

## The Single Daddy Club: Derrick

### Excerpt from Chapter 1

He followed the short hallway into the school until he came to a Y in the corridor. Although there had been several cars in the parking lot, the building seemed completely deserted. He took the hallway to the left, hoping it would lead to the kindergarten classrooms.

The first room he came to was dark and vacant. He was pleased to see a nameplate stating Grade One—Classroom One, however, the pleasure he felt was like a tiny spritz of cool mist that instantly evaporated when it came into contact with the annoyance that glowed inside him like hot embers.

As he moved further on down the corridor, he ran agitated fingers through his dark hair. He'd just talked to the woman yesterday afternoon. How could she possibly have forgotten their appointment?

Then he saw light and the soft, muffled sounds of movement coming from the room farthest down the hall.

"Bingo," he whispered.

He stopped in the doorway and blinked. The room seemed alive with a profusion of color and movement. It was in direct contrast with the drab gray paint of the walls of the hallway. Large, tempera-painted leaves dangled from the ceiling, twirling slowly on their string tethers. More larger-than-life autumn leaves were plastered to the windows. These were made of tissue paper causing the late-afternoon sunlight to glint in vibrant rainbow hues.

One corner of the room was obviously a play area, and Derrick was surprised at how the books, games and blocks were in such disarray.

"Mr. Richmond."

Derrick swiveled his attention and his gaze in the direction of the soft, feminine voice that called his name.

The slim, petite woman was standing in front of the bulletin board on a small, child-sized chair. The stapler clutched in her slender hand was folded open, and she was evidently using it to secure bold, blue cutout letters to the board. But what Derrick noticed above all else was the fact that her clothing was as colorful, maybe even more so, than the classroom itself.

The filmy, sheer material of her turquoise skirt was very full and hung nearly to her ankles. His brain registered an underskirt of some dense, dark fabric. The sash gathered around her trim waist was purple, her simple cotton pullover was bright red. A draping of purple glass beads hung from her neck and her small, dainty ears. And when her arm dropped to her side, Derrick heard the tinkle of numerous colorfully enameled bangle bracelets as they slid to her wrist.

He'd taken so long simply gazing at her in silence that when he finally did lift his eyes to her face he felt... embarrassed. But he immediately forgot his chagrin as he became lost in her eyes. They were a piercing green. And interesting. Filled with merriment. Her full mouth was drawn into a small smile. She reached up with her empty hand and plunged her fingers into the mass of her full, multilayered hair that was so black and shiny it gleamed blue in the overhead light.

"Please come in."

Hearing her soft, pleasant voice for the second time seemed to knock him out of his stuporous trance.

She stepped down from the chair, placed the stapler on her desk, and walked toward him.

"You are Timmy Richmond's father?" she asked. "I'm Miss Maxwell."

"Actually... I'm... um..." He let the words trail. Why couldn't he find his tongue? Or collect his thoughts? He reached out instinctively, took her hand and shook it. Her skin was warm and silky smooth.

Miss Maxwell's laughter was light, like the tinkling of far-off bells. It seemed to echo inside his head, making him feel strange, as though he were grinning like a fool, yet he knew for a fact there was no smile on his face.

"It's okay," she said. "There's no need to be disconcerted. Your reaction is quite normal. My appearance can be somewhat... overwhelming to some people. Most people, actually."

Again he heard that tinkling laughter.

"Mr. Styes, our principal," she continued, "hates the way I dress. But as the great Katy Perry says, 'Baby, I was born this way.'"

Her brow furrowed with the most adorable frown. "Or was that Lady Gaga?"

What the hell is the woman talking about? his hazy brain questioned. More importantly, what the hell is the matter with *me*?

He was normally competent, precise, articulate. But standing there in front of Timmy's kindergarten teacher, Derrick was finding his thoughts flying in utter confusion, his tongue tied up in knots. He felt an overwhelming need to offer an excuse for this strange, yet wholly perplexing fog he found himself smothered in. But how could he offer anything? Especially when he could come up with no justifiable reason for his lame behavior for himself, let alone for her.

After what felt like an eon of awkward silence, he found himself murmuring, "Sorry."

"Oh—" she airily waved aside his apology "—don't feel bad about being late."

Derrick watched her turn and walk to her desk. Her filmy turquoise skirt clung to the slight swell of her hips as they dipped and swayed from side to side.

His eyes were glued to the woman's cute derriere, and the sight threatened to suck him even deeper into the whirling vortex of stupefaction that was spinning around and around him. But something about what she'd said tugged violently at his subconscious, the words she'd spoken parted the clouds in his brain.

"I used the time wisely," she told him, "to put up a new bulletin board."

"What did you say?" he asked.

She was facing him once again, and with the sight of her shapely rear end removed from his view, sanity returned more quickly.

"I said I put the time to good use," she repeated for him. "I put up a bulletin —"

"No, no," he said, his tone short. "Before that."

She hesitated a moment, that cute little frown furrowing her brow again.

"Well, I don't remember my exact words," she said. "But I think I told you not to worry about being late for our meeting."

"That's what I thought you said." Derrick nodded as his mental acuity returned. He felt more clearheaded than he had since walking into this place, which seemed more suited for a garish Saturday morning cartoon than it did a classroom. Along with the restoration of crystal coherence came the strong annoyance he'd been feeling toward this woman—an annoyance that was fast building into full-fledged indignation.

"Miss Maxwell, I certainly do beg your pardon—" he placed sarcastic emphasis on the last three words "—but I was not late."

Delicate, dark eyelashes fluttered up and down as she blinked several times.

"And," he added, "not only did I arrive on time, but I also arrived at our appointed meeting place. The school office."

Instinctively she looked up at the large-faced clock on her classroom wall. Then her green gaze darted back to his face.

"Are you certain we arranged to meet at the office?"

"Absolutely," he said with great satisfaction.

"Oh."

That one tiny word came out all breathy, and her lips formed around it in a soft, luscious circle. He felt his palms grow moist and he fought the urge to tug at his shirt collar.