
IN LOVE WITH A
STRANGER

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Chapter 1

MADDY WATCHED as a well-dressed man who looked to be in his late thirties opened the front door of Gates Realty and walked in. As a realtor she worked with a variety of people every day and had gotten quite good at accurate first impressions, and her radar was telling her now that this handsome man was used to having his own way. It wasn't that he looked arrogant or demanding, but something about his body language said he was to be taken seriously.

The receptionist had stepped out for an errand, so Mandy rose and hurried towards the newcomer.

"Hello," she said with a smile. "Welcome to Gates Realty. My name is Maddy. May I help you with something?"

"I hope so," replied the tanned newcomer who looked even more handsome from close up. "I'd like to buy a house."

That was interesting. Most people first said they'd like to look at houses, but this man cut right to the chase and announced he'd like to buy one.

Maddy's smile broadened and she motioned with her hand.

“I can certainly help you with that. Why don’t we go sit down and talk.”

She pointed him to a comfortable chair in front of her desk and then sat down herself.

“I see your last name is Gates,” said the man as he looked at the name plate in front of him. “Is this your realty?”

“My parents are the brokers,” she replied. “Unfortunately they’re at a convention in Miami or I’d introduce you.”

She opened a new screen on her computer and then said, “Can I have your name, please?”

“Nick Loren, L-O-R-E-N.”

He reached into his inner pocket, took out a small silver case, and handed her a card.

Maddy took it but was surprised to not see the usual information on it... no job title, no address of any kind. It simply had his name and cell phone number. The card was of excellent quality, though, and it was engraved, not printed.

This Nick Loren was clearly not her average client, even for upscale Sarasota.

“So, why don’t you tell me what kind of house you’re looking for,” she said. “If we can get a few parameters down, it will make our search easier.”

She was acutely aware that her new client was watching her intently, further confirming her impression of him as a man who knew what he wanted. New clients usually looked around when they first arrived, checking everything out, but he was obviously ready to get down to business.

“Waterfront is a must,” he answered promptly. “I’ll need a dock for a fifty-five-foot boat, and room for an additional smaller boat would be a plus.”

“Okay,” Maddy said as she typed. “What else? Are there any areas in particular you’d like to look at?”

“I’m renting a place on Midnight Pass Road right now, so that type of neighborhood would probably work well.”

“I see,” said Mandy, smiling to herself. Gates Realty did a lot of work with upscale homes in the area, and houses on Midnight Pass could easily sell for several million dollars. Her impression of him as a man who got what he wanted had been spot on.

“I don’t need a huge place as I’m single and it won’t be my primary residence, but I would like some privacy,” he added as she typed.

“How about the house itself? How many bedrooms and bathrooms do you need, and are you looking for any particular size garage?”

Often clients looking for high-end homes had a good number of vehicles, either for their families or for a collection.

“A two-car garage is plenty, and frankly, as long as there’s space for visitors, I’m not too concerned about the bedrooms and baths. As I stated earlier, this won’t be a year-round residence. I would like a good pool, though, and also an exercise room.”

“What price range are you thinking of?”

Nick paused slightly but then said, “Whatever is required to get what I’m looking for, assuming of course the price is in line with neighborhood valuations.”

Maddy had occasionally worked with clients who claimed price wasn’t important but then quibbled and nit-picked over every dollar, but somehow she didn’t see this Nick Loren doing that. She suspected he would be an astute buyer but a straight-forward one.

She typed a bit more and then said, “Okay, let me run this information through the computer and see what properties we should look at. We’ll probably need to make appoint-

ments, though, so I can't guarantee we can see anything today."

A slight frown passed almost imperceptibly across his face, but he nodded slightly and said, "I understand."

Yes, he was definitely used to getting what he wanted, but he was courteous and accepted the situation.

"Can I get you some coffee or a cold drink while I do a quick search for properties?" she asked.

"Coffee would be nice, thank you. Black."

She got up to go get it but then turned back towards him.

"I should warn you, it's not the world's best coffee."

His face took on a look of amusement as he replied, "Florida coffee is an acquired taste. I'll be fine."

Maddy handed Nick a cup of black coffee and then sat down at her computer again, typed in some search requirements, and then looked back at her new client.

"So, where are you from?"

She'd noticed a faint accent in his speech, but it wasn't one she could place.

"I'm from a tiny border area in the southern Alps," he answered without giving a specific name.

"Oh." She paused momentarily and then asked, "You mean like France, or over by Italy or Austria?"

