

Fire and Dating on Friday the 13th

By Sarah Hastings

A stack of papers rained on Maggie's desk. She looked into the smiling face of her office manager, Denise, and then down at the papers.

"What's your take?"

Maggie picked up one of the pages, a job application. The handwriting was even and well balanced. Every letter was precise, words slanted slightly to the left. "He's very meticulous and careful. The slant to the left shows he's introverted and keeps to himself."

"Bo-ring," Denise sang out. "Do the next one." A couple of months before, Denise had discovered Maggie's side hobby of handwriting analysis.

Maggie brought the second page up to eye level. She glanced at the name. Another man. The large, quick writing slanted forward. "This one's got a wild streak. Extroverted, adventurous, competitive."

"Ooh, yummy. And he was hot, too. Although, they came in earlier to sign the final paperwork and they were both pretty cute."

Maggie shook her head. "Give me the boring, steady one. I've been jerked around enough by the wild, handsome men." She was thirty-five years old and relationships had been few and far between, ever since her longest relationship (six years with her college sweetheart) had ended in her mid twenties.

Denise shook her head. "Girl, you gotta take risks." She pulled two tickets from her pocket. "Here, I'm your fairy godmother. I've got two tickets for Jerry Seinfeld at the Orpheum tonight. My mom's sick again."

"I couldn't. Besides, it's Friday the 13th; I just want to go cuddle up in bed and read a good romance. You know what happened last time."

Denise laughed. "I'll never forget what you looked like the next Monday— black and blue all over, ankle in a cast. Poor thing. Just don't drive. That's why we live in the city."

In 2009, the 13th day of the month coincided with a Friday three separate times, in February, March, and November. The previous two had all been horrible luck for Maggie. Today was the last of the year.

Maggie took the two applications and placed them carefully in the "In" box, to be filed when she created their new employee folders next Monday.

Denise continued her badgering. "Don't you think it's time to turn your luck around? Take the tickets. Make it a good luck night."

Maggie knew that her stubborn coworker wouldn't back down. She took the tickets with a smile (more of a grimace, really) and looked at the clock. Closing time. On Fridays, they left early since Denise often had to catch the commuter flight from Minneapolis to her elderly parents in Fargo.

Denise sashayed out of the office, wiggling her fingers goodbye at Maggie, who was trying to organize herself before leaving. Did she have her keys? Water bottle? Who was she going to invite tonight? All her friends were coupled up, and it was rare they were free on a Friday night, unless she wanted to be third, or fifth, or seventh wheel....

A news update interrupted the soft muzak on the approved office radio: "The burnt-out apartment on south 7th Street yielded a surprising find— a young woman's body in the bedroom."

Maggie reached over and switched off the radio. Friday the 13th all right.



Not quite ready to go home, Maggie decided to stop in at the Starbucks down the street. November in Minneapolis was bundle-up weather. Hot chocolate or coffee helped her to avoid turning into a human popsicle on the walk home.

She walked into the Starbucks bathed in reddish-orange light, indistinguishable from any of the other million Starbucks in the city. Maggie ordered her tall chai soy latte, gave her name, and joined the throng of customers waiting for their warm drinks.

One man in particular caught her eye. He was standing by the counter, pouring cream into his coffee. Maggie stepped closer to read his name off the cup. Erik L. She racked her brain, knowing she had heard or read his name, with that particular spelling, today. She smiled as she hit on it. It was the first new employee whose application she had analyzed for Denise. She glanced at him again. He would look more at home on a tractor in the black fields of Minnesota than he did standing in a Minneapolis Starbucks preparing coffee. His handwriting had been strong and assured, but perfectly written. He was a perfectionist and very careful about his actions.

"Maggie," the barista called as he placed her steaming chai tea on the counter. In her rush to get to the counter near the new employee, she banged into one of the CD displays, bounced off, and went tumbling. She banged Erik's arm, causing his coffee cup to drop on the counter and create a wave that splashed onto his shirt.

"Oh, my gosh, I'm so sorry." She held out napkins for him and signaled the barista to get another cup. She slipped her a couple of bucks and gave the new cup to Erik.

"Thanks. I put too much cream in the other coffee anyway." He grinned at her and the smile wrinkles next to his green eyes caused her heart to thud a little louder in her chest. He nodded at her and then moved to an armchair with his new coffee.

She picked up her tea, embarrassed, and left feeling unsatisfied by the encounter. While she slipped the holder onto her cup, she lectured herself. *Maggie, you're thirty-five. Lonely. There is a good-looking man sitting alone. No ring. You saw his handwriting; he looks good on paper. Just go over there. What's the worst that can happen? You've already embarrassed yourself in front of him.*

She straightened her coat, twirled her scarf around her purse, and strode to the armchair next to Erik. She perched on the edge of the seat and bought herself some time by sipping her tea. Her eyes darted over at Erik, who was looking over at her, a smile playing on his face.

"Sorry about the coffee." She gripped her tea and mentally rolled her eyes. She needed to work on her opening lines.

"It's okay." He sipped his coffee. "Usually I'm the clumsy one in the room."

That was unlikely, but it at least he didn't hold a few coffee stains against her. Maggie wracked her brain, trying to think of a scintillating conversation starter. When that failed, she said, "So, are you from the Twin Cities?"

"Well, I've moved around a bit. I wanted to get a taste of city life for a while. My last job was on a farm up near Borup."

"Excuse you."

He threw his head back and barked out a laugh. He extended his hand, "I'm Erik. Erik Lund."

Maggie relaxed into the chair, and her muscles breathed a sigh of relief. She reached over and shook his hand. "Maggie Holversen."

"What's Maggie short for?"

"That's classified." . . .

What else is classified? Will Maggie set her heart on fire or get burned? To find out, order your hardcopy today!