but I’m between gigs,” said Jack. He was staring at her now, as though he were trying to puzzle something out. “Are you married?” he asked suddenly.

“Excuse me!”

Jack flushed. “Sorry that was out of line. It’s just that you remind me of someone I knew a long time ago. But her last name was Wilcox. I thought maybe...” he shrugged and his voice trailed away.

Nicki felt her heart skip a beat. Not totally forgotten then.

For a man who prided himself on keeping his emotions under control, Jack Rutherford was having a very bad day. He was used to garnering his share of female attention; what he wasn’t used to was such an immediate reaction to a woman he’d just met. Yet he’d had the strangest feeling of familiarity the entire time he’d been sitting across from Ms. Hamilton.

And more than that, she reminded him of the feelings he’d felt for someone long, long ago. A girl with soft skin and a big smile that, when she wasn’t worried about showing her braces, lit up her face and made him feel wonderful.

Unconsciously, his tongue drifted to the spot inside his lower lip where he'd bled profusely after a metal wire had come loose during one of their more passionate kisses. He was older and more experienced than she was and he had tried hard to remember that.

It was puppy love, he reminded himself. Put it in the past where it belongs.

You're thirty-four-years-old, a loner and a confirmed bachelor.

If his plan to refurbish the Inn didn't work out, he'd put it on the market, and head back overseas. One thing about working the rigs, he thought as he watched his new favourite accountant search through the papers on her desk, jobs were always plentiful, especially in security, an expertise which had led him to the North Sea. Expertise that would be of little use in Bedford County.

In the meantime, getting to know the intriguing Ms. Hamilton would definitely enhance his summer. Funny the way she was all business one minute and all woman the next. Like quicksilver, thought Jack. With a runny nose.

It was obvious the poor woman wasn't feeling well; she'd taken off her glasses and was now rubbing her eyes. Allergies on top of a cold, most likely. Nicki had had allergies, he remembered, especially when the weather was like today. Hot and dry. Jack blinked. Ms. Hamilton was blowing her nose again, hazel eyes clearly visible over the wad of tissue she held in her hand. Jack smiled

to himself. She so reminded him of Nicki, it was uncanny. Right down to the itchy eyes and grumpy disposition.

Jack leapt to his feet.

“What did you say your first name was?” he demanded.

“I didn’t,” said Nicki.

Jack gaped at her, the blood roaring in his ears. “I don’t understand! If you’re not married, then why aren’t you Nicki Wilcox...you are Nicki Wilcox, aren’t you!”

“You make it sound like an accusation.”

He was seething with rage. She’d known right from the get-go who he was, and yet she hadn’t said anything. She’d played him like a fish on a line.

“Explain it to me.”

“None of your business,” snapped Nicki. “You walk in here fifteen years later and expect *me* to explain my life to you...you don’t deserve to know!”

She was right. He didn’t. Jack held up his hands, palms out. “Nicki, I am so sorry.” He made a move towards her, but she cut him off.

“For what? For never answering my letters, or returning my calls...or how about forgetting me so completely that you didn’t even recognize me until a few minutes ago?” She was on her feet now, her body quivering with anger.

“Fifteen years is a long time,” tempered Jack. He’d hurt her badly, but how could he explain? He

didn't want her pity. Nicki had been the centre of his world before his accident, and he'd far rather she thought him selfish and uncaring than tell her the truth.

By the time he'd been able to get his life back on track, it was too late.

The years had slipped by, and instead of sharing them with Nicki, he'd frozen her in time. And, now, when they should be wrapping themselves in each other's arms, they were glaring at each other like boxers in a ring.

"I never forgot you," said Jack.

A wistful expression flitted across Nicki's face and then disappeared.

Anger had given way to sadness. "Perhaps it would be best if Madison arranged an appointment for you with Mr. Gammage. I'm sure he would make an exception...everyone wants to see the Bedford Inn restored."

"Including you?" asked Jack.

"Including me."

Barely taking her eyes off Jack, Nicki slid her preliminary notes on the Bedford Inn into an envelope and scrawled Doug's name on the front. "Madison!"

Jack held Nicki's glare as the receptionist poked her head into the office behind him.

"How'd you like to knock off early and go for a drive?" Nicki held the envelope aloft and waggled it in Madison's direction.

"This isn't necessary, you know, Nicki."

“Oh, I think it is.” Nicki kept her eyes locked on his as Madison darted towards the desk. She plucked the package from her boss’s hand.

“Show Mr. Rutherford the door on your way out, would you please, Madison?” asked Nicki in the most sickly sweet voice she could conjure. “He was just leaving.”

There was nothing left to say.

Feeling like he’d been sucker-punched, Jack stood on the hot pavement and wondered what part of his brain had been so mesmerized by the curvaceous, sniffing, indignant woman he’d just spent half-an-hour with that he hadn’t been able to see her for who she was...clunky glasses and all.

