

The Attracelli Family Series:

Proposal To Love

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Chapter 1

Jim McNabb poked his head in Darcy's door. "You ready to defend your ideas?" he asked, smiling as if he'd just swallowed the canary.

"What do you mean?" Darcy asked cautiously, not willing to sign up for anything when it came to her boss. Jim was great, but he tended to ride roughshod over people if they weren't careful. Darcy pushed a flyaway strand of chocolate brown hair out of her face, wondering why it never stayed in the bun she put it in each morning.

Jim sauntered into her office and leaned against the doorway, extending the suspense a few moments longer. "I mean, I talked to Michael Attracelli and he's willing to listen to your ideas on the bid he turned down last week."

Darcy stared blankly at Jim for a long moment until his words sunk in. "You don't mean the Senior Vice President for Growth and Technology, do you?" she whispered, awed by even mentioning his name out loud. The man was a legend, not just within the ATI community but in the information technology industry. He was a giant. He was brilliant when it came to programming and bidding on key jobs within the industry that put ATI in a strategic position for future work.

And he wanted to hear her pitch? Darcy was suddenly nervous. Terrified actually. She tried to hide her anxiety in front of Jim but she suspected that her green eyes mirrored her inner terror. Arguing with her boss about ATI's decision not to bid on a huge job was one thing. Arguing in front of Michael Attracelli was a completely different game! The man had to have been around since the concept of computers was introduced, he knew so much about them.

Jim watched the emotions run across the beautiful young woman's face. Darcy was not very skilled at hiding her emotions. He saw the excitement build then the anxiety enter her stunningly green eyes. Finally, her porcelain skin turned pale white as she realized the magnitude of what he was asking her to do. But it didn't matter. Darcy was the kind of woman that thrived on challenges so he knew she wouldn't turn down this opportunity no matter how nervous she became.

Sure enough, a moment later, her pert little chin went up and she straightened her slim shoulders, a sign that she was mentally getting herself ready for the problem of changing the mind of a senior vice president, no matter how terrifying the prospect. Jim had never met or worked with a more competent person. Nor had he ever seen the kind of blind determination this woman possessed. She worked long hours, dedicating her life to ATI.

Not only was she intelligent and driven, she was beautiful as well. He suspected she didn't even know how incredibly lovely she was. She was too dedicated to getting the work done to take the time to notice her personal appearance. He never heard of her dating anyone. When they talked, she only spoke of work issues and challenges. But he suspected she wasn't dating anyone currently. When would she find the time? She worked fourteen hour days plus weekends.

Once the fear was gone from her face, he smiled at her, trying to give her confidence. "Well, what are you waiting for?" Jim asked, satisfied with her determined expression. He was delighted that he was able to drop this bomb on her. It wasn't often that anyone surprised Darcy Madison.

He was actually hoping for a smile, but was disappointed this time. Darcy was stunning with a passive face. Her classically shaped features and the glowing green eyes that shone out from her lively face were enough to make men stop and stare. He knew because he had been affected that way when he'd first met her. In addition, he'd walked with her down the street and noticed the same affect on the other men she passed. What was more amazing was that Darcy didn't realize that it was happening. She was so intent on what she was doing, even if she was just walking down the street talking with another person, her whole self was absorbed in her task, eliminating all other details.

Add a figure that should be modeling sexy underwear and her smile, and the combination was devastating at times. Whenever Darcy smiled, gravity seemed to weigh more heavily in the room. Jaws dropped, pens fell to the floor, coffee cups spilled and water splashed in every direction. She turned from looking like a supermodel, albeit a petite one, to a mischievous elf, with just a smile. She had dimples on both sides of her luscious mouth and her cat-like eyes twinkled as if

she knew all the funny secrets in the world. It was quite a sight and caused shock each time a new person experienced her smile.

Jim sighed, wishing he could remember some joke to tell her so he could see her smile. Boy, was she a sight to behold. Darcy interrupted his thoughts and got him back to the business at hand.

“Not a problem. I can do this,” she said, grabbing her notebook and standing up. She grabbed a pen, and then rushed behind her boss out the door. A few seconds later, Darcy raced back to her desk and grabbed her glasses, then right back out to the hallway again.

“Are you sure Michael Attracelli is going to listen to me?” she asked, trailing behind him as she went through her papers to find the notes on the bid the senior vice president had originally rejected.

“Yep, the one and only.”

“Why is he going to listen now? What changed his mind?”

Jim pressed the call button for the elevator. “I did. I was talking to him and mentioned your idea. He seemed interested so I told him I’d get the two of you together to discuss the idea.”

Darci grimaced. “Remind me to keep my mouth shut in the future.”

