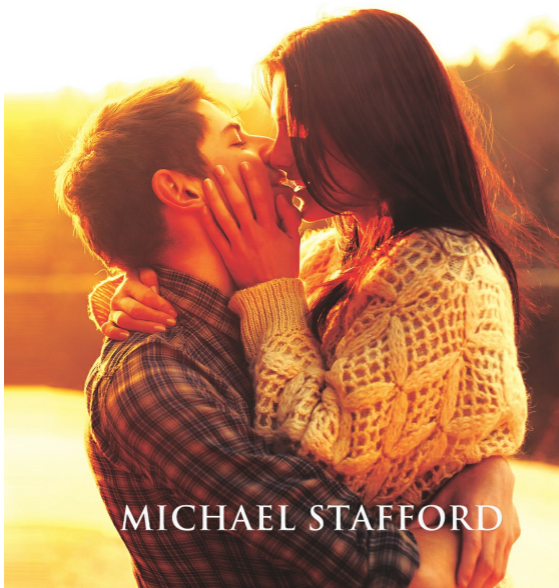


LEGITT SERIES

26 DAYS

— A LOVE STORY —



MICHAEL STAFFORD

own battles. They engaged in small talk: the weather, what movies they liked and didn't like, their favorite restaurants, typical things people talk about while they get acquainted. Nick was surprised that Cynthia never mentioned any of his books. She must read only nonfiction, he thought to himself. Ego can be a burden sometimes.

Cynthia controlled their conversation. Whenever Nick tried to add more substance, she deflected it back to the safe, predictable place where it had begun. Normally, Nick would have recognized the signs and moved on, yet there was something about Cynthia, something he couldn't quite put his finger on, that fascinated him. He was determined to find out what that intangible something was.

"Cynthia, would you care to join me for a drink after this is over? Maybe we can get better acquainted. It's too noisy and there's too much commotion here to talk about

important things, like why neither of us wants to be here.”

“How did you know I don’t want to be here?” She had a twinkle in her eye. “I didn’t realize it was that obvious. I’m afraid I’ll have to take a rain check, though. We have a Board of Directors meeting first thing in the morning, and I need to be on my toes. Maybe some other time. And by the way, it’s Cindy.”

Damn! She was furious with herself for leaving the door open! I know better than to say “rain check” and “maybe some other time.” Now he’ll think I’m willing to meet him for a drink sometime. Nick was attractive, even quite handsome, and he had a rugged look about him. He was articulate and witty, and it might have been interesting to share a cocktail or two with him, had it not been for Cindy’s intense hatred of all men.

The fundraising gala ended with a speech from the senator that left everyone standing

and cheering, something you wouldn't expect from a group of sophisticated people. Cindy said good night and walked away without giving Nick a chance to return her parting gesture.

During the taxi ride back to his hotel, he tried to figure out the reason for Cindy's indifferent attitude. For one thing, she was on the top rung of the ladder. Maybe she was a snob and didn't want to associate with a writer. Maybe it was the cowboy boots. Maybe they didn't have enough in common. He nodded his head up and down. That had to be the reason. Not enough in common.

3

THE SENATOR AND NICK talked on the phone at least once a month. Peter had a cell phone that was owned by Charlie Granderson, the third member of their clique that had existed since childhood. It allowed the senator privacy when he didn't want to be "on the record." Nick called his friend before breakfast the next morning.

"Pete, this is Nick."

"What's up?"

"Tell me about the lady you tried to fix me up with. She treated me like I had the plague."

"Fixing you up wasn't my idea. It was Maggie's. Honest. She'll be pissed that you figured it out. But she did it for Cindy's sake, not yours. She knows you're eligible and

never miss the opportunity to make friends with a pretty woman. She thinks Cindy needs a man in her life.”

“You’re telling me the future first lady tried to fix me up with a blind date? Come on.”

“I’m telling you. It was her idea.”

“Tell me what you know about Miss Iceberg.”

“She’s very prominent and commands a lot of respect in the business world: MBA from Stanford, several leadership and management seminars at Harvard, accounting degree from the University of Chicago, and a CPA designation. A ton of credentials.”

“*Time Magazine* selected her as one of the 50 most influential women in the country. She was number 38 on the list, but being on the list at all was a big deal.”

“She’s worked at Ecstasy for a little over six years. Rumor has it she fucked herself