

Fern's Fancies



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Excerpt

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CHAPTER ONE

Fern's hazel eyes widened as she looked from the calendar on the wall to the message on her computer screen.

Date: August 9, 1997 Time: 1645 CDT
To: Fern Tate
 San Antonio Branch Manager
From: Pendleton Morgenthal, III
 Southwest Regional Manager
Subject: San Antonio inspection visit

Message: As the new Southwest Regional Manager, I will be in San Antonio for an inspection of your branch, August 13-August 28. I'm arriving on American flight 682 at San Antonio International Airport at 2:35 P.M., Tuesday, August 13. Pick me up at the airport, and be prepared to meet with me at any time. The purpose of this visit is to integrate Fern's Fancies into an effective branch of Ultimate Plant Service, Inc.

Today was August 13. She read the e-mail message again and looked at her watch. Almost 1:30—she'd have to hurry. She didn't want to be late and face the wrath of her new boss. His memo made him sound demanding—he'd probably be even worse in person.

After she printed out the message, she hurried into the reception area. "Maria, I just can't get used to having our computer hooked into the one in the main office. I forgot to check my e-mail yesterday, and I almost missed this message. It came in late Friday."

Maria quickly scanned the message. "Oh, Fern, you'd better leave right now. I'll get the warehouse crew to help me straighten up and make sure everything's in good shape around here by the time you get back."

Only a few weeks before, Fern had sold her small interior landscape company, Fern's Fancies, to Ultimate Plant Service, Inc. Since then she had struggled to cope with the change. She'd been so excited and proud when a large and well-respected national corporation approached her to buy her company. She hadn't realized how much her business would change.

Thank goodness, she finally remembered to check her messages. She shuddered to imagine what would happen if she didn't show up at the airport at the appointed time to meet Mr. High and Mighty.

An hour later, she stood in the terminal counting to ten for the third time. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists. She couldn't believe that the company expected her to interrupt her workday to pick up this executive. She knew he had to be pompous, supercilious, and downright obnoxious. He'd probably never watered a plant in his life.

The inconsiderate snob didn't even have the decency to be on the flight. She double-checked the sign at the gate. This was flight 682. But no Mr. Pendleton Morgenthal, III. All the passengers had deplaned, and he definitely wasn't there.

Although she'd never met him, she knew exactly what he'd look like. His name and the tone of that e-mail message created a perfect picture in her mind. Pendleton Morgenthal—what a name. She had a clear mental image of a dapper little middle-aged man wearing a suit and vest with a tie in spite of the south Texas heat and casual lifestyle.

He'd greet her, oh so properly, in a high-pitched voice and insist she take him directly to the office. Then he would proceed to tell her all the changes she had to make in the operation of her business. Okay, so it wasn't exactly her business anymore, but

Wait a minute. Why was she angry? So she wasted a couple of hours on this fruitless trip to the airport. She had a reprieve. Whatever the insufferable Mr. Morgenthal's reasons for not being here, it was fortunate for her that he wasn't. Now she could get back to work without interference.

She took one more look around just to be sure. No one was left in the gate area except one man. Oh, but what a man. Even from a distance, she could tell he was drop-dead gorgeous, the most delicious hunk she'd ever seen. With guys like that wandering around loose, why did she have to deal with the Pendleton Morgenthals of the world?

She couldn't keep herself from staring. Fortunately he was looking in the opposite direction so he didn't see her gawking. His blond hair was longer than she usually liked to see on a man, but on him it was perfect. She'd thought she liked dark-haired men, but now she wondered why she hadn't realized how attractive a blond man could be. Especially when he had broad shoulders embraced by a stretchy black polo shirt. His low-slung jeans looked like they were painted on those lean hips and muscular thighs and . . .

She felt herself grow warmer, and her fingers itched to run through his glorious hair. Suddenly he looked in her direction, and eyes the color of coffee with just a touch of cream locked with hers. "Well, Fern, it's about time you noticed me. I'm Pen Morgenthal."

That magnetic voice set her nerve endings on fire.

What was the matter with her? This was Pendleton Morgenthal! This was her imaginary dapper little middle-aged man? He wasn't dapper or little or middle-aged. He exuded virility. Far from small, he stood over six feet tall, and he had shoulders broad enough to carry the largest tree her company had ever handled. He was closer to her own age of thirty than anything that could be remotely called middle-age.

This was her new boss, for heaven's sake. The new boss who was so obnoxious he might make her regret selling her company to a huge conglomerate. She didn't think executives of mega-companies like Ultimate Plant Service, Inc. had mesmerizing eyes or magnetic voices. She expected regional managers ...

