

Nick's Baby Book Excerpt

Chapter One

Nick Leonetti eyed the people around him with a sense of impending doom. He adjusted his tie several times, feeling like a man at the gallows about to be hung. He hated ties. Whoever invented them must have had a sadistic mind he decided with a quick jerk on the knot. He glanced at his shoes and saw his reflection. "This is definitely not the Nick Leonetti I know," he grumbled to himself.

He surveyed the room. Stale cigarettes stashed in overflowing ashtrays, magazines strewn haphazardly on the coffee tables, humdrum music playing in the background, and an impatient man strumming his fingernails incessantly against the plate glass window of the receptionist desk reminded Nick of his mission.

A company picture hung on one wall, men in hard hats--reassuring Nick that he was applying at a sheet metal company. It was the only thing that reassured him.

True, the note had been vague. So, he didn't get a look at who sent it to his table the other night at his mother's birthday party at L'Allegria's Restaurant. So what? It was a job, wasn't it? And Nick needed a second job to accomplish his goal.

Jumping up, he intended to make a quick dash for the front office door, but halted when the secretary came into the room. "Mr. Leonetti, would you follow me please?"

He followed her down a long narrow hallway. The secretary opened another door for him, and quickly closed it behind him. He felt as though a dungeon door had slammed shut. He took in the room with a single glance. It appeared empty. A solid plate glass window lined one wall, providing a highlighted view of the area. The carpet, a deep plush mauve, surprised him. Pink carpet? The furniture echoed a cold modern art form of chrome, glass and black lacquer. Two tall black leather chairs adorned both sides of the wide expansive desk.

Not his style. No sir, not his style at all. He was out of here.

His hand on the doorknob stilled when he heard a woman's voice. Not just any voice, but a soft, sexy voice, the kind a man likes to hear in the heat of the night. Desire speared him like a hot sword aiming for his loins. Lord, it was just a voice, he scolded himself as he turned around slowly.

"Mr. Leonetti?" The woman whirled about in the leather chair to face him and abruptly stood. Small, delicate, and composed with an air of confidence, she stepped toward him, her hand extended.

She didn't take his breath away, but few women did that anymore. Nick's heartbeat returned to normal. She just didn't knock his socks off, and with a voice like that she should have. For a man that usually dated busty blondes, or redheads with figures like Venus statues, a sexy voice shouldn't have thrown him. Still, he admitted, God granted some with looks, some with brains, and some--with a voice. And she definitely had a voice.

"I assume you are here about the job?"

He nodded. The voice lied to him, played him for a sucker. It promised much more than this little lady could deliver.

Nick studied the woman. He faced straight lines, starched linen, and big black glasses that were so thick they distorted her eyes into two sunken wells of who knew what color. Even the color of her suit--a blah brown--didn't invite a second glance. Only her long, straight, golden brown hair, held by a clasp at the base of her neck, caught his attention. It looked like the only thing she didn't control. Little Miss Plain and Simple. Not all that bad, just not his type he conceded, with an inward grimace.

"Sorry you had to wait so long. I've had numerous interruptions this morning."

He clasped her hand. Her skin felt petal soft, but her grip firmed in his. More like the handshake of a man than a woman.

"That's okay."

"It's unfortunate, but unavoidable."

The intercom buzzed. She pivoted then hit the switch so hard the phone rattled. She looked delicate, but apparently she packed quite a punch. Nick smiled at her actions.

"What is it, Paula?"

The secretary's voice faltered. "Uh, Mr. Guyon is on line three, Ms. O'Sullivan."

"Tell him I'll call him back. And hold my calls for now, Paula, please." She waved Nick to the chair in front of her.

She snapped off the intercom and slumped into the chair, grabbed an odd object off the top of her desk, then turned away from Nick for a moment. He saw her shoulders bunch, her spine stiffen. He couldn't be certain about the object in her hand but it appeared to be some sort of baby rattle. Funny, he hadn't pictured her as the motherly type, more along the lines of Miss Goody-Two-Shoes, married to her job.

"Now, where were we?" Once again composed, she whirled about and glanced at Nick. He watched her lay the rattle down, gently. It could've been fine bone china the way she was handling it.

Unexpected awareness shot through Nick again at the sound of her voice, low and raspy. If she kept that up, he wouldn't be able to walk out of the room. How could a voice so sexy, belong to a woman so--bland? And yet, bland or not, she had his attention. Her voice and mannerisms caught him off guard.

Curiosity and unwelcome awareness forced Nick to notice her finer features. Not that he wanted to notice, but the need to find a reason for his reactions became necessary. She did have a peaches and cream complexion, thin brown brows that arched arrogantly at his stare, and full lush lips. He couldn't quite pull his gaze from her lips--undoubtedly one of her better features.