It didn’t bear thinking about, not until he was back on his sailboat with a glass of scotch in his hand.

His rental car was up the street. With a parking ticket stuck beneath the wiper blade. The parking officer was two vehicles ahead, eyeing a blue pickup truck.

“Thanks a lot!” Jack hollered.

She turned around, flashed him a big smile and said, “Have a nice day!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Feeling more than a little foolish, Jack yanked the ticket off the windshield and unlocked the driver’s door. The day couldn’t get any worse.

No doubt Nicki felt the same way. She certainly

hadn't wasted any time trying to fob him off on Doug Gammage.

Easing into the traffic, Jack waved an apology to the officer as he joined the queue of traffic along Main Street. The town of Eastport was always busy this time of year. He tagged along then headed northeast to where the road skirted the sparkling waters of Coldwater Bay. The Bedford Inn lay off to his right, its former glory hidden behind a curtain of overgrown rhododendrons and wild grape vines.

Skirting the Inn, Jack followed the dusty access road down to the shoreline where his thirty-two-foot sailboat was moored. Here, with the cliff at its back, the bay formed a natural harbour protecting her inhabitants from the worst of the westerly winds that periodically whipped across the county with gale-force strength.

Rather like the wrath of Nicki Hamilton.

Parking next to a clump of willow trees, Jack made his way down the wooden steps to the dock below.

The Sea Hawk was the closest Jack had ever come to having a permanent home of his own. All the others had been short-term, apartments in Aberdeen, Scotland, visits to his mother and current step-father in New York, small efficiencies he'd rented here and there as he took advantage of company flights to places like Stockholm and Brussels and Amsterdam. But the novelty of the vagabond had worn off. He was nearing the age

when working fourteen-hour days was not what he wanted out of life.

He automatically checked the Sea Hawk's lines as he swung onboard. At first glance, everything seemed secure and then Jack caught a brief flicker of movement from below decks.

Roy.

Exhaling slowly, Jack went through the hatch and down the ladder. His cousin was sprawled at the table in the galley sipping a glass of his scotch. He loved the guy, but he could have done with a little peace and quiet right now.

"Help yourself," drawled Jack.

Roy pointed to the pile of papers on the table. "Thought you might be needing these."

Jack reached for a glass. "As a matter of fact, I do. I went to the accountant's today." He poured himself a healthy measure of scotch and slid onto the bench across from Roy. No point in revisiting the decline of their inheritance. They were both guilty of neglect. "Do you remember Nicki?"

"The Wilcox kid?"

"Yeah. She's at Gammage's for the summer."

Jack swirled the amber liquid in his glass and took a long slow sip. He could see Roy eyeing the half-empty bottle. He just had to bide his time, Jack realized, and then Roy would fill in the blanks.

"Mother was a real looker," Roy said eventually. "Married a guy with a car dealership. Next thing you know, their name's Hamilton and they're living

in Toronto.” He drained his glass and reached for the bottle. “Guess you’d bugged off by then.”

Jack scrubbed his forehead. He’d known so little about Nicki’s life. He’d been an arrogant nineteen-year-old with a wealthy family and a football scholarship.

He had to make things right with Nicki.

The cottage Doug and Ellen had found for her was perfect, thought Nicki as she nosed her small car up against the split rail fence at the end of the laneway. Far enough from town for privacy and close enough to not feel isolated. But what a day. Nicki cut the ignition and rested her forehead against the top of the steering wheel.

She’d overslept, woken up with a thick head, courtesy of the cold remedy she had tried the night before; she’d taken twice as long as she normally would have to prepare an annual report and then, at the end of the afternoon, just when she was looking and feeling her worst, in walks Jack Rutherford and turns her life upside down. Again.

Without even knowing it.

Nicki straightened up, grabbed her bag and got out of the car.

As she crossed the yard, a pair of Monarch butterflies flitted by, their distinctive black and orange markings a delightful contrast against the deep green of the shrubbery flanking the cottage’s back door. Nicki felt her spirits rise. Let Jack

sort himself out; she had the rest of the summer to enjoy. And if not, she'd be back in Toronto by September, older, wiser and finally free of the past.

There was one small glitch. All she had to do was get Jack out of her mind and out of her heart.

And, while she was at it, she thought ruefully as she opened the screen and unlocked the door, out of any sexual fantasies she might have for the rest of her life involving ruggedly handsome men with rock-hard biceps, killer blue eyes and an instinctive sensuality that begged for attention.

As if.

The screen door slapped shut behind her.

Kicking off her high-heeled sandals, Nicki padded barefoot into the kitchen. Another sneeze threatened. She dropped her bag on the counter and snagged a tissue just as a major blast of air exploded from her nose. "Aachoo!"

And how sexy was that!

Little Nicki Wilcox makes a dramatic return to Bedford County as Nicki Hamilton, chartered accountant, and all-time winner of the most ill-timed lovers' reunion imaginable.

