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By Catherine Mann

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Now Malcolm is a world-famous billionaire dedicated to atoning for his sins. When he swoops back into Celia's life, he tells himself he only wants to protect her from recent threats. But the desire between them leaves them as breathless as teenagers. Will Celia ever forgive him? Maybe. If he can make today's pleasure erase yesterday's pain.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

USA Today bestseller Catherine Mann has over two million books in print in more than 20 countries with Silhouette Desire, Silhouette Romantic Suspense, HQN and other Harlequin lines. A five-time RITA finalist, she has won both the RITA and the Bookseller's Best Awards. Catherine resides in Florida with her Air Force aviator husband and their four children. FMI visit: <http://catherinemann.com>

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Midway through the junior-high choir's rehearsal of "It's a Small World," Celia Patel found out just how small the world could shrink.

She dodged left and right as half the singers—the female half—sprinted down the stands, squealing in fan-girl glee. Their footsteps rattled metal risers and squeaked on the gymnasium floor, the stampeding herd moving as one. All their energy focused on racing to the back of the gymnasium where *he* stood.

Malcolm Douglas.

Seven-time Grammy award winner.

Platinum-selling soft-rock star.

And the man who'd broken Celia's heart when they were both sixteen years old.

Celia hefted aside her music stand before the last of the middle-school girls rushed by, oblivious to her attempts to stop them. Identical twins Valentina and Valeria nearly plowed her down in their dash to the back. Already, a couple dozen students circled him. Two bodyguards shuffled their feet uncertainly while more squeals and giggles ricocheted into the rafters.

Malcolm raised a stalling hand to the ominous bodyguards while keeping his eyes locked on Celia, smiling that million-watt grin that had graced CD covers and promo shots. Tall and honed, he still had a hometown-boy-handsome appeal that hadn't dimmed. He'd merely matured—now polished with confidence and about twenty more pounds of whipcord muscle.

Success and chart-topping wealth probably didn't hurt.

She wanted him gone. For her sanity's sake, she *needed* him gone. But now that he was here, she couldn't look away.

He wore his khakis and designer loafers—sockless—with the easy confidence of a man comfortable in his skin. Sleeves rolled up on his chambray shirt exposed strong, tanned forearms and musician's hands.

Best not to think about his talented, nimble hands.

His sandy-brown hair was as thick as she remembered. It was still a little long, skimming over his forehead in a way that once called to her fingers to stroke it back. And those blue eyes—heaven help her—she

recalled well how indigo-dark they went just before he kissed her with the enthusiasm and ardor of a hormone-pumped teenager.

There was no denying he was all man now.

What in the hell was he doing here? Malcolm hadn't set foot in Azalea, Mississippi, since a judge crony of her father's had offered Malcolm the choice of juvie or military reform school nearly eighteen years ago. Since he'd left her behind—scared, *pregnant* and determined to salvage her life.

Even though he showed up regularly in the tabloids, seeing him in person after all these years was different. Not that she'd gone searching for photos of him. But given his popularity, she couldn't help but be periodically blindsided by glimpses of him. Worst of all, though, was hearing the sound of his voice crooning over the radio as she changed the station.

Now, across the room, he pressed a paper against his knee to sign an autograph for Valentina—or Valeria. No one could tell them apart, not even their mother sometimes. Totally beside the point, because watching Malcolm with the young girl twisted Celia's heart with what could have been if somehow, against the odds and all better judgment, they'd been able to keep and raise their baby.

But they weren't sixteen anymore, and she'd put aside reckless dreams the day she'd handed her newborn daughter over to a couple who could give the precious child everything Celia and Malcolm couldn't.

She threw back her shoulders and started toward the cluster across the gym, determined to get through this surprise visit with her pride in place. At least the nine boys in the choir were sitting on the risers, making the most of the chance to play with video games banned during class. She let that slide for now and zeroed in on the mini-mob collected by a rolling cart full of basketballs just under a red exit sign.

"Class, we need to give Mr. Douglas some breathing room." She closed in on the circle of girls, resisting the urge to smooth her hands down her sunshine-yellow sundress. She gently tapped Sarah Lynn Thompson's wrist. "And no pulling hair to sell online, girls."

Sarah Lynn dropped her hand to her side, a guilty flush spreading up her face.

Malcolm passed back the last of the autographs and tucked the pen in his shirt pocket. "I'm fine, Celia, but thanks for making sure I don't go prematurely bald."