"Fern? You are Fern Tate, aren't you?" There was that voice again, talking to her. "You're wearing a Fern's Fancies' tee-shirt, and Fern is supposed to meet me. If you're not Fern, who are you?"

"I'm Fern." Good grief. Her voice squeaked. Her voice never squeaked, just like she never ogled men or created romantic fantasies just from hearing a voice. She cleared her throat. "Yes, I'm Fern. Nice to meet you, Mr. Morgenthal. I'm sorry I didn't recognize you immediately."

His lips curved upward in a small smile. "You can drop the Mr. Morgenthal. Every time I hear that, I look around for my father. I'm Pen to all my co-workers. Now, where's the baggage claim?"

"This way," she said as she stepped in front of him. If she led the way, she wouldn't have to talk to him. She just needed time to regain her equilibrium. She was a sensible, pragmatic businesswoman, not some teenager with a crush on a rock star. She'd be back to normal when they reached the baggage claim.

Pen enjoyed the view as he followed Fern through the terminal. He hadn't expected to be punched in the gut with his reaction to her. He was glad she hadn't seen him until he'd had time to recover from his first sight of her.

He grinned to himself as he watched the sway of her shapely hips in front of him. She might think that uniform of jeans and a polo shirt with the company logo was businesslike, but the body the uniform covered was as sultry as her voice.

Oh, her voice hadn't been so sultry just now. She must be nervous about meeting the new regional manager. But he'd heard her on the speaker phone as he walked into his boss's office a few days ago. How could a woman discussing business over a speaker phone sound so enticing? He'd wondered what she looked like ever since. The reality was better than the fantasies he'd created.

He wished she didn't have that ink black hair wrapped up in some kind of bun. The curls escaping around her face were driving him wild, and he wondered if her hair was as long as he imagined.

What was he doing? He couldn't afford to have lustful fantasies about this woman. He was here to integrate the operation of Fern's Fancies into the Ultimate Plant Service family.

He didn't have time to get involved with a woman, and if he did, it wouldn't be with a woman who reported to him. His career was too important to risk a complaint of sexual harassment when the relationship soured.

Pen was so engrossed in his thoughts and the rhythmic sway of those curvy hips that he didn't realize they had reached the baggage claim area until the mesmerizing swaying suddenly stopped. Most of the passengers had already claimed their bags, so it was easy to spot his tartan plaid garment bag and soft-sided suitcase. He already had a briefcase in one hand, so he set the bags beside the carousel and looked around for a skycap. Before he realized what was happening, Fern had picked up his bags and started walking toward the exit.

He hurried to catch up with her.

"Where are your claim checks?" she asked as she stopped at the checkpoint.

He showed his tickets to the attendant, but he spoke to Fern. "I can find a skycap. You don't have to carry my bags."

He tried to take the garment bag from her, but she held onto it. "In case you've forgotten, I'm an interior landscaper. I carry heavy plants and trees all the time. Carrying a couple of bags of clothes won't hurt me."

"You're not on the job now."

"I'm not? Did I imagine that e-mail message telling me to meet you?"

He laughed. "Okay. You're on the job. I just meant carrying my bags wasn't part of your job." He motioned her forward with a sweeping gesture. "But, hey, if you feel like carrying bags, by all means, be my guest."

A blast of hot air hit them as they left the terminal. Fern led the way toward the parking garage across the street. She had the trunk open and the bags stowed by the time Pen reached the car. He held onto his briefcase.

"Where to?" she asked when they were both seated in the car.

"I'd better check into the hotel." He opened his briefcase to look at his itinerary. "I'm staying at the San Antonio Fiesta."

Fern nodded and drove her beige Chevy out of the parking lot. When she stopped at the toll booth, Pen handed her the money to pay for the parking.

"Actually the hotel is close to the office, so it'll be convenient," she said. "I'm very familiar with the hotel. It happens to be one of our largest accounts." She hoped the tone of her voice was proud, rather than boastful. The hotel was their premier plant leasing account.

"You don't think I'd spend Ultimate's money on a hotel that would use it to pay our competitors, do you?"

"Oh, you mean you checked the client list before making reservations?" she asked.

"Well, I didn't do it personally." His sensual lips lifted in a smile. "I can always count on Melissa."

Why did she feel a pang of jealousy? "Who's Melissa?"

Pen put the paper back in the briefcase and closed it. "You should know who Melissa is. She's an administrative assistant in the corporate office. You've spoken with her several times since Ultimate bought your company."