Sniff, sniff. Boo, hoo. Just have a glass of nice cold wine, enjoy the view and stop feeling sorry for yourself!

A few minutes later, changed and curled up in a wicker chair, Nicki sat listening to the waves roll in as she sipped her chardonnay. The beach had been a rarely visited and magical place for an only, lonely child, but she'd loved it, especially

on winter walks with her mother when the force of the waves would drive the sand back onto the beach. It would freeze into icy dunes of caramel-coloured snow, perfect for climbing and slaying mythical dragons.

But not today.

Today was all wind and sand and hot summer sun.

Just like it was fifteen years ago. When she used to lie on the public beach and dream about a future with Jack. She pictured them living together in a cozy little apartment. They'd both have part-time jobs. Jack would be in his final year at college and she would be in her first. There would be candlelight dinners and trips to the library. They would study together and take walks in the park, planning their family and arguing softly about whether they should have two children or four.

The grownup Nicki snorted. She knew real life didn't play that way. So why leap from her chair when she heard her phone ringing in the distance?

Because she could fool herself all she liked; she was not over Jack Rutherford after all, not by any stretch of the imagination.

Grabbing her purse off the kitchen counter, Nicki dug out her phone and checked the screen before answering. "Hi, Mom, how are you?"

"I'm fine. What about you?" Christine's rich voice held a note of concern. "How's the cold?"

“Improving,” Nicki replied. “Where are you guys?”

“Still at the cottage,” her mother answered. “Your father has decided, in his infinite wisdom, that we now need a screened-in porch.”

Nicki smiled and leaned against the counter.

Having sold their car dealership a year ago, Christine and Jim Hamilton had become bona fide snowbirds, spending six months of the year at their property on Georgian Bay and the other six in Florida. They also kept a small condo in Toronto for their not infrequent trips to town, but Jim Hamilton needed to keep busy. Nicki missed them terribly – family was everything to her. But it was time to get on with her own life, and answering Doug’s call for help had been the perfect start. Until today.

“Despite the sniff I think I just heard, you do sound a bit better than you did on the weekend,” Christine was saying. “Did you try that cold medicine?”

Nicki ran her fingers through her unwashed hair and shuddered. “Yeah, it was so good I slept through my alarm.”

“Well, you know what grandma used to say...”

“...a summer cold is like a summer storm. One big blow and it’s all over. With hindsight, I think that was a very sneaky way to get me to blow my nose.”

“You were a snotty kid,” laughed Christine, “we had to do something...how’s the job going by the way? Keeping you busy?”

“The county is booming. Doug must have at least a couple hundred clients.” *Make that two hundred-and-one.* Nicki paused. “Mom...” she began, “...do you remember a guy named Roy Harper? He’d be in his mid-forties by now.”

Her question resulted in a terse silence on the other end of the line. “Sort of...why?”

“Just wondering...”

“Just wondering has never been your style, Nicki.”

“His name came up at work today.”

“Really. In what way?”

It was on the tip of Nicki’s tongue to tell her mother about Jack, but if she did, she would also have to confess that Jack had not known who she was at first. And that was a hurt Nicki would rather keep to herself.

“Oh, a new client connected to the Bedford Inn. Roy’s running the marina next to it.”

“Good for him,” was all she got back. In Christine-speak that meant she had nothing more she wanted to say. They chitty-chatted for a few more minutes, and after a quick word with her father, Nicki said good-bye.

Her mother hadn’t found true happiness until she was in her thirties. And when she did, she hit pay dirt. Jim Hamilton was a definite keeper. A man who put family first even when it came to raising another man’s unclaimed child. Nicki hoped that someday a man like that would come into her life.

Lost in thought, Nicki checked her voice mail. Doug's wife, Ellen, had called.

"So, Nicki darling," Ellen began, her voice message oozing curiosity. "What's this I hear about a tall, dark stranger riding into town?"

Nicki smiled. Ellen Gammage was quite possibly the only woman in the world capable of playing the vamp at seven-months-pregnant – and making it work.

"Okay," Ellen was saying, "it's six-fifteen and you're not home yet, soooo...either you are putting in some serious overtime, which you're not because I called the office, or you're out socialising with one of your new clients...nudge, nudge, wink, wink."

Madison must have spilled the beans, not that she would have been able to resist. Ellen was on bed rest and dying for gossip.

She'd love Jack, thought Nicki, as she deleted Ellen's message. But only because she desperately wanted Nicki to have what she had. A great guy, a loving family, and two more babies on the way.

She'd call Ellen back in the morning, Nicki decided. When she didn't feel so raw.

Coming back to Bedford had always been a risk, but she hadn't expected to ever see or hear from Jack Rutherford again. And she'd been unforgiving. Her heart had been broken so long ago, she'd almost forgotten how painful it could be, and now her ego was bruised as well. Yet here she was, clutching her phone like a lovelorn teenager.