"Celia? *Celia*?" asked Valeria. Or was it Valentina? "Miss Patel, you know him? Oh, my God! How? Why didn't you tell us?"

She didn't intend to delve too deeply into those murky waters. "We went to high school together." His name was etched on the sign that proclaimed "Welcome to Azalea, Home of Malcolm Douglas" as if the town hadn't once tried to send him to jail because of her. "Now, let's get back to the risers, and I'm sure Mr. Douglas will answer your questions in an orderly fashion since he disrupted our rehearsal."

She shot him a censorious look that merely prompted an unrepentant grin in return.

Sarah Lynn stayed glued to Celia's side. "Did you two date?"

The bell rang—thank God—signaling the end of class and no time for questions after all. "Students, line up

for your last class."

And wouldn't you know, both the principal and the secretary stood in the doorway as starstruck as their students in spite of the fact that both ladies were happily married and grandmothers. How had he gotten into the gym/auditorium without causing a riot?

Celia led the students to the double door, her sandals slapping the wood floor. Step by step, she realized the pair of guards inside were only a part of Malcolm's security detail. Four more muscle-bound men stood outside in the hallway while a large limo lurked beyond the glassed front entrance. Additional cars with majorly tinted windows were parked in front of and behind the stretch limo.

Malcolm shook hands with the principal and secretary, making small talk as he introduced himself, ironic as all get-out since at least half of the free world knew his face. "I'll leave autographed photos for your students."

Sarah Lynn called over her shoulder, dragging her feet on the way down the hall, "For all of us?"

"Miss Patel will let me know how many."

The last of the students stepped into the corridor, the door swooshing closed after the administrators left. How had their departure managed to suck all the air out of the massive gym along with them? She stood an arm's reach away from Malcolm, his two bodyguards looming just behind him.

So much for privacy.

"I assume you're here to see me?" Although she couldn't for the life of her fathom why.

"Yes, I am, darlin'," he drawled, his smooth baritone voice stroking over her senses like fine wine. "Is there somewhere we can talk without being interrupted?"

"Your security detail makes that rather moot, don't you think?" She smiled at the bulky duo, who stared back at her with such expressionless faces they could have been auditioning for positions as guards at Buckingham Palace.

Malcolm nodded to the stony-faced pair and without a word they both silently stepped out into the hall. "They'll stay outside the door, but they're here for your protection as much as mine."

"My protection?" She inched a step away to put a little distance between herself and the tempting scent of his aftershave. "I seriously doubt your fans will start worshipping me just because I knew you aeons ago."

"That's not what I meant." He scratched the back of his neck as if choosing his words carefully. "I hear via the grapevine there have been some threats made against you. A little extra security's a good thing, right?"

Perhaps some security from the temptation of having him around disrupting her wellordered life, not to mention her hormones. "Thanks, but I'm good. It's just some crank calls and some strange notes. That kind of thing happens all too often when my dad has a high-profile case."

Although how in the world had Malcolm heard about it? Something uneasy shifted inside her, a stirring of panic she quickly squashed down. She refused to let Malcolm's appearance here yank the rug out from under

her blessedly routine existence. She refused to give him the power to send her pulse racing.

Damn it all, she was a confident adult and this was her turf. Still, her nerves were as tight as piano strings. Fighting back the urge to snap at him for turning her world upside down, she folded her arms and waited. She wasn't an indulged, impulsive only child any longer. She wasn't a terrified, pregnant teen.

She wasn't a catatonic, broken young woman caught in the grips of a postpartum depression so deep her life had been at risk.

Her road back to peace had been hard-won with the help of the best shrinks money could buy. She refused to let anything or anyone—especially not Malcolm Douglas—threaten the future she'd built for herself.

Loving Celia Patel had changed his life forever. The jury was still out as to whether that had been a good or bad thing.

Regardless, their lives were linked. For nearly eighteen years, Malcolm had been able to keep his distance from her. But he'd never mastered the art of looking away, even when they were a couple of continents apart. Which was what had brought him here now, knowing too much about her life, too much about a threat to her safety that sent old protective urges into high gear. He just had to figure out how to persuade her to let him back into her life so he could help her. And by helping her, he could atone for how he'd wrecked their lives. Maybe then he could finally let go of a glorified puppy love that after so many years he doubted was real.

Although given his physical reaction to her at the moment, the memories of their attraction were 100 percent real. Once again, desire for Celia Patel threatened to knock him flat on his ass.

