

## Father's Day

Alexa and Nick from *The Marriage Bargain*

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“Surprise!”

Nick jerked up out of bed and blinked. The three females in front of him were the backbone of everything he held dear, and everything good and beautiful in the world.

But the tray they held contained a leaking, smashed up mess of food he doubted the most adventurous eater on the planet wouldn't touch. “What's this?”

Lilly gave a huge grin, her sparkling white baby teeth all still firmly intact. “It's Father's Day, daddy! Happy Father's Day! We made you breakfast.”

Maria jumped up and down, her chubby legs and arms shaking with excitement. “Eat, eat!”

With a laugh, he lifted Maria up on the bed where she perched by his legs. His gaze rose to his wife. Her ocean blue eyes sparkled with mischief as she lay the tray in front of him. “*Buon Appetito*, my love. I thought it would be extra special if the children really cooked it themselves as part of your present.”

Oh, yeah. She was so gonna get it later.

He pondered the mishmash of runny eggs with a few white sparkling shells included for crunch. The toast was soggy and pretty much dipped in a tub of butter. That move was all Maria, who seemed obsessed with finding the butter at the table and smearing it on everything she could find. Including herself. He pointed to the charred, pointy thing lying in the center. “What's that, girls?”

“Bacon! You love bacon, right Daddy?”

Alexa sputtered a half laugh. The thing could kill someone, it was so overcooked and burnt he was afraid to touch it. Still, when he caught the proud expressions on his girls faces, his heart did that weird flip flop thing. “It looks delicious, I can't wait to eat it.”

Maria clapped her hands and waited. Lily pointed to the fork, knife and napkin to his right. Alexa gave him that look that always made him want to tumble her right there, full of challenge and spice and humor. Ah, hell, he had to choke it down no matter which way he looked at it.

Nick picked up the fork and prepped for battle. “Can't wait.”

It got better after the first few bites, but he figured his tongue had numbed out by then anyway. He ate most of the plate, while his daughters chattered about every step they had taken to prepare him a meal fit for a king.

Or, at least a king ready to be poisoned for his heir to take over.

He dove for the juice to wash the whole concoction down and choked on a pit and some nasty pulp. “Did you squeeze the oj yourself too, girls?”

“Yes! Mommy helped!”

“Oh, goody.”

That made them giggle so he drank the rest. Too bad. He’d had his eye on that new watch Michael owned, which was a bit metro for him but he’d been lusting after it for months. Way too indulgent to just go buy himself.

Nick pushed the tray away. “I loved it,” he said with a serious face. “It’s the best breakfast I ever had.”

Lilly climbed on the bed and hugged him. Maria snuggled into his chest. He breathed in the sweetness of their skin, touched their silky hair, and wondered how he’d gotten so damn lucky.

“The girls made their own cards for you too. Let’s clean up and you can read them downstairs. Give daddy some time to shower and get ready for the day.”

Lilly and Maria scrambled off the bed, too young to realize cleaning up was a chore rather than a fun activity, and raced out the door. His wife picked up the tray with a smirk on those bee stung lips.

“You’re giving me payback for mother’s day, aren’t you?”

One brow arched. “Whatever do you mean? I remember how relaxing it was. Imagine my surprise when I prepared for a day at the spa and got to host a party for twenty five of our closest friends?”

He winced. Yeah, not his best moment. “Sorry, babe. I figured you’d like a celebration with everyone included. I got it catered.”

“Hmm. There were over a dozen children running around like mad, it rained all day so we were stuck inside, and you hung by the bar with your buddies while I ran around like a nut. Real fun.”

“Ok, lesson learned. You’re not gonna drag me to a children’s carnival as punishment now are you?”

She laughed, the husky sound spilling across his ears like an aphrodisiac. “Nope, eating that breakfast was good enough for me. Come down when you’re ready.”

She leaned over and kissed him, a slow, sweet leisurely kiss that still stole his breath and contained the promise of...everything. “You know that thong corset thing Maggie got me and I refused to wear?”

He frowned. “Yeah?”

“Mom’s babysitting tonight. Perhaps, I’ll try it on for you and you give me your opinion?”

He rose to full staff, ready to play, but with a wicked laugh she danced just out of reach and sashayed out the room. “Later.”

Nick shook his head, pushed back the covers, and headed toward the bathroom. A flash of red caught his eye, and he turned to find a square black box on the bureau with a big bow. After a quick shake, he slowly unwrapped it.

The Italian designer luxury watch sat amidst the velvet backdrop, the tiny rows of diamonds both subtle and elegant. It had so many buttons and features it would take him a day to read the instruction manual. Excitement lit up. He ripped open the small card propped up next to it.

*“To the man I loved since I was sixteen, and to the father I always knew you would be, you are everything. Happy Father’s Day. Love, Al.”*

He blinked back the ridiculous, wimpy sting behind his eyes, reclaimed his man card, and headed to change.

Best. Father’s. Day. Ever.