He looked surprised.

"You know your European geography. Yes, exactly that second area."

"So do you just vacation here?"

His face took on a guarded look as he answered, "Sometimes. I like water activities."

Maddy laughed.

"In spite of your words, I'm not *that* that good on European geography, but I'm pretty sure there are some great water places closer to home."

Nick smiled and gave a half nod.

“There are indeed, but many are gathering places for the glitterati. Florida has a very laid-back atmosphere that I prefer, especially here on the west coast.”

Maddy glanced at the beautifully cut sport coat Nick was wearing over a crisp golf shirt and thought that he didn't look like someone who would object to a bit of glitter, but then you never knew. In any case, she kept the thought to herself and instead turned back to see what results her search had produced.

“It looks like we've got several interesting properties to consider,” she said with a satisfied smile as she hit Print. “What does your schedule look like for visiting them? Is there anything I need to work around in making appointments?”

“I can be available whenever you need.”

“Good. Let me make a few calls and we'll set up our schedule.”

Maddy managed to get two appointments for the next day.

“If you give me your address, I'll pick you up at ten-thirty,” she said.

Nick hesitated briefly and then said, “How about if I meet you here?”

“It's more trouble for you. It's my job to make your search as easy as possible.”

“It's no trouble,” he replied. “I'll see you here tomorrow at ten-thirty.”

Maddy walked Nick to the door and then unobtrusively watched as he got into a metallic silver Porsche 911 parked in front. She wasn't a big car person, but she had an older brother who had spent years talking about the 911, so she knew that certain versions could run well over two hundred thousand dollars.

She found herself wondering about Nick's statement about the glitterati. His clothes, his car, even his engraved

card all seemed to fit right into the world he said he preferred to avoid. Her new client was definitely interesting!

She smiled to herself again. If this Nick Loren was as ready to do business as he appeared, she might well have a nice commission still coming this month.

It wasn't just the thought of the commission though that had caught her attention. She tried to always be strictly professional with her clients, but truth be told, it would be hard not to notice how good looking and physically fit Nick was.

She still thought it was strange to come all the way from Europe to the west coast of Florida for water activities. From what he'd said, he was fairly close to the whole Mediterranean area—the Greek islands... the Riviera... hell, there were even great lake resorts in the Alpine areas. Surely they weren't all full of the so-called glitterati.

Then she frowned as she realized that he hadn't really said exactly where he was from. He'd named a region, but not a country, which seemed like a strange way to identify your home. Was he Italian? Austrian? Even Slovenian? Would it be too rude of her to ask?

Maybe when they closed on a house she'd see where his bank was.

Meanwhile, how was she supposed to get her work done with visions of Nick Loren distracting her?

Nick was a bit distracted himself. His visit to Gates Realty had gone better than he'd expected. Or worse, depending on his point of view.

Maddy Gates had been very professional, and he fully expected to find a house reasonably quickly with her help.

She had also been strikingly good looking in a warm,

approachable way and represented everything he liked about the Florida West Coast. He knew he was making a snap judgment, but she didn't strike him as the kind of woman who lived for the latest fashion and being seen at the 'right' places. God knows he'd been around plenty of women like that his whole life, so maybe he'd developed a radar that allowed him to avoid such people when possible.

Nothing about Maddy had set off his radar, and he'd found himself watching her as she worked at her computer. She was beautiful, but in an unassuming way he found very attractive, and her smile seemed genuine, not something she'd practiced for hours in front of the mirror like some women he'd known. He could imagine her dangling her legs over the side of a boat or walking barefoot on the beach without complaining about her new pedicure.

Down boy, he thought to himself. You know nothing about her, and in any case, she's probably in some kind of relationship. Women like her don't sit unclaimed on the market.

On the market? He grimaced, thinking how unacceptable in today's world his last thought had been. Oh well, even if she was forbidden fruit, he could enjoy her company while they looked at houses.

He smiled to himself as an interesting idea crossed his mind. Maybe he should take a bit longer to find a house than he'd first planned. Spending several hours a day with Maddy Gates could be very pleasant.

He wondered briefly if the name Maddy was a nickname for something else, but his thoughts were interrupted by his cell phone, which he'd laid on the seat next to him. He glanced over at the screen and frowned slightly when he saw the caller's name. It was already mid-evening there, so he hoped nothing was wrong. He hit Talk and put it on speaker.

"Guten Abend, Vater. Wie geht es dir?"