Hell, no, he hadn't been able to forget her even while across the world singing to sold-out stadiums. He certainly couldn't tear his eyes off her now when she walked only a step ahead. Her wavy dark hair hung loose halfway down her back, swaying with each step. The bright yellow sundress hugged her curves the way his hands once had.

He followed her across the gymnasium floor, the same building where they'd gone to school together. He'd performed on that stage in the junior-high choir to be with her. Taunts hadn't bothered him—until one stupid little idiot had said something off-color about Celia. Malcolm had decked him and gotten suspended for three days. Small price to pay. There was nothing he wouldn't do then for Celia.

Apparently that hadn't changed. One of his contacts had gotten wind of a case on her judge father's docket, a high-profile drug case with a kingpin who'd drawn a target on Celia's back. Malcolm had notified local authorities, but they hadn't bothered looking into the evidence he'd gifted them with. Evidence that detailed a money trail connecting a hit man to the suspected drug dealer.

Local authorities didn't like outsiders and were stubborn about their ability to handle matters on their own. Someone had to do something, and apparently that someone was Malcolm. Nothing, absolutely nothing, could derail him from his plan to protect Celia. He had to do this in order to make up for all the ways he'd let her down eighteen years ago.

She opened the door by the stage steps, her spine stiff and straight as she entered her small office lined with shelves surrounding a tiny desk. Musical scores and boxes of instruments packed the room—everything from triangles to xylophones to bongo drums. The smell of paper, ink and leather mixed with the familiar praline scent of Celia.

She spun to face him, her hair fanning gently, a strand caressing over his wrist. "It's more of a closet really, where I store my cart, instruments and paperwork. I travel from classroom to classroom, or we meet in the gym."

He adjusted the fit of his watch to cover rubbing away the sensation of her hair skimming his skin. "Just like the old days. Not much has changed here."

The police department was every bit as slack as before, swayed by the person with the most influence.

"Some things are different, Malcolm. *I* am different," she said in a cool tone he didn't recognize at all.

And he was a man who specialized in the timbre of the voice.

"Aren't you going to chew me out for disrupting your class?"

"That would be rude of me." Her fingers toyed restlessly with the ukulele on her desk, notes lightly filling the air. "Meeting you was obviously the highlight of their young lives."

"But obviously not the highlight of yours." Leaning back, he tucked his hands in his pockets to keep from stroking the strings along with her. Memories taunted him of how they'd played the guitar and piano together, their shared love of music leading to a shared love of each other's bodies. Had his mind exaggerated those memories into something more than they really were? So much time had passed since he'd seen her that he couldn't be sure.

"Why are you here?" The sight of her slim fingers moving along the strings damn near mesmerized him. "You don't have a performance scheduled in the area."

"You follow my tour schedule?" His eyes snapped up to her face.

She snorted on a laugh. "The whole freakin' town follows your every breath. What you eat for breakfast. Who you dated. I would have to be blind and deaf not to hear what the town has to say about their wonder boy. But personally? I'm no longer a charter member of the Malcolm Douglas fan club."

"Now, there's the Celia I remember." He grinned.

She didn't. "You still haven't answered my question. Why are you here?"

"I'm here for you." His libido shouted a resounding echo. Damn it all, why did she have to be even more lushly sensual now than she had been before?

"For me? I think not," she said coolly, her fingers still lightly stroking the ukulele with instinctive sensuality, as if she savored the feel of every note as much as the sound. "I have plans for tonight. You should have called ahead."

"You're much more level now than you were before."

Her expression flickered with something he couldn't quite grasp before she continued, "I was a teenager then. I'm an adult now, with adult responsibilities. So if we could speed this up, please?"

"You may not have kept track of my schedule, but I kept up with yours." He knew every detail of the threatening phone calls, the flat tire and the other threats increasing in frequency by the day. He also knew she'd only told her father half of what happened. The thought of each threat chilled Malcolm's ardor and ramped up his protectiveness. "I know you finished your music degree with honors from the University of Southern Mississippi. You've been teaching here since graduation."

"I'm proud of my life, thank you very much, far more than can be summed up in a couple of sentences. Did you come to give me a belated graduation gift? Because if not, you can go finish signing autographs."

"Let's cut to the chase, then." He shoved away from the door and stood toe-to-toe with her, just to prove to himself he could be near her and not haul her against him. "I came here to protect you."

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