"Oh, sure, I know Melissa," Fern answered.

How stupid could she be? She spoke to Melissa on the phone almost daily and faxed her weekly reports. Of course, Melissa would be the one to make his travel arrangements. Why had she immediately wondered if this Melissa he could always count on was his girlfriend?

Why should she care, anyway? He was just her boss. His personal life wasn't any of her business.

"Melissa is the best administrative assistant in the whole corporation, and that's saying a lot. Ultimate is very picky, especially in the corporate office. We hire only the best." He set his briefcase in the seat between them and looked at her with a cocky, lopsided grin. "And, of course, I'm the best regional manager."

Fern ignored his comment. "I thought you had just become regional manager."

"Fern, Fern, Fern." His head moved from side to side each time he said her name. "Didn't you study the organization chart you got from corporate development? I was Northeast Regional Manager for seven years, which makes me the most experienced regional manager at Ultimate. That's why I got the Southwest Region. With all the acquisitions in the works now, it'll be the largest region within the next year."

She hadn't realized he was so important. "I'm duly impressed."

Pen's husky laughter seemed to vibrate throughout Fern's body. "Don't be yet. So far, the one and only branch of Ultimate Plant Service in the Southwest Region is Fern's Fancies in San Antonio."

Fern glanced at him in surprise. "I didn't know that. I thought Ultimate had several deals going in this area at the same time they bought my company."

"Actually, we did and do. We're about to close on companies in Dallas, Houston, Austin, Albuquerque, and Oklahoma City. Yours just happened to be the first."

She breathed a silent sigh of relief that the hotel was now in sight.

"I hope you won't be disappointed in Fern's Fancies," she said in a whisper. Then louder, she continued, "Here's the hotel. Do you want me to wait in the car?"

"Of course not. Come on in the lobby while I register. It's too hot to stay out here."

A bellman waited by the car with a luggage cart. Fern opened the trunk and stood back. Pen pointed to the bags in the trunk, but he continued to hold onto his briefcase. When Fern looked at it with her eyebrows arched in a question, he said, "My laptop computer is in here. I always carry it myself."

She followed him into the lobby. He stepped up to the registration desk and introduced himself.

"Oh, Mr. Morgenthal. We didn't realize you were traveling with a companion. We put you in a single room. Would you like a double or a king?"

He looked from the desk clerk to Fern and back to the clerk again. Then he winked at the desk clerk. "The single's fine."

Was the man crazy? Or was it her? Why did he let the desk clerk think they were together?

Fern's face and neck burned with embarrassment. This was too close to the fantasies she'd had earlier. She'd imagined being alone with Pen ...

He finished registering. He handed the bellman a tip and asked him to take his bags to the room.

"Okay. It's time for me to take my first look at Fern's Fancies."

During the drive to the office, she pointed out the buildings along the way that had plants serviced by Fern's Fancies. "We maintain the plants in all the buildings between the hotel and the office."

"But our presence in the downtown market is far below expectations," Pen said. "That's the first item of business." His voice had turned serious.

Fern took a deep breath. She must remain calm. She must not lose her temper. This man was her boss. "San Antonio Foliage has had a monopoly on the downtown market for years. They were in business before we were, so they had the major downtown accounts locked up."

Although she was looking ahead at the road, she felt his eyes boring into her. "Nobody has a lock on any market," he said. "If anybody has a monopoly on any segment of the plantscape business in San Antonio, it will be Ultimate Plant Service. Is that understood?"

Omigosh. What if they were planning to bring somebody else in to run this office? Hadn't they agreed to keep her as manager? Thoughts raced through her head, and she couldn't remember whether or not her continued employment was part of the contract.

The offer from Ultimate had sounded so wonderful. She would continue to manage the company, and the national corporation would provide resources she couldn't. Together they would create the best interior landscape company in San Antonio. Together? What if they never really meant together? Were they planning to ease her out—maybe even push her out—and bring in someone else to run Fern's Fancies?

She forced her thoughts to the back of her mind as she pulled into the parking lot. "Here we are," she said, pointing to the sign in front of the building. "Fern's Fancies."

She parked her sedan and turned off the ignition.

“Actually, I'm ahead of myself,” Pen said. “The first priority is not the downtown market. The first thing we're doing is get rid of that awful name.” He picked up his briefcase and opened the car door. “The new sign for Ultimate Plant Service should have been delivered by now.”

Fern, usually the epitome of calm organization, dropped her keys as her hands began to shake. That awful name was her name.