“Bah!” he said and waved her concern aside. “You’re ready for this,” he said. “And if not, you’re no worse off than you were five minutes ago except that you’ve finally met Michael.”

“How do I greet him?” she asked. “Is there any formal policy?”

Jim glanced back to the nervous beauty, his eyes rolling. “He’s not royalty. He’s just a vice president.”

Darcy had a great sense of the absurd and was willing to make fun of herself when she was acting silly, like right now. “Yeah, but he’s sort of a god in the industry. It seems like he should have some sort of title befitting that reputation, don’t you think?” the imp in her joked. “Vice President just doesn’t do him justice, I’m guessing.”

“How about God of IT?” he quipped, pressing the button on the elevator that would take them to the executive floors.

They stepped into the elevator together. “No,” she said, shaking her head while she stared up at the lights indicating the floors they were passing. “It has to be more glorious. How about...God of Information?” she asked.

Jim didn’t respond but chuckled at her.

“Why not?” she asked, a few moments before they came to the top floor, “I mean, it’s reputed that he knows everything. Therefore, he must be at least a century old. I’m hoping that if I make it to that age, I’ll get a god-like title as well.”

She missed Jim’s astonished expression because the doors opened and they walked out into the subdued atmosphere of the executive floor. It was dramatically different on this floor, Darcy thought as she made her way down the hallway behind Jim who obviously knew where Michael Attracelli’s office was. Her office was on the sixth floor and was filled with mostly technical people. They called to each other with their ideas or barged into offices unannounced to bounce ideas off of each other. Some people didn’t even bother with going to an office. They would just shoot ideas as a co-worker passed by in the hallways. There was a great deal of joking and letting off of steam when the tensions rose or deadlines drew near.

On this floor, it was very quiet. The doors were mostly closed and people scurried about busily, looking very important and harried. She suspected that no one really joked on this floor and meetings were scheduled to discuss ideas, not tossed about while walking to get a cup of coffee. It was very serious business up here on the fifteenth floor.

They stopped in an impressive lobby-like area with a secretary quickly typing on a computer. She looked up when Jim entered and smiled her greeting. “He’s waiting for the two of you. Just go on in,” she said, waving towards a double door that was open on one side.

“Thanks, Donna,” Jim said and nodded for Darcy to follow him through a set of closed double doors.

Jim knocked, but didn't wait for a response before entering. They walked into a large office filled with modern, steel and glass furniture. Off to one side, a small grouping of brown leather chairs and a sofa surrounded a low coffee table. Jim stopped in the middle of the room, politely waiting for the man behind the desk to get off the phone.

Darcy was behind him, taking in the impressive office space. She was lucky to have a small round table in her office that she used for conferences with her technical leads but it was nothing like this, she thought, looking around the room and noting the panoramic view of the Washington, D.C. skyline. It was twilight so the sun was just touching the horizon, setting down between the tall buildings and monuments of the historic city.

"Jim, how are you?" a deep voice said.

Darcy looked up and felt her mouth drop open. The most incredibly gorgeous man she'd ever met in her life was walking towards Jim, his hand outstretched to shake Jim's.

"Doing well, thanks. How about you?" Jim asked.

"Not bad," he replied.

Darcy felt the man's dark blue eyes move her way and snapped her mouth shut. But not in time. One dark eyebrow went up when he caught her shocked expression. Thankfully, the handsome man didn't comment on her open mouthed expression.

Jim cleared his throat. "This is Darcy Madison. She has the great ideas I was telling you about earlier. Thanks for taking the time to hear her out," Jim was saying.

"Great. I'm eager to hear them," the gorgeous man said. "How about if we sit down?" he asked, waving his arms to indicate that they should sit down the sofa and chairs versus the desk with chairs in front of it.

Darcy shook herself mentally. So he was stunning. What did she care? She was here to do a job and a handsome face can be seen on any magazine cover, she told herself.

They all sat down, then the two men turned to Darcy expectantly. Darcy blinked, realizing that they wanted her to start her arguments.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Mr. Attracelli?” she asked, trying to be diplomatic but not wanting to go through this twice.

After a pregnant pause, Jim laughed self consciously. “Um...Darcy, this is Michael Attracelli,” he said simply.

Darcy’s eyes snapped back to the man who was now trying to hide a smile. “Oh,” was all she could say while her face turned pink in her embarrassment. Her mind just wasn’t working. Well, who could think with that man staring at her so expectantly? A woman should be allowed to make a fool of herself around a man like that!

“I think Darcy was expecting an older man,” he explained to Michael.

“Ah,” was all he said and turned back to face Darcy, waiting expectantly.