She returned his sensual glance, scanning every inch of him from his shoe tips to his thick head of black hair, without a trace of embarrassment. Nick didn't mind; he was used to assessing stares from women. Yet her examination of him went deeper than most, as though she were probing his mind and soul. What was she after?

Her lips slanted, capturing his attention again. Not overtly full, nor too thin, just well formed and dotted with a pale pink lipstick, barely noticeable. There were no laugh wrinkles around her eyes or mouth. This woman took life seriously. Too bad.

"Please make yourself comfortable, this--interview, might take a while."

He watched her every move, oddly fascinated. He wondered what she might taste like--sugar or vinegar.

He was definitely losing it. He'd never entangled himself with a boss-lady before. Hell, he'd never had a boss lady before. The guys down at the garage would get a kick out of this, if they knew.

Glancing at the pile of files on her desk, she set his aside as though it told her nothing. She tapped her fingernail on the desk. "Mr. Leonetti." She cleared her throat and waited until he looked straight at her. "May I call you Nick, or do you prefer Nicholas?"

"Nick's fine."

Nick watched the way her hands clenched the arms of her chair, as though this interview made her uncomfortable too.

Annoyed and puzzled by his mild attraction to her, Nick stirred restlessly in his chair. He'd walked straight into this one. Okay, so he'd walk out of it too. He'd come here for a job, and he wasn't leaving until he found out about it.

"Good, I hate formalities. I'm Kelsey O'Sullivan. I'd like to keep this on a first name basis. You are answering the ad in the paper, aren't you?"

"Paper? Uh no, as a matter of fact it was the note at the restaurant last night."

She paled.

Nick adjusted his tie. He wanted to jerk it off his neck and throw it in the nearest trashcan. He shouldn't have come here. The woman would probably think he was crazy or desperate. Well--maybe he was. Still, if she had forgotten the note, he was in trouble.

"Note? Restaurant? I'm afraid there must be a mistake."

Uneasiness surged through him, but he'd tough it out. "The waiter said a lady sent this note," he explained as he reached into his jacket pocket and offered her the crumpled paper with the O'Sullivan logo on top. She stared at the note a long time.

"Oh dear, at L'Allegria's?"

"Yeah, that's it." He sighed with relief, glad she finally remembered.

"Oh ... I'm so sorry, Mr. Leonetti."

Uh-oh, back to last names again. "No problem, I figured it had to be a screw-up."

"It was meant for a colleague of mine," she said hurriedly as he stood and began backing toward the door.

"Yeah, well, no harm done. Thanks anyway."

"Wait!" She practically jumped from her chair, knocking the rattle off the desk. She issued a soft exclamation, glanced at him, then stooped to pick it up. That's when he noticed she wasn't wearing shoes. Goody-Two-Shoes barefoot? He spotted the shoes beside her desk on the floor. As though she'd kicked them aside. At first it stunned him, then it tickled him. He grinned. Maybe she wasn't quite as uptight as he thought.

She slipped into her heels with a reluctant grimace. "I feel as though I owe you an explanation, and the job is still open. You did come about the job? Didn't you?"

Bare feet and baby rattles? What next? Nothing seemed to fit with this woman. He'd form an opinion of her, and she'd destroy it within seconds. Everything about her looked professional except for her bare feet and that rattle.

"Yeah, sure, but--"

"Well then the least I can do is give you an opportunity, if you're still interested."

Nick hesitated, detecting what seemed to be a note of desperation in her voice, another unexpected twist to the lady. Now why would a lady like her be desperate? And what was she desperate for? He should be walking out about now, but something rooted him. Yeah, his brain wasn't working.

"You don't like ties, Mr. Leonetti?" she asked jerking him out of his thoughts again.

"No ma'am," he admitted, taking his hand away from the offending material. "As you can see I'm not a white collar man, although I'm willing to try almost anything once."

This time, her mouth quirked.

Something told him he should be out the door. Still, this might be a good opportunity and he couldn't pass it up. He had to give it a shot.

"Then please remove it."

"What'd you say?"

"I said, please remove the tie, if it's bothering you. If something bothers you, get rid of it. I remove my shoes when they bother me, which I'm sure you've already noticed. And I'm aware that it's very unprofessional but you try wearing three inch heels all day and see how you feel."

Something comfortable slipped between them--a smile.

Removing things wasn't how it was supposed to work. Remove the tie? Just like that? What next? He didn't like this. Bosses weren't supposed to say such things. Bosses weren't supposed to go bare foot, either, or have rattles on their desks.

Nick loosened the tie, and moved slowly back to the middle of the room. "About the job?"

"This isn't an ordinary job, Nick. I'm sure you've already guessed that much. And it isn't easy for me." She sank into her chair. The smile disappeared. Tension took its place. Her lips firmed into a grim line. "The first three men I interviewed ran out before we could get to the details."

Nick waited for her to continue. Wasn't easy for him to sit through this either, but he had to.

She sought eye contact when she spoke. He liked that. He could read her better that way. She looked almost vulnerable as she sat staring at him.

"I do remember you now, at the restaurant," she gasped. "You were with a large group of people. It looked like a celebration. You were sitting next to an elderly lady who only had eyes for you."

"My mother."

Another hint of a smile lit Kelsey's eyes, softening her expression. "A very beautiful woman."

"Yeah."

Just then she could have grown two heads and turned purple and Nick still would have liked her. No one, absolutely no one had said that about his mother before, and it touched him deeply.

Rosa Leonetti had worked hard all her life as a laundress in a Dry Cleaner's. She'd never enjoyed the finer luxuries of life. Her hands wore raw calluses from working with hot water and chemicals all day. Her hair was always in a frumpy bun on top of her head, frizzed from the humidity. She was a fine woman, a good woman, but no one, had ever called her beautiful except her children--and this woman.

He took a good long look at Kelsey O'Sullivan, realizing he had misjudged her. There was more to the lady than met the eye. Much more. "Yes, she is," he agreed slowly, his eyes never leaving Kelsey's. He took the chair again, relaxing despite the odd circumstances. "It was her birthday."

He shouldn't be talking about birthdays. He couldn't fathom why he felt so comfortable with a business executive in starched linen suits and Coke bottle glasses.

"And did you arrange for all the family to be there?"

"Not much arranging in the Leonetti family. Everyone knows Mama's birthday and they are there, or else."

"Or else they'll have Nick Leonetti to deal with?"

"Something like that." He wondered where this was leading. Dammit, he was attracted to her. He didn't want to be attracted. He could think of a million reasons not to be. So why her? He didn't have time for a woman in his life. He had other worries. He needed to concentrate on getting his family out of Hell's Kitchen and into a nice comfy home in Queens.

"Tell me about your mother, your ... family."

"Y--you wanna know about my family?"

She nodded.

"What do you wanna know? I mean, they're just family. Like anybody else's. My mother is a God-fearing Italian woman who loves her children more than her life. My sister Tina is sixteen. She's turning into quite a young lady, which happens to scare the hell outta me. And Tony, well, what can I say? I guess we tend to spoil him a little. He's the baby of the family."

Nick watched Kelsey's face. No ridicule there. Instead, she was quiet, pensive, glancing occasionally out the window as he spoke. Her expression reminded him of a child looking inside a department store window at Christmas and longing for the toys. He recognized something in her face, something he'd seen many times before, from neighbors, friends, even relatives. He saw loneliness--and sudden envy.

"It sounds like a lovely family." She cleared her throat, straightened her jacket and blinked hard. God, the woman was close to tears. And all he had done was talk about his family. She might appear a hardened businesswoman, but Nick suspected a hidden tenderness lurked beneath her surface. "I like you, Nick." Her voice sounded soft, like a whisper.

He liked her too, and he had absolutely no idea why. They had nothing in common. He ate hot dogs with 'kraut on top, she probably had caviar and imported wines. He was poor, she was rich. It'd never work, even if he wanted it to.

"I don't normally form opinions so quickly about strangers," she explained, her face strained. "But I'm very glad we met, even if it was through a--a screw-up."

Nick didn't say a word.

"The note was meant for an old friend. But I'm not the least upset."

"You aren't?"

"No. Because I am a desperate woman."

Oh God, here it comes. She wants me to kill somebody! He knew he should have walked out. He couldn't kill anybody; he wasn't the type. Sure, he'd seen the "Godfather." Sure, he was Italian, but that was as far as it went. Just because he lived in the infamous "Hell's Kitchen" didn't give her the right to jump to conclusions.

He could take care of himself, in any given situation. His thorough knowledge of Karate saved him more than once, but kill--no, not this Leonetti! She had the wrong guy. He had the wrong job. He was out of here!

Yet instead of leaving, like he knew he should be doing, he heard himself saying, "Go on." He wanted to yank his own tongue out, but he had no control over his mouth any longer.

Her eyes locked with his, darkening with intensity. "It's really very simple."

Why did he not quite believe that? "What is?" Nick prompted, totally curious.

She was doing it again, looking him straight in the eyes and daring him to leave. She actually glanced at the door, as though she might be waiting for him to do just that. But Nick Leonetti was no quitter and she'd soon learn that.

"The job you applied for--the reason you're here--what I need ..."

Now he was nervous. Why didn't she just spit it out? The longer she waited the more tense Nick became. The way she hedged, he was sure he wasn't going to like what she was about to say. Obviously no one else had.

"There's just no delicate way of putting this. No way to sound nice. I don't want you getting a wrong impression, nor jumping to conclusions but I need your ..."

Her voice grew low, like a whisper and even then Nick wasn't sure he had heard right. He sat very still. It became very quiet. Very, very quiet. "My--what?"

She exhaled a long breath, rolled her eyes, and blushed. "I said I want you to be a sperm donor for me!"