Shaking her head, she pushed the man’s physical attributes aside, reminding herself that this man had turned down her idea for bidding on a very strategic project. It was something she felt confident the company could win and would place them in a good position for future work in an area she thought was not very well tapped yet. “Well, then. Here’s my idea for the project. I know this work is a little different than what we normally do, but if we go a little bit to the left in our processes, you’ll see that my ideas really will work,” she stressed, warming to her topic.

“If you’ll turn to page three,” she said, handing them a copy of a briefing she’d done for Jim and some others last week, “you’ll see what I have in mind. If we don’t use the normal operating system, then we can sidestep many of your concerns about....” Darcy explained, addressing each of the issues she’d heard about and how she would circumvent any problems.

She talked and answered questions for over an hour from both Jim and Michael, showing them that she had done her homework and knew the subject. What she was proposing was dramatically different from what she suspected the competitors would be offering but by going with a different operating system,

she knew that ATI could do the job for much less money and create a much more stable system with double the flexibility. The down side would be that ATI would have to do most of the development work ahead of time in order to prove to the client that it would work. That created a huge risk. Not many companies, ATI included since they rejected going for this work initially, would put up thousands, potentially hundreds of thousands of dollars to work without a contract from a client with the hopes that they would be so impressed with the solution they would buy it after the fact.

The up side would be, if they won the work, they would be perfectly positioned for millions of dollars in contracts that would feed off the work.

She finally finished her briefing and sat there, waiting in the silence as Michael considered various aspects of her idea.

The silence was broken a moment later as Jim's cell phone went off. He looked at the number on the screen and sighed. "I'm sorry, I need to take this. It's a client," he said and walked out of the office. She could hear him talking in the lobby, and then his voice trailed off as he moved down the hallway.

Chapter 2

The silence lasted so long, she started to fidget. He was going through the pages of her briefing again, making notes in the margins.

Darcy was a lot of things, but patient wasn't one of them. She liked computers because she understood them. In fact, she worked long hours because human relations were just too irritating in general. She had several friends that she did things with occasionally, but not on a regular basis. Her time was mostly spent at work, tweaking lines of code and reviewing data. Those people she socialized with were also in the industry and they talked shop most of the time.

Darcy crossed and uncrossed her legs, wishing she could get some sort of feedback from this man. She still couldn't get over the fact that this virile, sexy man was the one and only Michael Attracelli. She remembered reading about him in the technology magazines when she was in college. Granted, only six years had passed since she graduated but she'd always thought of him as being somewhere in his sixties or seventies, considering the amount of work he'd done and the influence he had in ATI.

"Hiccup"

Darcy looked around, shocked that the sound had come from her. Had she really done that?

"Hiccup"

"Excuse me," she said, her face turning red when Michael looked up from reading the briefing, eyebrows raised.

"I'm sorry," Darcy said, desperately trying to smother her hiccups. But they were coming fast and furious. "I guess I'm just hungry," she said as an explanation for her hiccups.

Michael was instantly contrite, looking at his watch. "I'm sorry; I've kept you too late. We can go over this another time," he said.

“No, no! Please, I have plenty of time.” This might be her only chance to convince him of her idea and she didn’t want to lose the opportunity because she’d skipped lunch again.

Michael sat back and watched her. “You don’t have a husband and kids waiting for you at home?”

Darcy shook her head. “No, but I guess you do,” she said, gathering up her papers.

“Nope,” he said and stood up, reading the briefing as he walked over to his desk. He pressed a button which was obviously a speed dial to a Chinese restaurant. “Hello Chiang! How are you?” Michael asked when the phone call was answered.

“Fine, fine,” the voice said over the speaker phone. “Working late again tonight?” the voice asked.

“Yes. Can you send over my usual?” Michael asked.

“Of course,”

“And what would you like?” Michael asked, looking over towards Darcy.

Darcy blushed but spoke up. “Hello Chiang. This is Darcy. And you know what I like,” she said.

She watched as Michael smiled.

The voice over the phone chuckled. “You want two broccoli and chicken meals or you both want to share?”

Michael laughed. “I guess we can share if you toss in some extra egg rolls,” he said.

“You got it,” Chiang said. “I charge you, Mr. Attracelli. You pay for the lady,” he said.

Michael chuckled. “Deal. Charge it to my account. Thanks for the tip on the gentlemanly behavior, Chiang.”

“I could give you lots of tips. Number one, take her out instead of working so late,” he said. “But you won’t listen to me, will you? That’s why I have six kids and you have none.”

Darcy smothered a laugh, watching Michael shake his head. “You have a good point. I’ll talk to you soon,” he said.